

DISENTANGLEMENT

STEVEN FRENCH

My dearest Käthe,

I hope that this letter finds its way to you and that you are safe. I am sorry that we parted with such bad humour. You know that I love you and Mama dearly. And Papa too, even though to him I am still his little girl whose studies he has indulged but who will be expected to marry and have babies and behave as a good German housewife should. As Mama has, all her life.

But Käthe, today, that life is over. It was so for me as soon as I took my seat in the lecture theatre the first time, the only woman there amongst a crowd of men. Some of whom laughed and smirked at me but what did I care? For there, at the front, just a few rows ahead of me, were the gods of my scientific pantheon. They included the great man himself, Professor Einstein, who was to give this inaugural lecture but was happily sharing a joke with his host, Professor Heisenberg, and seemed immune to all the admiring glances from the audience. Just to be present – I will not say ‘in such company’ – was sufficient for me.

Imagine then how I felt when I was invited by none other than Professor Heisenberg himself to join his ‘select group’ who would meet outside of class to read and discuss the latest work on the new quantum physics. At first, I was too shy to even squeak but one evening I plucked up the courage to say something about a new paper we were studying by Professor Schrödinger, one of the architects of the theory. In this work Schrödinger describes how, according to the theory, two particles might become tied together or ‘entangled’ in a way that seems quite mysterious. One of the young men in the group was trying to summarise this paper but in a manner that seemed to me to miss the central point. So, I decided to speak up and correct him. I almost stuttered to a shameful halt and would have embarrassed myself if Professor Heisenberg hadn’t nodded his head in encouragement. But it was the young man who blushed and looked down at his shoes.

I was afraid that by showing off in this way I had committed a faux pas with the group, or even made an enemy of my fellow scholar. But afterwards he introduced himself as Max and complimented me on my insight. And he asked me if he could walk me back to my lodgings! Käthe, I must confess my heart skipped a beat as he was tall and handsome and, despite my correction of

his understanding, quite clever. Soon we became inseparable. We not only walked together to and from the meetings but also discussed the papers together beforehand, studied together ... I am sure Mama and Papa would have been scandalised!

After some weeks, he invited me to have dinner with him at a little restaurant not far from the Institute. For the first time we talked about things other than physics and began to share our hopes and fears for the future. But then, walking home, we passed one of those horrifying spectacles that have become increasingly common: a well-dressed middle-aged man and what I assume was his wife, were down on their knees scrubbing at the pavement, while a crowd surrounding them jeered and called them the most filthy names. I looked away, appalled. "That's not how we should deal with the Jews" Max muttered and I must admit, my horror at what I'd just seen was fully matched by my anger at what I'd just heard. He observed my face then and his too changed, as he realised. "Not you, my dear, not you," he tried to reassure me. "You will be safe I will make sure of that. After all, Germany needs great minds like yours as well."

I did not know what to say and so I walked on in silence. When we reached my lodgings, I said goodnight and all but ran upstairs to my room. My only thoughts were of how to remove myself from this relationship. Fortunately, the matter was resolved for me within a few days. A Professor Wigner was visiting from the United States with a scholarship in his pocket and had been invited to join our discussions. At first I could barely say a thing as I felt him observing me. What prompted me to assert myself was Max's overly confident summary of the paper, presented as if he felt he had something to prove. However, once again his understanding of it struck me as muddled and confused. I regret to say that I told him so and before he could respond, I set out my analysis, to Professor Heisenberg's obvious approval.

This time Max's face flushed with anger and he stormed out of the meeting shortly after we had finished, but Professor Wigner asked me to stay behind. I cannot express how nervous I was answering his questions about my background, my studies and so forth. And so, I was utterly taken aback when Professor Heisenberg invited me to his office the next day and announced that I was to be offered the scholarship!

Now I write this on the train to Hamburg from where I will sail to America and my new life. Käthe, I do not know when I will be able to return, as much as I fear for you and Mama and Papa. I beg you not to remain tied to this country which is already so different from what it was. We are all of us

entangled with family and tradition but since what is on the horizon will break those chains anyway, it would be better, far better, to do it yourself, and soon.

I must end this now as we are approaching the station.

Take care,

Your loving sister,

Greta

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven French is a retired Professor in history and philosophy of science at the University of Leeds. He has been trying his hand at various forms of creative writing, including speculative and, as in this case, historical.