

Holly-Jane Rahlens



Extract:

## *Silence of Snow*

Lucia struck the brass door knocker twice. They had decided that she would do the talking, as she spoke both German and English fluently. Oliver hoped that Mr. Clemens's German was as good as Iris said it was alleged to be. He didn't want to miss out on anything or have something get lost in translation.

The door swung open. Peering down at them was a stout woman wearing a small white lace cap and a starched white pinafore over a blue-striped, high-collared dress. "Yes, please?" she asked, in German.

Uh-oh. They hadn't expected household help. They had thought Twain himself or his wife would answer the door, or maybe one of the daughters.

"We're here to see Mr. Clemens," Lucia said.

The woman's eyes narrowed. "About ... ?"

"It's a private matter, ma'am."

The woman's eyes were small, like beads. "Is he expecting you?"

"Yes," said Lucia. She *had* to lie.

"Do you have a card?"

The children looked at each other. A card?

"I'm afraid not," Lucia murmured.

The woman pursed her lips. "I'm sorry, but Mr. Clemens is not accustomed to receiving guests without—"

“Frau Müller?” said a man, annoyed. “There’s an arctic draft creeping into my study.”

Frau Müller turned toward the voice. “I’m sorry, sir,” she called out to him, “I was just closing the door.” Then she did close it – or, rather, tried to. Oliver blocked it with his foot. He *had* to block it.

“What on earth ... ?” said the woman, flustered.

She turned back to the man. “There are children here, sir. They say you’re expecting them? But I think not. One of them has his foot in the door!”

“Children?” said the man. “What children? What foot?”

The woman stepped back and the door swung open. In the doorway appeared a slightly built man with a full head of messy, white hair, bushy pepper-and-salt eyebrows and a matching mustache. He wore a taupe-colored silk smoking jacket, brown plaid slacks, a matching plaid vest, a white shirt, and a brown cravat. He was smoking a cigar.

Oliver may never have read any of Mark Twain’s books, but he recognized that famous face, as most people would recognize Princess Diana, Albert Einstein or John F. Kennedy.

“What do you rascals want?” Twain snarled in German.

“We’ve come to speak to you, sir,” Lucia responded in German.

Twain’s blue eyes glared at Lucia as if he had just caught her with her hand in the cookie jar. Lucia coughed at the stench of his cigar. Iris swatted its smoke back at the man.

“Are you those horrendous children from across the street? The ones who make all that noise? With those intolerable barking dogs?”

“No, sir,” said Lucia.

“Well, you look pretty unruly to me.” His eyes took in everything: their dirty fingernails, the yo-yo-sized bump on Rosa’s forehead, the encrusted blood under Oliver’s nose, the edelweiss bandana around Iris’s mouth and nose to keep her braces out of sight. “You look like the

unwashed, ill-mannered, lazy, coarse, devil-daring, ignorant rascals that you are,” he boomed.

Oliver noticed that the man’s German was grammatically correct, but extremely American in accent: with rounded Rs, drawled vowels, and all the dotted umlauts chopped off.

Twain took a step back. Just as Oliver realized he was about to shut the door, Iris stepped forward and thrust the door back open with one hand. She *had* to do something!

“I beg your pardon!” Iris said to the writer. “I may be many things, sir, but ignorant is most assuredly not one of them!”

“And for your information,” added Rosa in her finest haughty-mode voice, “your most famous hero, Huckleberry Finn, is exactly as you just described us – unwashed, ill-mannered, lazy, coarse, devil-daring and ignorant. And you wrote a whole book about him! And everyone loves him!”

Mark Twain, taken aback by so much boldness, cocked his head. “What do you know of Huck Finn? Have you read that book, young lady?”

“I certainly have.”

“So have I,” said Iris. “In Henny Koch’s translation, her real name being Henriette Koch.”

“But that was just published a few months ago,” said the writer, astonished.

“That doesn’t change the fact that I read it, does it?”

“I read it in the original English, sir” said Lucia. “My favorite part is when Huck follows his heart and decides to break the laws of the South and not turn Jim in as a runaway slave. His declaration, ‘All right then, I’ll go to hell!’” will go down in literary history.”

“In German,” said Iris, “it sounds just as good. It’s a turning point in the novel.”

Mark Twain, flabbergasted, to say the least, peered at Oliver. “And

you, son? Do you claim to having read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as well?”

“No, sir,” Oliver confessed. “I have not. But I saw Tom Sawyer.”

“You saw Tom?”

“Yes. In the cinema.”

Twain’s eyes grew small. “Cinema?” he said. “What the heck is a cinema?”