

The Curse of ... Love

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The road to the village ran downhill. The figure of a traveler appeared on it just at the moment when the sun's bright red orb began to fall below the horizon. It seemed that the man had emerged from the sun's rays, taken a step forward, and now stood on the hillside above the village. All kinds of things seem possible.

The man slowly approached the first dwelling and paused, leaning in exhaustion on the gate-post. He wore a light, rather threadbare coat, which had once been pale beige in color. The coat was of a somewhat unusual style: it reached down almost to his ankles and had a hood instead of a collar.

The traveler's intelligent features radiated calm, and his gray eyes observed the surroundings with serene pensiveness. Only one thing spoiled the overall impression. Despite the late hour, the man wore indoor slippers on his otherwise bare feet.

Spotting the stranger, the dog in the yard took a step forward and gave a brief bark of warning. He was a large, powerful dog, and his general appearance gave the distinct impression that he was not given to joking.

On hearing him bark, few people would venture into the yard, especially as the guard dog was not on a leash. But the man merely smiled and said in a friendly voice:

“Why are you angry? I'm not a robber.”

Having uttered these words, he calmly opened the gate and entered the yard.

“Be so good as to summon your master, Rover. I'm tired, and I don't want to have to sit on these rough steps.”

On hearing his name from the lips of the stranger, the dog raised his head and barked loudly several times to summon his masters from the house, as if to say “See for yourselves who has come to your house.”

The barking summoned a slight young woman from the house. She was immediately struck by the stranger's curious attire but did not show her surprise.

“Good day, madam,” said the visitor, slightly bowing his head.

“Good day to you, sir,” replied the woman. “I suppose you have business with my husband?”

“Actually, I wanted to ask permission to spend the night here. I still have far to go, and I am exhausted.”

The young woman raised her eyebrows in surprise. These days people undertake a long journey on foot for one of only two reasons: either they are destitute or they are not entirely in possession of their senses. The intelligent look in his gray eyes eloquently refuted the latter suggestion. So he was penniless. Immediately she felt sorry for the poor man. Perhaps he had been robbed or suffered some other misfortune. The unexpected guest gave no impression of being a drunkard or tramp.

"You can stay the night, but I'm alone in the house with my children. I'm afraid I can't let you inside the house until my husband returns from work. You know yourself the things that go on in the world today." Then, realizing she had been indiscreet, she corrected herself.

"Don't think I am afraid of you, but God protects the prudent," she said. "Look," she went on, pointing with her finger. "The barn is open, and there's fresh hay there. Lie down and rest. When my husband returns, you can talk with him. It's up to him to decide, anyway," she said, shrugging her shoulders.

"Thank you," replied the traveler courteously. "For me, that is quite adequate. I have experienced worse."

The aroma of straw soon numbed his exhausted brain. The soft bedding soothed the man's body, and before he knew it he had fallen asleep.

He was awakened by the sound of heavy footsteps over on the porch of the house.

"We have a visitor," the master of the house was informed by his wife as soon as he opened the door.

"Who is it?" he asked in a deep and powerful but tired-sounding voice.

"I really don't know. Some traveler. Seems to be a decent man. He's quite exhausted. Perhaps there's been some tragic event or an illness. He's asking to stay the night. I sent him to the barn. Is that all right?"

"Let him be. He isn't in our way. And I don't suppose he'll set the barn afire."

The master was silent for some time—evidently he was changing his clothes. Then his deep voice was heard again.

"Go and see what he needs. Give him something to eat. But don't invite him into the house. I'm dog-tired and can't face visitors. And tell him to go outside into the yard if he wants to smoke."

"I'll tell him," said his wife. "His breath doesn't exactly smell of alcohol. He probably isn't very well. There's really no point in inviting him into the house—he might bring in fleas or some other bug. There's plenty of hay, the nights are still warm—he'll manage. Shall I ask why he's traveling on foot?"

"No need. We haven't any money lying around anyway, and if he ... er ... hm," mumbled the husband irritably, "we'd never get rid of him afterwards. They're all like that. As soon as they start talking about themselves...."

Lying on the hay in the barn, the traveler smiled gently, shaking his head. This was the kind of reception he got in so many households. Often, they did not even let him into the yard.

"Here you are—I've brought you some refreshment."

The young woman was standing in the doorway, holding a mug of hot milk and a large slice of bread. There was also a cup full of gleaming white sugar.

"Here's your supper. In the morning we'll find you something more nourishing. For now this is all we have—we were not expecting visitors. You can sleep here." She gave a friendly smile. "My husband wasn't in a very good mood when he came home. I'll bring you a blanket a bit later."

"Please don't trouble yourself. I'll just settle deeper in the hay and I'll be fine. I can't cover myself with a blanket wearing these clothes, and it's too inconvenient to get undressed." With these words, he reached for the food.

"Oh!," cried the housewife, "What's the matter with your hands?"

The man looked at the palms of his hands. The wounds were bleeding again and the blood was dripping onto the floor in large drops.

"Oh, it's nothing, really," he replied, smiling pleasantly to reassure the young woman, who was quite alarmed. "Some old wounds have opened up. I expect the weather's about to change. Don't concern yourself about it."

"No, no!" The woman put the food down on the chaff-cutter. "We must do something. I'll bring something to soothe your wounds and bandage them. You could get blood poisoning."

After a while his hands were freshly bandaged, and soon the traveler, with a full stomach, lay on the sweet-smelling dry hay, listening to the silence of the night.

"That bitch has let me down again—she's just deserted me," dreamt Rover, snoring away. "She says only a silly chump like me would live in an old kennel breeding fleas. Normal dogs go out at night, looking for what's not tied down, but I'm stuck here, guarding someone else's property." When he felt the touch of human consciousness reading his thoughts, the dog roused himself and gave a growl of dissatisfaction.

That first time he saw the land it was gray and seemingly lifeless. It stretched out before him as far as the eye could see, waiting for his hands to rouse it from its winter hibernation. And he began to walk across it, leaving in his wake darkening traces of vapor—the coming to life. Then, after what was for his hands an eternity, it all turned darker and asked to be fed. Once again he was traversing the field from end to end, nourishing it with the sweat of his brow.

When it turned green, his life was full of joy. He stroked and caressed the silky ears of wheat, and he was happy. He shared in its happiness ... until the greenery also asked for nourishment.

The master of the house was so exhausted after his work that he did

not realize someone was eavesdropping on his dreams. And even if he had, he wouldn't have been annoyed. His dreams held no secrets. In spring they were about sowing, in summer about harvesting, and in autumn about preparing winter fodder. Only in winter did he dream about everything at once: sowing, harvesting, and preparing the fodder.

When the visitor saw the children's dreams, he squinted involuntarily—he was so dazzled by all that light and by those brilliant colors. It had been a long, long time since he had seen such a firework's display of happiness and joy, even in the dreams of children.

Only the woman of the house slept a dreamless sleep.

Her dreams, her pleasures, and her worries accompanied her all day long. So when everyone else finally fell asleep and dreamt, she would simply rest, gathering her strength for the next day's round of the joys and tribulations that are the lot of any ordinary woman.

The traveler quietly rose and went out through the gate.

He loved them all, the good and the bad. They had forgotten about Him and they no longer recognized Him. So He had no choice but to wander about in this world from dwelling to dwelling, awaiting that final day when He would be able to protect them better than any lawyer in the world, as they came face to face with His father. Those victims of self-love, that most dreadful of all curses.

Translated by Oksana Bunio and Patrick Corness

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