FIRST SORROW

A trapeze artist — it is well known that this art, practiced high in the domes of the great variety theaters, is one of the most difficult attainable by human beings — had, first just in striving for perfection, and later also as a habit that had become tyrannical, arranged his life so that, for as long as he worked at the same enterprise, he remained on the trapeze day and night. All of his needs, which were very minor anyway, were seen to by servants who watched from below, working in shifts and using specially constructed containers to pull up and down everything that was needed above. This way of life did not create any particular difficulties for the world around him, though it was a little disturbing that he stayed up there, as was impossible to conceal, during

the other performances, and, although he usually remained still at such times, a glance from the audience would occasionally wander up to him. But the different managements forgave him this because he was an extraordinary, irreplaceable artist. And of course people understood that he did not live this way out of malice, but because this was the only way he could remain in constant practice and preserve his art in its perfection.

And besides, it was healthy up there, and when, during warmer times of year, the side-windows in the lantern of the dome were opened and the fresh air and the sun penetrated powerfully into the brightening space, it was even beautiful. Admittedly, his dealings with humanity were limited; only sometimes did one of his gymnast colleagues climb up to him on the rope ladder, then both of them sat on the trapeze, leaned to the left and the right on the rope-holds and conversed, or laborers who were making improvements to the roof exchanged a few words with him through an open window, or the fireman checking the emergency lighting on the highest gallery called out to him something respectful, though scarcely audible. Otherwise it

remained quiet around him; only sometimes did an employee who had wandered into the empty theater during the afternoon look up to where, at a height almost vanishing from view, the trapeze artist, having no way of knowing that he was being observed, practiced his art or rested.

The trapeze artist could have lived this way undisturbed if it had not been for the inevitable journeys from place to place, which he found extremely aggravating. It was true that the impresario took pains to see that the trapeze artist was spared any unnecessary extension of his suffering: race cars were used for the journeys in the cities, whenever possible at night or in the earliest hours of the morning, and they would chase through the empty streets with all possible speed, though admittedly too slowly to satisfy the trapeze artist's longing; in trains, an entire compartment would be reserved, where the trapeze artist would spend the journey up in the luggage rack, which was a miserable substitute for his life at other times, but nevertheless a substitute; at the site of the next performance the trapeze was in its place long before the trapeze artist's arrival, and all the doors that led to the auditorium

were thrown open, all the corridors kept free — but the most beautiful moments in the impresario's life were still the ones when the trapeze artist put his foot on the rope ladder and, in no time at all, was finally hanging up on his trapeze again.

Although the impresario had succeeded with many such journeys, he still found them unpleasant, because the journeys, disregarding everything else, were always damaging to the trapeze artist's nerves.

So it was that they were travelling with each other again. The trapeze artist was lying in the luggage rack and dreaming. The impresario was leaning in the corner by the window and reading a book. Then the trapeze artist addressed him softly. The impresario was immediately at his service. Biting his lips, the trapeze artist said that, instead of one trapeze, as he had used for his acrobatics up until now, he would now always have to have two trapezes, two trapezes opposite one another. The impresario agreed with this idea immediately. However, the trapeze artist, as if he wanted to show that in this case the impresario's agreement meant as little as a refusal would have, said that he would never again and under no circumstances perform on one

trapeze. He seemed to shudder at the idea that it might ever happen again. Hesitating and observing, the impresario explained his full agreement once again, two trapezes were better than one, and this new arrangement was also advantageous because it added variety to the performance. Then the trapeze artist suddenly began to cry. Deeply disturbed, the impresario leapt up and asked what had happened, and when he received no answer, he climbed up on the bench, caressed him and pressed his face to his own, so that the trapeze artist's tears would flow over his face as well. But only after many questions and flattering words did the trapeze artist say, sobbing: "Just this one bar in my hands — how can I live!" Now it was already easier for the impresario to comfort the trapeze artist; he promised to telegraph the site of the next performance about the second trapeze as soon as they reached the next station; reproached himself for having allowed the trapeze artist to work on one trapeze for so long, and thanked him and praised him highly for finally having called attention to the mistake. Thus the impresario gradually succeeded in calming the trapeze artist, and he was able to return to his corner. But he himself had

not been calmed, and with grave concern he secretly regarded the trapeze artist from over the top of his book. When such thoughts had begun to torment him, would they ever completely stop? Didn't they have to constantly increase? Weren't they existence threatening? And the impresario really thought he saw, in the apparently quiet sleep in which the crying had ended, how the first wrinkles began to etch themselves into the trapeze artist's smooth, childish forehead.