THE OLD PEASANT OF OLLERUP: BY PAUL HARBOE

He lived in his own thatched house, half brick and half timber, which stood by itself at the foot of the long hill, a little way west of Ollerup. Scarcely ever did anyone come to see him, and rarely indeed did he himself venture out beyond his gate. There was a flourishing fresh-looking garden within the fence, on either side of the narrow gravel path that led to the porch. The house lay perhaps a hundred feet back. Most of his time, I was informed, was spent in keeping the garden absolutely weedless, and otherwise in perfect order.

All Ollerup knew his life-story like a well-studied lesson. Already I had heard it from many mouths, in almost as many accents; one would tell it with some faint display of sympathy, another with loud laughter, yet another with sneers.

“He’s a simpleton,” they said to me. “He could have married as fine a girl as ever was seen in Ollerup. He thought he was too poor. Fixed idea with him, you know. He wasn’t poor at all, and as for the girl,—she had a nice little lump of money laid by, and owned land besides. But the old crank wouldn’t listen to reason. He had a mortal horror of debt.”

One Sunday morning (I had been a week at Ollerup) I strolled down the Landevej toward his home. As I drew near, I caught sight of the old peasant, and I paused, involuntarily struck by the way, the very careful and yet tenderly nervous way, in which he fussed about his flowers and plants. Now he would stoop down, crush a lump of earth between his hands and sprinkle the powdered soil close around the stem of a sprouting shrub; or pull up a stray unwelcome weed. To me he gave no notice till he heard the click of the gate as it closed. Then he stopped his work suddenly and looked at me with a surprised, half-startled gaze.

“Oh,” he cried, somewhat flustered, “I took you for the clogmaker. I owe him for my last pair, you see. I meant to have paid him yesterday,” he went on convincingly, “but it was Katherina’s birthday and—” He paused, as if there was nothing more to tell, as if he expected I should understand. In the moment of silence, he had turned away.

“Katherina was your old friend?”

He faced me quickly and with eagerness.

“Has she told you? Do you know her?”

“They told me in the village,” I replied quietly.
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"Tell me," he cried almost harshly, "did they blame me? Did they say it was my fault?"

"They said Katherina loved you dearly."

His features lighted up for an instant, and then faded into a sad dreamy smile. And when he spoke again his voice was strangely mellow, pleasanter to my ear than the music of the ringing churchbells.

"We might go in, if you like?"

We followed the gravel path around the house and entered a bare but very clean-kept kitchen. Indeed it might have been a woman's hand that had put it in order. There was an oblong table at the window; and one chair; beside the old-fashioned stove, which was polished to a glitter, stood a square box filled with peat. I further noticed on the lowest shelf of a white-painted closet a row of crockery. The floor bore evidence of having been scrubbed that very morning.

I WAS born in this house," the old peasant began when I was seated in the rocker he had brought in from the parlor. "My father died before I was able to walk. My mother—poor, dear woman—guarded me only too well. As I grew up, I felt that I was fitted for the trade of watchmaker, and I told her so. But she would not give her consent; she thought my mingling with rough journeymen would make a wayward youth of me. Nor would she let me go to school with other boys."

He drew in a deep breath; I tried to catch his eye, but in vain. It was an awkward interval for me. I felt the need of saying something that might convince the old man that he had before him at least a sympathetic listener. Certain words hung on my lips, but there was in his manner an air of aloofness that swept them away unspoken.

"Where was I?" he asked absently.

"Your mother would not—"

"Oh, yes, I remember. Our pastor gave me lessons in religion. I had no friends in the world—no friends save Katherina. My mother wanted me to be a child all my life—her child only."

He paused.

"You call Katherina a friend," I said as gently as possible, "but wasn't she your sweetheart, didn't you love her?"

"Love her!" he retorted sternly. "How could I think of love? I had my mother then—a mother who wanted me all for herself. I was kept away from everybody, away from Katherina."
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He stopped again, as if the whole story had been recited. We sat in silence for a little while. At length he leaned forward, so far that his hand outstretched would have touched my face.

"And then she died, my mother, in her seventieth year. Oh, what despair, what grief, what agony! I stood there at her deathbed, the bewildered, helpless child she had fashioned. What did I know of the ways of the great world? These rooms and the garden were my world. I couldn't eat, nor sleep, nor think. A neighbor came and asked me when I should bury her; the minister came, too. I answered them that I didn't know. "She isn't in my way here," I told them. But then—then Katherina came."

THIS time the silence was long, but not oppressive. Indeed, it seemed quite natural that he should hesitate at this point.

"My mother was buried. She lies near the tall oaks, just within the cemetery gate."

We heard quick steps on the path, and then, a moment later, a sharp, loud knock.

"The clog-maker, and I owe him for my last pair," cried the old peasant leaping up. "Oh, I'm so sorry I didn't pay him yesterday," he went on nervously, in great confusion. I opened the door and found the butcher there with a slice of meat already paid for. The old peasant had hurried into the parlor for money.

When he returned, he recounted a number of silver coins, and laid them carefully, one upon the other, on the table.

"I'm somewhat better off than I used to be. But it's so easy to fall into debt." The mere thought of this made him shudder. "I wish the clog-maker would come, so that I might get rid of that burden."

"So, after all, you didn't love Katherina," I urged, trying to get the truth out of the man.

His childish, kindly face beamed and his tender blue eyes looked as though they saw straight before them some happy scene of the far dead past.

"Oh, yes," he spoke slowly and distinctly, "I did love her,—when my mother was gone. We were to have been married. Katherina set the day. She was in Svenborg then. As often as she could, she came here to see me, and when we were together I had plenty of courage to face the future—but none at all when alone. I brooded over my meager income. I couldn't see any light ahead. Some time passed. I was very unhappy, and always restless and
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conscience-stricken. I wrote to her again. I told her I was ready. I told her I could not live away from her. And yet, on Thursday, when my heart ached most terribly, I wrote again, a very long letter, in which I said that I could not marry now. I could not drag her into my miserable life. Poverty, debt, stared at me wherever I turned my gaze. ‘Don’t come,’ I wrote. But in a postscript I added, ‘Come anyway.’ She sent back this message, ‘If you dare not, I dare not.’ Nothing more.

“Sunday morning, awaking early, I hurriedly put on my new black suit, which I had placed the night before carefully on a chair beside my bed. For some time I stood before the mirror admiring myself. How handsome I looked. Ha, ha! I would not wear the suit to the church, I would carry it upon my arm—ha, ha!—upon my arm.

“I made no breakfast. Of course, Katherina would prepare an excellent dinner. At the commencement of the chimes I started out. It was raining lightly. I hurried onward—onward, with my new black suit, but Katherina was not at the church. Then I remembered her note—‘If you dare not, I dare not,’ and slowly came home.”

He had grown pale and seemed very tired. I noticed that his hands, clasped across his breast, trembled a little.

“Have you ever seen Katherina since that day?”

He started queerly at the sound of my voice.

“Seen her?” he asked in a dry whisper, “Why yes,—I have, indeed.” He fell forward across the table, quite exhausted. There he lay for some moments, perfectly still. At length when he rose to his feet and turned his eyes upon mine, there were no tears in them.

“I’m very tired,” he said, with a childish appeal, “I’m going in for a rest. But you need not go. You might stay and give this money to the clog-maker when he comes.”

I tarried for five or six minutes, then I stole softly out of the cool, quiet room. On the Landevej I met an old woman, very neatly dressed. She was carrying a big basket. To my “good morning!” she smiled, and quickened her step a little.

At the gate she stopped as if to view the garden. I knew her then, and went on up the hill. But its steepness and length were both diminished, I thought. And what a beautiful Sunday morning it was!