

Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor

By Franz Kafka

One evening Blumfeld, an elderly bachelor, was climbing up to his apartment—a laborious undertaking, for he lived on the sixth floor. While climbing up he thought, as he had so often recently, how unpleasant this utterly lonely life was: to reach his empty rooms he had to climb these six floors almost in secret, there put on his dressing gown, again almost in secret, light his pipe, read a little of the French magazine to which he had been subscribing for years, at the same time sip at a homemade kirsch, and finally, after half an hour, go to bed, but not before having completely rearranged his bedclothes which the unteachable charwoman would insist on arranging in her own way. Some companion, someone to witness these activities, would have been very welcome to Blumfeld. He had already been wondering whether he shouldn't acquire a little dog. These animals are gay and above all grateful and loyal; one of Blumfeld's colleagues has a dog of this kind; it follows no one but its master and when it hasn't seen him for a few moments it greets him at once with loud barkings, by which it is evidently trying to express its joy at once more finding that extraordinary benefactor, its master. True, a dog also has its drawbacks. However well kept it may be, it is bound to dirty the room. This just cannot be avoided; one cannot give it a hot bath each time before letting it into the room; besides, its health couldn't stand that.

Blumfeld, on the other hand, can't stand dirt in his room. To him cleanliness is essential, and several times a week he is obliged to have words with his charwoman, who is unfortunately not very painstaking in this respect. Since she is hard of hearing he usually drags her by the arm to those spots in the room which he finds lacking in cleanliness. By this strict discipline he has achieved in his room a neatness more or less commensurate with his wishes.

By acquiring a dog, however, he would be almost deliberately introducing into his room the dirt which hitherto he had been so careful to avoid. Fleas, the dog's constant companions, would appear. And once fleas were there, it would not be long before Blumfeld would be abandoning his comfortable room to the dog and looking for another one.

Uncleanliness, however, is but one of the drawbacks of dogs. Dogs also fall ill and no one really understands dogs' diseases. Then the animal sits in a corner or limps about, whimpers, coughs, chokes from some pain; one wraps it in a rug, whistles a little melody, offers it milk—in short, one nurses it in the hope that this, as indeed is possible, is a passing sickness while it may be a serious, disgusting, and contagious disease.

And even if the dog remains healthy, one day it will grow old, one won't have the heart to get rid of the faithful animal in time, and then comes the moment when one's own age peers out at one from the dog's oozing eyes. Then one has to cope with the half-blind, weak-lunged animal all but immobile with fat, and in this way pay dearly for the pleasures the dog once had given.

Much as Blumfeld would like to have a dog at this moment, he would rather go on climbing the stairs alone for another thirty years than be burdened later on by such an old dog which, sighing louder than he, would drag itself up, step by step.

So Blumfeld will remain alone, after all; he really feels none of the old maid's longing to have around her some submissive living creature that she can protect, lavish her affection upon, and continue to serve—for which purpose a cat, a canary, even a goldfish would suffice—or, if this cannot be, rest content with flowers on the window sill. Blumfeld only wants a companion, an animal to which he doesn't have to pay much

attention, which doesn't mind an occasional kick, which even, in an emergency, can spend the night in the street, but which nevertheless, when Blumfeld feels like it, is promptly at his disposal with its barking, jumping, and licking of hands. This is what Blumfeld wants, but since, as he realizes, it cannot be had without serious drawbacks, he renounces it, and yet-in accordance with his thoroughgoing disposition-the idea from time to time, this evening, for instance, occurs to him again.

While taking the key from his pocket outside his room, he is startled by a sound coming from within. A peculiar rattling sound, very lively but very regular. Since Blumfeld has just been thinking of dogs, it reminds him of the sounds produced by paws pattering one after the other over a floor. But paws don't rattle, so it can't be paws. He quickly unlocks the door and switches on the light.

He is not prepared for what he sees. For this is magic-two small white celluloid balls with blue stripes jumping up and down side by side on the parquet; When one of them touches the floor the other is in the air, a game they continue ceaselessly to play. At school one day Blumfeld had seen some little pellets jumping about like this during a well-known electrical experiment, but these are comparatively large balls jumping freely about in the room and no electrical experiment is being made.

Blumfeld bends down to get a good look at them. They are undoubtedly ordinary balls, they probably contain several smaller balls, and it is these that produce the rattling sound. Blumfeld gropes in the air to find out whether they are hanging from some threads-no, they are moving entirely on their own. A pity Blumfeld isn't a small child, two balls like these would have been a happy surprise for him, whereas now the whole thing gives him rather an unpleasant feeling. It's not quite pointless after all to live in secret as an unnoticed bachelor, now someone, no matter who, has penetrated this secret and sent him these two strange balls.

He tries to catch one but they retreat before him, thus luring him on to follow them through the room. It's really too silly, he thinks, running after balls like this; he stands still and realizes that the moment he abandons the pursuit, they too remain on the same spot. I will try to catch them all the same, he thinks again, and hurries toward them. They immediately run away, but Blumfeld, his legs apart, forces them into a corner of the room, and there, in front of a trunk, he manages to catch one ball. It's a small cool ball, and it turns in his hand, clearly anxious to slip away. And the other ball, too, as though aware of its comrade's distress, jumps higher than before, extending the leaps until it touches Blumfeld's hand. It beats against his hand, beats in ever faster leaps, alters its angle of attack, then, powerless against the hand which encloses the ball so completely, springs even higher and is probably trying to reach Blumfeld's face. Blumfeld could catch this ball too, and lock them both up somewhere, but at the moment it strikes him as humiliating to take such measures against two little balls. Besides, it's fun owning these balls, and soon enough they'll grow tired, roll under the cupboard, and be quiet.

Despite this deliberation, however, Blumfeld, near to anger, flings the ball to the ground, and it is a miracle that in doing so the delicate, all but transparent celluloid cover doesn't break. Without hesitation the two balls resume their former low, well-coordinated jumps.

Blumfeld undresses calmly, arranges his clothes in the wardrobe which he always inspects carefully to make sure the charwoman has left everything in order. Once or twice he glances over his shoulder at the balls, which unpursued, seem to be pursuing him; they have followed him and are now jumping close behind him. Blumfeld puts on his dressing gown and sets out for the opposite wall to fetch one of the pipes which are hanging in a rack. Before turning around he instinctively kicks his foot out backwards, but the balls know how to get out of its way and remain untouched.

As Blumfeld goes off to fetch the pipe the balls at once follow close behind him; he shuffles along in his slippers, taking irregular steps, yet each step is followed almost without pause by the sound of the balls; they are keeping pace with him.

To see how the balls manage to do this, Blumfeld turns suddenly around. But hardly has he turned when the balls describe a semicircle and are already behind him again, and this they repeat every time he turns. Like submissive companions, they try to avoid appearing in front of Blumfeld. Up to the present they have evidently dared to do so only in order to introduce themselves; now, however, it seems they have actually entered into his service.

Hitherto, when faced with situations he couldn't master, Blumfeld had always chosen to behave as though he hadn't noticed anything. It had often helped and usually improved the situation. This, then, is what he does now; he takes up a position in front of the pipe rack and, puffing out his lips, chooses a pipe, fills it with particular care from the tobacco pouch close at hand, and allows the balls to continue their jumping behind him. But he hesitates to approach the table, for to hear the sound of the jumps coinciding with that of his own steps almost hurts him. So there he stands, and while taking an unnecessarily long time to fill his pipe he measures the distance separating him from the table. At last, however, he overcomes his faintheartedness and covers the distance with such stamping of feet that he cannot hear the balls. But the moment he is seated he can hear them jumping up and down behind his chair as distinctly as ever.

Above the table, within reach, a shelf is nailed to the wall on which stands the bottle of kirsch surrounded by little glasses. Beside it, in a pile, lie several copies of the French magazine. (This very day the latest issue has arrived and Blumfeld takes it down. He quietly forgets the kirsch; he even has the feeling that today he is proceeding with his usual activities only to console himself, for he feels no genuine desire to read. Contrary to his usual habit of carefully turning one page after the other, he opens the magazine at random and there finds a large photograph. He forces himself to examine it in detail. It shows a meeting between the Czar of Russia and the President of France. This takes place on a ship. All about, as far as can be seen, are many other ships, the smoke from their funnels vanishing in the bright sky. Both Czar and President have rushed toward each other with long strides and are clasping one another by the hand. Behind the Czar as well as behind the President stand two men. By comparison with the gay faces of the Czar and the President, the faces of their attendants are very solemn, the eyes of each group focused on their master. Lower down-the scene evidently takes place on the top deck-stand long lines of saluting sailors cut off by the margin.

Gradually Blumfeld contemplates the picture with more interest, then holds it a little further away and looks at it with blinking eyes. He has always had a taste for such imposing scenes. The way the chief personages clasp each other's hand so naturally, so cordially and lightheartedly, this he finds most lifelike. And it's just as appropriate that the attendants-high-ranking gentlemen, of course, with their names printed beneath-express in their bearing the solemnity of the historical moment.)

And instead of helping himself to everything he needs, Blumfeld sits there tense, staring at the bowl of his still unlit pipe. He is lying in wait. Suddenly, quite unexpectedly, his numbness leaves him and with jerk he turns around in his chair. But the balls equally alert, or perhaps automatically following the law governing them, also change their position the moment Blumfeld turns, and hide behind his back.

Blumfeld now sits with his back to the table, the cold pipe in his hand. And now the balls jump under the table and, since there's a rug there, they are less audible. This is a great advantage: only faint, hollow noises can be heard, one has to pay great attention to catch their sound. Blumfeld, however, does pay great attention, and hears them

distinctly. But this is so only for the moment, in a little while he probably won't hear them any more. The fact that they cannot make themselves more audible on the rug strikes Blumfeld as a great weakness on the part of the balls. What one has to do is lay one or better two rugs under them and they are all but powerless. Admittedly only for a limited time, and besides, their very existence wields a certain power.

Right now Blumfeld could have made good use of a dog, a wild young animal would soon have dealt with these balls; he imagines this dog trying to catch them with its paws, chasing them from their positions, hunting them all over the room, and finally getting hold of them between its teeth. It's quite possible that before long Blumfeld will acquire a dog.

For the moment, however, the balls have no one to fear but Blumfeld, and he has no desire to destroy them just now, perhaps he lacks the necessary determination. He comes home in the evening tired from work and just when he is in need of some rest he is faced with this surprise. Only now does he realize how tired he really is. No doubt he will destroy the balls, and that in the near future, but not just yet, probably not until tomorrow. If one looks at the whole thing with an unprejudiced eye, the balls behave modestly enough.

From time to time, for instance, they could jump into the foreground, show themselves, and then return again to their positions, or they could jump higher so as to beat against the tabletop in order to compensate themselves for the muffling effect of the rug. But this they don't do, they don't want to irritate Blumfeld unduly, they are evidently confining themselves to what is absolutely necessary.

Even this measured necessity, however, is quite sufficient to spoil Blumfeld's rest at the table. He has been sitting there only a few minutes and is already considering going to bed. One of his motives for this is that he can't smoke here, for he has left the matches on his bedside table. Thus he would have to fetch these matches, but once having reached the bedside table he might as well stay there and lie down. For this he has an ulterior motive: he thinks that the balls, with their mania for keeping behind him, will jump onto the bed, and that there, in lying down, on purpose or not, he will squash them. The objection that what would then remain of the balls could still go on jumping, he dismisses. Even the unusual must have its limits. Complete balls jump anyway, even if not incessantly, but fragments of balls never jump, and consequently will not jump in this case, either.

"Up!" he shouts, having grown almost reckless from this reflection and, the balls still behind him he stamps off to bed. His hope seems to be confirmed, for when he purposely takes up a position quite near the bed, one ball promptly springs onto it. Then, however, the unexpected occurs: the other ball disappears under the bed. The possibility that the balls could jump under the bed as well had not occurred to Blumfeld. He is outraged about the one ball, although he is aware how unjust this is, for by jumping under the bed the ball fulfills its duty perhaps better than the ball on the bed.

Now everything depends on which place the balls decide to choose, for Blumfeld does not believe that they can work separately for any length of time. And sure enough a moment later the ball on the floor also jumps onto the bed. Now I've got them, thinks Blumfeld, hot with joy, and tears his dressing gown from his body to throw himself into bed. At that moment, however, the very same ball jumps back under the bed.

Overwhelmed with disappointment, Blumfeld almost collapses. Very likely the ball just took a good look around up there and decided it didn't like it. And now the other one has followed, too, and of course remains, for it's better down there.

"Now I'll have these drummers with me all night," thinks Blumfeld, biting his lips and nodding his head. He feels gloomy, without actually knowing what harm the balls could do him in the night. He is a good sleeper, he will easily be able to ignore so slight a noise. To make quite sure of this and mindful of his past experience, he lays two rugs on the floor. It's as if he owned a little dog for which he wants to make a soft bed. And as though the balls had also grown tired and sleepy, their jumping has become lower and slower than before. As Blumfeld kneels beside the bed, lamp in hand, he thinks for a moment that the balls might come to rest on the rug—they fall so weakly, roll so slowly along. Then, however, they dutifully rise again. Yet it is quite possible that in the morning when Blumfeld looks under the bed he'll find there two quiet, harmless children's balls. But it seems that they may not even be able to keep up their jumping until the morning, for as soon as Blumfeld is in bed he doesn't hear them anymore. He strains his ears, leans out of bed to listen—not a sound. The effect of the rugs can't be as strong as that; the only explanation is that the balls are no longer jumping, either because they aren't able to bounce themselves off the rug and have therefore abandoned jumping for the time being or, which is more likely, they will never jump again. Blumfeld could get up and see exactly what's going on, but in his relief at finding peace at last he prefers to remain where he is. He would rather not risk disturbing the pacified balls even with his eyes. Even smoking he happily renounces, turns over on his side, and promptly goes to sleep.

But he does not remain undisturbed; as usual he sleeps without dreaming, but very restlessly. Innumerable times during the night he is startled by the delusion that someone is knocking at his door. He knows quite well that no one is knocking; who would knock at night and at his lonely bachelor's door? Yet although he knows this for certain, he is startled again and again and each time glances in suspense at the door, his mouth open, eyes wide, a strand of hair trembling over his damp forehead. He tries to count how many times he has been woken but, dizzy from the huge numbers he arrives at, he falls back to sleep again. He thinks he knows where the knocking comes from; not from the door, but somewhere quite different; being heavy with sleep, however, he cannot quite remember on what his suspicions are based. All he knows is that innumerable tiny unpleasant sounds accumulate before producing the great strong knocking. He would happily suffer all the unpleasantness of the small sounds if he could be spared the actual knocking, but for some reason it's too late; he cannot interfere, the moment has passed, he can't even speak, his mouth opens but all that comes out is a silent yawn, and furious at this he thrusts his face into the pillows. Thus the night passes.

In the morning he is awakened by the charwoman's knocking; with a sigh of relief he welcomes the gentle tap on the door whose inaudibility has in the past always been one of his sources of complaint. He is about to shout "Come in!" when he hears another lively, faint, yet all but belligerent knocking. It's the balls under the bed. Have they woken up? Have they, unlike him, gathered new strength overnight?

"Just a moment," shouts Blumfeld to the charwoman, jumps out of bed, and, taking great care to keep the balls behind him, throws himself on the floor, his back still toward them; then, twisting his head over his shoulder, he glances at the balls and—nearly lets out a curse. Like children pushing away blankets that annoy them at night, the balls have apparently spent all night pushing the rugs, with tiny twitching movements, so far away from under the bed that they are now once more on the parquet, where they can continue making their noise. "Back onto the rugs!" says Blumfeld with an angry face, and only when the balls, thanks to the rugs, have become quiet again, does he call in the charwoman.

While she—a fat, dull-witted, stiff-backed woman—is laying the breakfast on the table and doing the few necessary chores, Blumfeld stands motionless in his dressing

gown by his bed so as to keep the balls in their place. With his eyes he follows the charwoman to see whether she notices anything. This, since she is hard of hearing, is very unlikely, and the fact that Blumfeld thinks he sees the charwoman stopping here and there, holding on to some furniture and listening with raised eyebrows, he puts down to his overwrought condition caused by a bad night's sleep. It would relieve him if he could persuade the charwoman to speed up her work, but if anything she is slower than usual. She loads herself laboriously with Blumfeld's clothes and shuffles out with them into the corridor, stays away a long time, and the din she makes beating the clothes echoes in his ears with slow monotonous thuds.

And during all this time Blumfeld has to remain on the bed, cannot move for fear of drawing the balls behind him, has to let the coffee-which he likes to drink as hot as possible-get cold, and can do nothing but stare at the drawn blinds behind which the day is dimly dawning.

At last the charwoman has finished, bids him good morning, and is about to leave; but before she actually goes she hesitates by the door, moves her lips a little, and takes a long look at Blumfeld. Blumfeld is about to remonstrate when she at last departs. Blumfeld longs to fling the door open and shout after her that she is a stupid, idiotic old woman. However, when he reflects on what he actually has against her, he can only think of the paradox of her having noticed nothing and yet trying to give the impression that she has.

How confused his thoughts have become! And all on account of a bad night. Some explanation for his poor sleep he finds in the fact that last night he deviated from his usual habits by not smoking or drinking any schnapps. When for once I don't smoke or drink schnapps-and this is the result of his reflections-I sleep badly.

From now on he is going to take better care of his health, and he begins by fetching some cotton wool from his medicine chest which hangs over his bedside table and putting two little wads of it into his ears. Then he stands up and takes a trial step. Although the balls do follow he can hardly hear them; the addition of another wad makes them quite inaudible. Blumfeld takes a few more steps; nothing particularly unpleasant happens. Everyone for himself, Blumfeld as well as the balls, and although they are bound to one another they don't disturb each other.

Only once, when Blumfeld turns around rather suddenly and one ball fails to make the countermovement fast enough, does he touch it with his knee. But this is the only incident. Otherwise Blumfeld calmly drinks his coffee; he is as hungry as though, instead of sleeping last night, he had gone for a long walk; he washes in cold, exceedingly refreshing water, and puts on his clothes.

He still hasn't pulled up the blinds; rather, as a precaution, he has preferred to remain in semidarkness; he has no wish for the balls to be seen by other eyes.

But now that he is ready to go he has somehow to provide for the balls in case they should dare-not that he thinks they will-to follow him into the street.

He thinks of a good solution, opens the large wardrobe, and places himself with his back to it. As though divining his intention, the balls steer clear of the wardrobe's interior, taking advantage of every inch of space between Blumfeld and the wardrobe; when there's no other alternative they jump into the wardrobe for a moment, but when faced by the dark out they promptly jump again. Rather than be lured over the edge further into the wardrobe, they neglect their duty and stay by Blumfeld's side. But their little ruses avail them nothing, for now Blumfeld himself climbs backward into the wardrobe and they have to follow him. And with this their fate has been sealed, for on

the floor of the wardrobe lie various smallish objects such as boots, boxes, small trunks which although carefully arranged-Blumfeld now regrets this-nevertheless considerably hamper the balls. And when Blumfeld, having by now pulled the door to, jumps out of it with an enormous leap such as he has not made for years, slams the door, and turns the key, the balls are imprisoned.

"Well that worked," thinks Blumfeld, wiping the sweat from his face. What a din the balls are making in the wardrobe! It sounds as though they are desperate. Blumfeld, on the other hand, is very contented. He leaves the room and already the deserted corridor has a soothing effect on him. He takes the wool out of his ears and is enchanted by the countless sounds of the waking house. Few people are to be seen, it's still very early.

Downstairs in the hall in front of the low door leading to the charwoman's basement apartment stands that woman's ten year-old son. The image of his mother, not one feature of the woman has been omitted in this child's face. Bandy-legged, hands in his trouser pockets, he stands there wheezing, for he already has a goiter and can breathe only with difficulty. But whereas Blumfeld, whenever the boy crosses his path, usually quickens his step to spare himself the spectacle, today he almost feels like pausing for a moment.

Even if the boy has been brought into the world by this woman and shows every sign of his origin, he is nevertheless a child, the thoughts of a child still dwell in this shapeless head, and if one were to speak to him sensibly and ask him something, he would very likely answer in a bright voice, innocent and reverential, and after some inner struggle one could bring oneself to pat these cheeks.

Although this is what Blumfeld thinks, he nevertheless passes him by. In the street he realizes that the weather is pleasanter than he had suspected from his room. The morning mist has dispersed and patches of blue sky have appeared, brushed by a strong wind. Blumfeld has the balls to thank for his having left his room much earlier than usual; even the paper he has left unread on the table; in any case he has saved a great deal of time and can now afford to walk slowly.

It is remarkable how little he worries about the balls not that he is separated from them. So long as they were following him they could have been considered as something belonging to him, something which, in passing judgment on his person, had somehow to be taken into consideration. Now, however, they were mere toys in his wardrobe at home. And it occurs to Blumfeld that the best way of rendering the balls harmless would be to put them to their original use. There in the hall stands the boy; Blumfeld will give him the balls, not lend them, but actually present them to him, which is surely tantamount to ordering their destruction. And even if they were to remain intact they would mean even less in the boy's hands than in the wardrobe, the whole house would watch the boy playing with them, other children would join in, and the general opinion that the balls are things to play with and in no way life companions of Blumfeld would be firmly and irrefutably established.

Blumfeld runs back into the house. The boy has just gone down the basement stairs and is about to open the door. So Blumfeld has to call the boy and pronounce his name, a name that to him seems as ludicrous as everything else connected with the child.

"Alfred! Alfred!" he shouts. The boy hesitates for a long time. "Come here!" shouts Blumfeld, "I've got something for you."

The janitor's two little girls appear from the door opposite and, full of curiosity, take up positions on either side of Blumfeld. They grasp the situation much more quickly

than the boy and cannot understand why he doesn't come at once. Without taking their eyes off Blumfeld they beckon to the boy, but cannot fathom what kind of present is awaiting Alfred. Tortured with curiosity, they hop from one foot to the other. Blumfeld laughs at them as well as at the boy.

The latter seems to have figured it all out and climbs stiffly, clumsily up the steps. Not even in his gait can he manage to belie his mother, who, incidentally, has appeared in the basement doorway. To make sure that the charwoman also understands and in hope that she will supervise the carrying out of his instructions, should it be necessary, Blumfeld shouts excessively loud.

"Up in my room," says Blumfeld, "I have two lovely balls. Would you like to have them?" Not knowing how to behave, the boy simply screws up his mouth, turns around, and looks inquiringly down at his mother. The girls, however, promptly begin to jump around Blumfeld and ask him for the balls. "You will be allowed to play with them too," Blumfeld tells them, but waits for the boy's answer.

He could of course give the balls to the girls, but they strike him as too unreliable and for the moment he has more confidence in the boy. Meanwhile, the latter, without having exchanged a word, has taken counsel with his mother and nods his assent to Blumfeld's repeated question. "Then listen," says Blumfeld, who is quite prepared to receive no thanks for his gift. "Your mother has the key of my door, you must borrow it from her. But here is the key of my wardrobe, and in the wardrobe you will find the balls. Take good care to lock the wardrobe and the room again. But with the balls you can do what you like and you don't have to bring them back. Have you understood me?"

Unfortunately, the boy has not understood. Blumfeld has tried to make everything particularly clear to this hopelessly dense creature, but for this very reason has repeated everything too often, has in turn too often mentioned keys, room, and wardrobe, and as a result the boy stares at him as though he were rather a seducer than his benefactor. The girls, on the other hand, have understood everything immediately, press against Blumfeld, and stretch out their hands for the key.

"Wait a moment," says Blumfeld, by now annoyed with them all. Time, moreover, is passing, he can't sit about much longer.

If only the mother would say that she has understood him and take matters in hand for the boy! Instead of which she still stands down by the door, smiles with the affection of the bashful deaf, and is probably under the impression that Blumfeld up there has suddenly fallen for the boy and is hearing him his lessons. Blumfeld on the other hand can't very well climb down the basement stairs and shout into the charwoman's ear to make her son for God's sake relieve him of the balls! It had required enough of his self-control as it was to entrust the key of his wardrobe for a whole day to this family. It is certainly not in order to save himself trouble that he is handing the key to the boy rather than himself leading the boy up and there giving him the balls.

But he can't very well first give the balls away and then immediately deprive the boy of them by-as would be bound to happen-drawing them after him as his followers.

"So you still don't understand me?" asks Blumfeld almost wistfully after having started a fresh explanation which, however, he immediately interrupts at sight of the boy's vacant stare. So vacant a stare renders one helpless. It could tempt one into saying more than one intends, if only to fill the vacancy with sense. Whereupon "We'll fetch the balls for him!" shout the girls.

They are shrewd and have realized that they can obtain the balls only through using the boy as an intermediary, but that they themselves have to bring about this mediation. From the janitor's room a clock strikes, warning Blumfeld to hurry. "Well, then, take the key," says Blumfeld, and the key is more snatched from his hand than given by him. He would have handed it to the boy with infinitely more confidence.

"The key to the room you'll have to get from the woman," Blumfeld adds. "And when you return with the balls you must hand both keys to her."

"Yes, yes!" shout the girls and run down the steps. They know everything, absolutely everything; and as though Blumfeld were infected by the boy's denseness, he is unable to understand how they could have grasped everything so quickly from his explanations.

Now they are already tugging at the charwoman's skirt but, tempting as it would be, Blumfeld cannot afford to watch them carrying out their task, not only because it's already late, but also because he has no desire to be present at the liberation of the balls. He would in fact far prefer to be several streets away when the girls first open the door of his room. After all, how does he know what else he might have to expect from these balls!

And so for the second time this morning he leaves the house. He has one last glimpse of the charwoman defending herself against the girl's, and of the boy stirring his bandy legs to come to his mother's assistance. It's beyond Blumfeld's comprehension why a creature like this servant should prosper and propagate in this world.

While on his way to the linen factory, where Blumfeld is employed, thoughts about his work gradually get the upper hand. He quickens his step and, despite the delay caused by the boy, he is the first to arrive in his office.

This office is a glass-enclosed room containing a writing desk for Blumfeld and two standing desks for the two assistants subordinate to him. Although these standing desks are so small and narrow as to suggest they are meant for schoolchildren, this office is very crowded and the assistants cannot sit down, for then there would be no place for Blumfeld's chair. As a result they stand all day, pressed against their desks. For them of course this is very uncomfortable, but it also makes it very difficult for Blumfeld to keep an eye on them. They often press eagerly against their desks not so much in order to work as to whisper to one another or even to take forty winks. They give Blumfeld a great deal of trouble; they don't help him sufficiently with the enormous amount of work that is imposed on him. This work involves supervising the whole distribution of fabrics and cash among the women homeworker who are employed by the factory for the manufacture of certain fancy commodities. To appreciate the magnitude of this task an intimate knowledge of the general conditions is necessary. But since Blumfeld's immediate superior has died some years ago, no one any longer possesses this knowledge, which is also why Blumfeld cannot grant anyone the right to pronounce an opinion on his work.

The manufacturer, Herr Ottomar, for instance, clearly underestimates Blumfeld's work; no doubt he recognizes that in the course of twenty years Blumfeld has deserved well of the factory, and this he acknowledges not only because he is obliged to, but also because he respects Blumfeld as a loyal, trustworthy person. He underestimates his work, nevertheless, for he believes it could be conducted by methods more simple and therefore in every respect more profitably than those employed by Blumfeld.

It is said, and it is probably not incorrect, that Ottomar shows himself so rarely in Blumfeld's department simply to spare himself the annoyance that the sight of

Blumfeld's working methods causes him. To be so unappreciated is undoubtedly sad for Blumfeld, but there is no remedy, for he cannot very well compel Ottomar to spend let us say a whole month on end in Blumfeld's department in order to study the great variety of work being done accomplished there, to apply his own allegedly better methods, and to let himself be convinced of Blumfeld's soundness by the collapse of the department-which would be the inevitable result. And so Blumfeld carries on his work undeterred as before, gives a little start whenever Ottomar appears after a long absence, then with the subordinate's sense of duty makes a feeble effort to explain to Ottomar this or that arrangement, whereupon the latter, his eyes lowered and giving a silent nod, passes on.

But what worries Blumfeld more than this lack of appreciation is the thought that one day he will be compelled to leave his job, the immediate consequence of which will be pandemonium, a confusion no one will be able to straighten out because so far as he knows there isn't a single soul in the factory capable of replacing him and of carrying on his job in a manner that could be relied upon to prevent months of the most serious interruptions. Needless to say, if the boss underestimates an employee the latter's colleagues try their best to surpass him in this respect. In consequence everyone underestimates Blumfeld's work; no one considers it necessary to spend any time training in Blumfeld's department, and when new employees are hired not one of them is ever assigned to Blumfeld. As a result Blumfeld's department lacks a younger generation to carry on.

When Blumfeld, who up to then had been managing the entire department with the help of only one servant, demanded an assistant, weeks of bitter fighting ensued. Almost every day Blumfeld appeared in Ottomar's office and explained to him calmly and in minute detail why an assistant was needed in his department. He was needed not by any means because Blumfeld wished to spare himself, Blumfeld had no intention of sparing himself, he was doing more than his share of work and this he had no desire to change, but would Herr Ottomar please consider how in the course of time the business had grown, how every department had been correspondingly enlarged, with the exception of Blumfeld's department, which was invariably forgotten! And would he consider too how much the work had increased just there!

When Blumfeld had entered the firm, a time Herr Ottomar probably could not remember, they had employed some ten seamstresses, today the number varied between fifty and sixty. Such a job requires great energy; Blumfeld could guarantee that he was completely wearing himself out in this work, but that he will continue to master it completely he can henceforth no longer guarantee. True, Herr Ottomar had never flatly refused Blumfeld's requests, this was something he could not do to an old employee, but the manner in which he hardly listened, in which he talked to others over Blumfeld's head, made halfhearted promises and had forgotten everything in a few days-this behavior was insulting, to say the least. Not actually to Blumfeld, Blumfeld is no romantic, pleasant as honor and recognition may be, Blumfeld can do without them, in spite of everything he will stick to his desk as long as it is at all possible, in any case he is in the right, and right, even though on occasion it may take a long time, must prevail in the end.

True, Blumfeld has at last been given two assistants, but what assistants! One might have thought Ottomar had realized he could express his contempt for the department even better by granting rather than by refusing it these assistants. It was even possible that Ottomar had kept Blumfeld waiting so long because he was looking for two assistants just like these, and-as may be imagined-took a long time to find them. And now of course Blumfeld could no longer complain; if he did, the answer could easily be foreseen; after all, he had asked for one assistant and had been given two, that's how cleverly Ottomar had arranged things.

Needless to say, Blumfeld complained just the same, but only because his predicament all but forced him to do so, not because he still hoped for any redress. Nor did he complain emphatically, but only by the way, whenever the occasion arose. Nevertheless, among his spiteful colleagues the rumor soon spread that someone had asked Ottomar if it were really possible that Blumfeld, who after all had been given such unusual aid, was still complaining. To which Ottomar answered that this was correct, Blumfeld was still complaining, and rightly so. He, Ottomar, had at last realized this and he intended gradually to assign to Blumfeld one assistant for each seamstress, in other words some sixty in all. In case this number should prove insufficient, however, he would let him have even more and would not cease until the bedlam, which had been developing for years in Blumfeld's department, was complete.

Now it cannot be denied that in this remark Ottomar's manner of speech had been cleverly imitated, but Blumfeld had no doubts whatever that Ottomar would not dream of speaking about him in such a way. The whole thing was a fabrication of the loafers in the offices on the first floor. Blumfeld ignored it-if only he could as calmly have ignored the presence of the assistants! But there they stood, and could not be spirited away. Pale, weak children. According to their credentials they had already passed school age, but in reality this was difficult to believe. In fact their rightful place was so clearly at their mother's knee that one would hardly have dared to entrust them to a teacher. They still couldn't even stand properly; standing up for any length of time tired them inordinately, especially when they first arrived. When left to themselves they promptly doubled up in their weakness, standing hunched and crooked in their corner. Blumfeld tried to point out to them that if they went on giving in to their indolence they would become cripples for life.

To ask the assistants to make the slightest move was to take a risk; once when one of them had been ordered to carry something a short distance, he had run so eagerly that he had banged his knee against a desk. The room had been full of seamstresses, the desks covered in merchandise, but Blumfeld had been obliged to neglect everything and take the sobbing assistant into the office and there bandage his wound. Yet even this zeal on the part of the assistant was superficial; like actual children they tried once in a while to excel, but far more often-indeed almost always-they tried to divert their superior's attention and to cheat him.

Once, at a time of the most intensive work, Blumfeld had rushed past them, dripping with sweat, and had observed them secretly swapping stamps among the bales of merchandise. He had felt like banging them on the head with his fists, it would have been the only possible punishment for such behavior, but they were after all only children and Blumfeld could not very well knock children down. And so he continued to put up with them.

Originally he had imagined that the assistants would help him with the essential chores which at the moment of the distribution of goods required so much effort and vigilance. He had imagined himself standing in the center behind his desk, keeping an eye on everything, and making the entries in the books while the assistants ran to and for, distributing everything according to his orders. He had imagined that his supervision, which, sharp as it was, could not cope with such a crowd, would be complemented by the assistants' attention; he had hoped that these assistants would gradually acquire experience, cease depending entirely on his orders, and finally learn to discriminate on their own between the seamstresses as to their trustworthiness and requirements.

Blumfeld soon realized that all these hopes had been in vain and that he could not afford to let them even talk to the seamstresses. From the beginning they had ignored some of the seamstresses, either from fear or dislike; others to whom they felt partial

they would sometimes run to meet at the door. To them the assistants would bring whatever the women wanted, pressing it almost secretly into their hands, although the seamstresses were perfectly entitled to receive it, would collect on a bare shelf for these favorites various cuttings, worthless remnants, but also a few still useful odds and ends, waving them blissfully at the women behind Blumfeld's back and in return having sweets popped into their mouths. Blumfeld of course soon put an end to this mischief and the moment the seamstresses arrived he ordered the assistants back into their glass-enclosed cubicles.

But for a long time they considered this to be a grave injustice, they sulked, willfully broke their nibs, and sometimes, although not daring to raise their heads, even knocked loudly against the glass panes in order to attract the seamstresses' attention to the bad treatment that in their opinion they were suffering at Blumfeld's hands. The wrong they do themselves the assistants cannot see.

For instance, they almost always arrive late at the office. Blumfeld, their superior, who from his earliest youth has considered it natural to arrive half an hour before the office opens-not from ambition or an exaggerated sense of duty but simply from a certain feeling of decency-often has to wait more than an hour for his assistants. Chewing his breakfast roll he stands behind his desk, looking through the accounts in the seamstresses' little books. Soon he is immersed in his work and thinking of nothing else when suddenly he receives such a shock that his pen continues to tremble in his hand for some while afterwards. One of the assistants has dashed in, looking as though he is about to collapse; he is holding on to something with one hand while the other is pressed against his heaving chest. All this, however, simply means that he is making excuses for being late, excuses so absurd that Blumfeld purposely ignores them, for if he didn't he would have to give the young man a well-deserved thrashing. As it is he just glances at him for a moment, points with outstretched hand at the cubicle, and turns back to his work.

Now one really might expect the assistant to appreciate his superior's kindness and hurry to his place. No, he doesn't hurry, he dawdles about, he walks on tiptoe, slowly placing one foot in front of the other. Is he trying to ridicule his superior? No. Again it's just that mixture of fear and self-complacency against which one is powerless. How else explain the fact that even today Blumfeld, who has himself arrived unusually late in the office and now after a long wait-he doesn't feel like checking the books-sees, through the clouds of dust raised by the stupid servant with his broom, the two assistants sauntering peacefully along the street? Arm in arm, they appear to be telling one another important things which, however, are sure to have only the remotest and very likely irreverent connections with the office. The nearer they approach the glass door, the slower they walk. One of them seizes the door handle but fails to turn it; they just go on talking, listening, laughing.

"Hurry out and open the door for our gentlemen!" shouts Blumfeld at the servant, throwing up his hands. But when the assistants come in, Blumfeld no longer feels like quarreling, ignores their greetings, and goes to his desk. He starts doing his accounts, but now and again glances up to see what his assistants are up to. One of them seems to be very tired and rubs his eyes. When hanging up his overcoat he takes the opportunity to lean against the wall. On the street he seemed lively enough, but the proximity of work tires him. The other assistant, however, is eager to work, but only work of a certain kind. For a long time it has been his wish to be allowed to sweep. But this is work to which he is not entitled; sweeping is exclusively the servant's job; in itself Blumfeld would have nothing against the sweeping, let the assistant sweep, he can't make a worse job of it than the servant, but if the assistant wants to sweep then he must come earlier, before the servant begins to sweep, and not spend on it time that is reserved exclusively for office work. But since the young man is totally deaf to any

sensible argument, at least the servant-that half-blind old buffer whom the boss would certainly not tolerate in any department but Blumfeld's and who is still alive only by the grace of the boss and God-at least the servant might be sensible and hand the broom for a moment to the young man who, being clumsy, would soon lose his interest and run after the servant with the broom in order to persuade him to go on sweeping.

It appears, however, that the servant feels especially responsible for the sweeping; one can see how he, the moment the young man approaches him, tries to grasp the broom more firmly with his trembling hands; he even stands still and stops sweeping so as to direct his full attention to the ownership of the broom. The assistant doesn't actually plead in words, for he is afraid of Blumfeld, who is ostensibly doing his accounts; moreover, ordinary speech is useless, since the servant can be made to hear only by excessive shouting. So at first the assistant tugs the servant by the sleeve. The servant knows, of course, what it is about, glowers at the assistant, shakes his head, and pulls the broom nearer up to his chest. Whereupon the assistant folds his hands and pleads. Actually, he has no hope of achieving anything by pleading, but the pleading amuses him and so he pleads. The other assistant follows the goings-on with low laughter and seems to think, heaven knows why, that Blumfeld can't hear him. The pleading makes not the slightest impression on the servant, who turns around and thinks he can safely use the broom again. The assistant, however, has skipped after him on tiptoe and, rubbing his hands together imploringly, now pleads from another side. This turning of the one and skipping of the other is repeated several times. Finally the servant feels cut off from all sides and realizes-something which, had he been slightly less stupid, he might have realized from the beginning- that he will be tired out long before the assistant. So, looking for help elsewhere, he wags his finger at the assistant and points at Blumfeld, suggesting that he will lodge a complaint if the assistant refuses to desist. The assistant realizes that if he is to get the broom at all he'll have to hurry, so he impudently makes a grab for it. An involuntary scream from the other assistant heralds the imminent decision. The servant saves the broom once more by taking a step back and dragging it after him. But now the assistant is up in arms: with open mouth and flashing eyes he leaps forward, the servant tries to escape, but his old legs wobble rather than run, the assistant tugs at the broom and though he doesn't succeed in getting it he nevertheless causes it to drop and in this way it is lost to the servant. Also apparently to the assistant for, the moment the broom falls, all three, the two assistants and the servant, are paralyzed, for now Blumfeld is bound to discover everything. And sure enough Blumfeld at his peephole glances up as though taking in the situation only now. He stares at each one with a stern and searching eye, even the broom on the floor does not escape his notice. Perhaps the silence has lasted too long or perhaps the assistant can no longer suppress his desire to sweep, in any case he bends down-albeit very carefully, as though about to grab an animal rather than a broom-seizes it, passes it over the floor, but, when Blumfeld jumps up and steps out of his cubicle, promptly casts it aside in alarm.

"Both of you back to work! And not another sound out of you!" shouts Blumfeld, and with an outstretched hand he directs the two assistants back to their desks. They obey at once, but not shamefaced or with lowered heads, rather they squeeze themselves stiffly past Blumfeld, staring him straight in the eye as though trying in this way to stop him from beating them. Yet they might have learned from experience that Blumfeld on principle never beats anyone. But they are over apprehensive, and without any tact keep trying to protect their real or imaginary rights.