



2002

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Frapan, Ilse, "How are things going for us?" (2002). *Prose Fiction*. 464.
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How are things going for us? (English Translation)

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"How are things going for us?"

A Sketch from Hamburg

by

Ilse Frapan

Translated by Michelle Stott James

Street upon street, house upon house, shop upon shop.

Shop upon shop, and in every broad, mirroring shop window, barbaric decorations, blinding, multi-colored light. A city in lights every evening, every, every evening.

Who shines the most colorfully? Who shouts the loudest? It is a hot, desperate contest, this battle of colors and of lights.

Shine, my chandelier, outshine my neighbor, my competitor, my enemy! Shout and trumpet, oh my golden-yellow silks, my blood-red brocades, my grass-green ribbons, my false, glittering tinsel, out-shout my neighbor, my competitor, my enemy! He who wants to lure the buyers to himself, who wants to take the money from them, the money, the money that I need to live, to eat, I, my wife, and my children! Obscure him, destroy him, because his downfall is my fortune, strike him to the ground, oh my inspiration, save me from hunger, me, my wife, and my children, oh my tricks and ruses and inexhaustible flashes of inspiration!

Behind the shop counter he stands, pale and dull-eyed. His blonde moustache gleams with scented pomade, his shirt front with starch and ironing. He is polished, spruced up, perfumed as if for a ball. And his posture towards buyers is flawless, although a nervous twitch now and again makes his face, his hands, even his eyeballs in their sockets tremble.

"Not this color? Oh, I have--we have a large selection! And if I might have the honor of displaying my entire stock to you, it would be no trouble! What is your request, please?" And his red-rimmed eyes fly anxiously from point to point, until they focus up there, on the highest shelves of the long shop, illuminated as bright as day, there on the countless bales and bundles, which are--filled with paper cuttings! He blinks and averts his glance, his eyeballs tremble in their sockets. "So, today you don't desire anything, Madam? Just as you wish! Oh, please don't

trouble yourself, the door is perhaps a little heavy? I'll have it seen to first thing tomorrow--and might I invite you back another time."--

Now he is alone; timid and bitter he gazes after her, the choosy woman.

And once again it is the upper shelves, those with the beautifully packed, beautifully labeled, uniformly large bales, which draw his glance. The doorbell rings furiously, the mailcarrier tosses three letters onto the counter; he is also too tired, too dull-eyed and out-of-breath to be able to say even a word.

Hastily the shopkeeper takes the letters, his face becomes even a bit paler; he doesn't open them, he knows the contents; upstairs in his private rooms he has an entire drawer full of such communications. With difficulty he remains erect; it seems to him as if he would collapse if he even sat down there on the chair.

And the colors glow and the lamps shine, like a colorful, mute sacrificial festival. He stands and stares at the door through which no one else enters, his display windows with the red, green and yellow, beautifully decorated posters: "Clearance sale!" "Bargains at vastly reduced prices."-- Street upon street and house upon house and shop upon shop! And in every shop the white, red, yellow posters, angled across in diagonals, with sun-rayed edges and the same inscription: "Clearance sale! Reduced prices! Half price! Practically free! A real giveaway!" The wretched, deceitful, cutthroat, transparent boasting of starving people who don't want to starve, and who all, all, the poor things, came up with the same ideas.

A rear door opens cautiously. A young woman, his wife, peeks anxiously into the shop. "Well, Guschen?" He shrugs his shoulders. "Nothing this evening! Absolutely nothing!" She comes closer and takes his hands: "What are we going to do?" And suddenly, as if moved by the same thought, both lift their gaze to the upper shelves where those bales lie, none of which have yet been opened. The large stock--the paper cuttings! He doesn't keep any business secrets from her. Through long nights they stayed up together and made these bales. She thought it up, she, who also answers the worst letters, such letters as the three he just received. She is a great deal more optimistic than he is. She thinks like that at the right moment, the way, when their fingers were too tired and swollen from the shears, she afterwards carefully peered into and illuminated every corner. They chased down every tiny scrap of paper, because of the maid. One has to be so very careful. Oh, if only they could do the work themselves! But that just won't do, because of the neighbors, such things really get around, which would hurt their credit. One is surrounded by enemies, and those who aren't enemies are at the very least watchdogs. But this thing worked out well. The woman doesn't even blink. She has the courage to point upward and to whisper: "They really look good. They fill in so well. And they don't eat up money, like everything else does!" He hangs his head.

"Just don't let it all confuse you, Guschen! Go up and get something to eat, I'll stay here that long." And when he hesitates: "Just go, Guschen, nobody will notice! Everything is already on the table." Finally, with a sigh, he goes. But he turns around once more: "Are the girls already in bed?" "No, they're out front. They're out there sliding on the ice awhile, you know." He shakes his head. "In the east wind? Call them in, Martha, it's already almost seven." But the round, childlike face of the woman becomes earnest: "Oh, Guschen, let them stay for another half hour. I see it this way: thank heavens that they are still little girls who aren't aware of anything. I just heard them shouting with joy; I heard them clear upstairs! Thank heavens, I was thinking, that you can still rejoice, thank heavens, that you are still children! Isn't that right, Guschen?" He

nods: "Well, then--in half an hour. And don't sell too much! Don't sell out the whole shop, you hear?" With a pitiful grimace he goes out.

The woman sits down, leans back comfortably. "I can take care of things just as well sitting."

It is so still inside that she again clearly hears the children outside. Now they are singing, that is, a couple of them; most likely her Olga and Else aren't among them:

*My beer and wine are fresh and clear,
My daughter lies on a funeral bier.--*

That's strange, what made the girls think of that? And what crazy things they come up with. "Funeral bier? What's that?" "A funeral bier is a death certificate." "It doesn't either mean a death certificate (Totenschein), it means someone who seems to be dead (scheintot)!" Olga says. The woman smiles: "Oh, you little smarty-pants, you think you know everything!" "Everybody thought I was dead once!" Else remarks now in a schoolmarmish tone. It can be heard so clearly in the silence of the shop. "They are so entertaining, the girls," nods the solitary woman. Aha, now Olga takes over again. "And everybody thought my Mama was dead once too!" "Ha! You're making it up!" the others shout in objection. Olga becomes more enthusiastic: "It's absolutely true, she had such a terrible toothache in the night, and I go to her bed and touch her and she's almost completely cold, barely a little bit warm." "Ha! a likely story!" comes the shout again. The mother is greatly amused: "Such foolish chatter."

Now Else again: "Actually, my Papa was once really dead. He had a 120 degree fever, I tell you!" "Ha, 120 degrees! What an amount!" "Oh, don't believe it! They always think they are so important!" cries the voice of a boy. The woman frowns; that must be the dreadful boy of that despicable Fuhrhopp Junior, who runs the same kind of business as her husband, a couple of buildings away. "Look, they think they're so important!" he repeats in an even more strongly challenging tone. A revolting boy! "No, now I'll bring them inside!" The mother stands up urgently, as if her little girls were being threatened. As she opens the door, their loud squabbling swells up to meet her, and suddenly she hears the same malicious voice, sharp as a knife: "Ha! Ha! Don't you even know? You don't even know!" And then the cruel shouting of many voices: "Ha, Olga and Else! They don't even know! They think they're so important and they don't even know! Go ask your Mama! Look, she's coming outside! Ha, go ask her!"

"Mama! Mama!" Crying, beside themselves at the rain of ridicule suddenly poured out upon them, the two little girls charge up to their mother: "Mama, Mama! How are things going for us? How are things going for us, Mama? Tell us, Mama! Louis Fuhrhopp says that we don't even know how things are going, and we really don't know either, and we are supposed to ask you Mama, and they are all laughing and tormenting us! How are things going for us, Mama?"

The woman hasn't even closed the door; she stands, for a moment struck dumb, reeling as if from a terrible blow to the chest, almost unconscious. And doggedly and pitifully the little ones whimper the same question, which they don't understand, while outside the cruel derisive laughter gradually dies away. The children are playing at something else now. Finally she pulls herself together, puts her arms around her little ones and slams the door. "Children, don't cry! don't cry!" Despairing she hugs them both tightly, and her own tears fall like rain on the innocent, round little heads.

"May God have mercy on us!"