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ODARKA
Tr. N. Pedan-Popil¹

I

Our old deceased landlord had been a terrible man! One should not speak ill of the dead, but in his case he does not deserve to be spoken of otherwise.

Across the river from us, there was a free Kozak farm-settlement, and even the Kozaks from there were afraid of him and avoided him because he harmed them greatly. May the Lord protect any Christian soul from what we serfs had to endure from him! Any of us who met him would, without looking to left or right, run on just to get past him. The girls were particularly afraid of him. He had destroyed more than one girl's happiness. But what could one do about him? ... There he was! Walking through the village sullen, and glancing angrily about, like a vulture. Just the other day we were all sitting in our house talking about him in a not very complimentary way, when he himself suddenly stormed into the house. As they say: "Talk of the devil and he is sure to appear."

On entering he asked my brother: "Where is your daughter, Odarka?"

You see, my brother had a daughter. Lord, what a girl she was! She brightened the whole household like a star. She was young and gay — without a care in the world, running and laughing happily, not as yet knowing the meaning of misfortune.

When he asked about Odarka, we froze, and, just at that moment, Odarka herself came in. At sight of her his eyes glittered and he said: "Let us go to the manor, girl!"

Odarka ran to her mother and stood near her, poor child, afraid to breathe!

"She has not yet come of age. She has only turned fifteen," said her father. Her mother began to cry.

"Say just one more word, you rash fellow, and you are for it!" the master stormed at him. Then he addressed Odarka once more: "Get a move on, Odarka! Let us go!"

But she stood stock still.

"Hurry, girl!"

She stood there dumbfounded. He grabbed her and led her away. It was as if our sun had set! It was as if the house had immediately become empty and desolate.

II

We put up with it till the evening. In the evening my brother's wife went to the manor to find out what had happened, but soon returned. "They did not let me go to Odarka," she said, "and I neither saw any sign of her nor heard her voice!" and she began to weep bitterly.

For a long while we did not see our child. They did not allow the father or mother or myself to see her. We would go and stand about at the manor gates and, without seeing her, would return home, feeling embittered against the whole world. We would inquire of the servant girls, but all the answer we got was: "We do not know, dearie! We don't know! It looks as if your child has

1. Marko Vovchok. *Ukrainian Folk Stories*. Trans. N. Pedan-Popil, Ed. H. B. Timothy. Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1983. Pp. 44–49.

been put under lock and key and we have no means of seeing her."

There were also others who would laugh at it all as if bereft by God of their senses, and would say: "What will happen, you ask, to your Odarka? The same as has happened to us! And why not? Is your Odarka better than we are? Were we not our fathers' children too? Have our mothers not cared for us? We were also once pure and good, and now see what has become of us! Still, our life, somehow or other, goes on."

Every day we would go and try to see her. She had already been three weeks gone from us. One Sunday evening my brother's wife returned again from the manor weeping: "I did not see her," she said, "only the servants, and they, God forgive them, laughed at me."

III

We sat in silence. The house was overshadowed by a cloud of gloom; only the sobbing of my brother's wife and the heavy sighs of my brother could be heard. Then something stirred; the door opened and our Odarka entered. We almost fainted at sight of her. She was so pale and exhausted! She greeted us and stood on the threshold like a stranger, unable to look anyone in the face.

"Well, wife," said my brother, "we are seeing our child at last. What a beauty she has become!" — and he broke into tears. That was the first time in my life that I had seen him cry — and, Mother of God, may it be the last!

We sat our Odarka on the bench and my brother's wife said:

"Oh, my daughter, my misfortunate one! So they have now released you from the manor?"

"I slipped away, mother. Guests have arrived: the young lord and his wife."

"Odarka darling, please tell us all that has happened to you there," I said to her.

"Yes, please do, let them hear about it," said my brother, and left the house as if a fire were raging inside him.

Odarka sobbed bitterly and began telling everything: how they would lock her in at night, how they would thrash and threaten her, and how she was finally brought to ruin.

"Perhaps you should have gone to the lady of the manor, perhaps she would have saved you, my poor child!"

"Mother, mother! How could the lady have helped! The master is so ferocious that everyone steers clear of him as doves steer clear of hawks. The lady will not help! She and the young misses spurn me as if it were all my fault."

So until night was upon us we worried and we wept.

"I am not well, mother. Let me stay with you at least this one night," said Odarka. "With guests in the manor they will be too busy to miss me."

IV

She spent the night at home. It seemed that she had scarcely closed her eyes, when serving lads from the manor came for her:

"Come, quickly!"

How she pleaded, and how she begged tearfully to be allowed to stay for a while in her father's house, since she was not feeling at all well!

"No," they said, "we cannot allow this. If you will not come willingly, we will, as ordered, take you by force. The lady-guest and the young ladies have been looking for you since last night."

"It looks as if some other misfortune is on the way," said my brother's wife.

"God forbid! It would have been better had she died young!" responded my brother. "Stop crying, Odarka, stop it!" he said. "Stop pleading! These lads cannot be appealed to. They are just carrying out their orders."

"It is not up to us," said the youths. They began also to feel sorry. "Oh uncle, if only it were up to us!"

We were worried about what was to happen. We did not know what to do: should we go to the manor, or await our fate at home? Just then, at noon, Odarka put in an appearance:

"Farewell, mother, farewell!"

We rushed to her:

"What is the matter? What has happened?"

"They have given me to the young master and his lady," she said. "They will take me away next week. And, aunt, they will take you as well. They said we have until Sunday to get ready."

A chill ran through my heart. I had not lived a life of luxury; I had, nevertheless, lived with my family, in my own house. Now they were giving me to strangers, sending me to strange surroundings. What had I done to deserve such treatment? I became very sad, and gave way to a flood of bitter tears. My brother's wife was thankful to God that Odarka was not going away alone.

The oldest of the young lords married a Pole, and lived in the city. For four years he did not visit his father, who was angry with him for

marrying a Pole. But since God blessed them with children, the old one forgave them, and they began to visit regularly. The Polish wife somehow won the old one's favor so that he listened to her and was even giving her money, although he was such a miser!

Our lady and the daughters persuaded the Polish wife, when she arrived, to get the old one to give Odarka to her, so as to take the poor girl away from him. The Polish wife pleaded and begged until he finally gave his consent. That is why we were given until Sunday to get ready, and our new masters, went on ahead of us.

V

Sunday finally came! The family gathered to bid us farewell. Odarka said a last goodbye to her mother who hugged her, and through her tears could only say: "My child! My only child!" She was so distraught and so miserable that even a heart of stone would have broken at the sight. The girl, as if dead, shed not a single tear. She said goodbye to her father and he blessed her: "May the Mother of God protect you, my daughter!"

They took us to the manor. The horses were already harnessed to the wagons. The lady came out with the daughters and told us to serve the young nobles faithfully; then the master also came out. "Get moving!" he ordered the coachman. "What is there here to talk about? Look out for

yourselves," he said to us, "don't have masters complaining or it will be the worse for you! Get moving!"

We rode a whole day and another. I asked Odarka if she was feeling better. "Yes, aunt," she replied, "if my heart were not so heavy!" Poor girl, she never stopped thinking and grieving for a minute about her father and her mother.

On the fourth day we arrived at our new master's residence. Winking at one another, the staff eyed us up from every angle. No one talked to, or greeted us. They were all insincere and sarcastic city folk.

They took us inside. The lady of the house appeared. Perhaps you have already seen Polish women. They are all so foot-loose, happy-go-lucky, and talkative. This one was no different. When she started to talk, she did the talking for everyone, and in such a quick, zesty fashion. How impressive she wanted to make herself in our eyes! Although made up to look younger, with her shining rings, and ribbons, and curls about her temples, she was already quite old. Then the lord came out. He was handsome, portly, and very proud-looking; if he gave you a look at all, it was always down his nose. He asked if there was a letter from his father and departed. Then the children came running in to see what was going on. The lady told them in Polish: "Give these peasant women your hands to kiss!" They held out their tiny hands — there you are, kiss it!

VI

They ordered me to spin wool and Odarka to embroider. She did embroidery for the young ladies, or anything else asked of her, and

would go to the lady every evening to show what she had done. The lady was sometimes not too demanding, scolding only when something failed to give satisfaction; but there were times when she became so enraged that nothing could please her ... At those times everyone was in trouble! She took a dislike to both of us, but not as much to me as to Odarka. She corroded her, like rust, iron. Once, she had her put in the middle of the room, and ordered: "Dance, Odarka, dance!" Odarka began to dance, poor thing, but her legs gave way and she fell down. They roared with laughter. "She is putting it on," they said. "She is faking!"

I saw that my Odarka was wasting away like a candle. She would sit all day long without saying a word. It did not matter what the lady did or said to her — she made no response except to cast her eyes occasionally in her direction. The nobles' children would pester her like leeches. "Oh, you are stupid!" they would say. "All of your kind are stupid! Go and dance!" They shoved, scratched, and pinched her. She would only look at them, my little darling. The lady would get angry and say: "This girl is as if she were made of stone!"

VII

Spring came. We were digging and seeding in the orchard, and Odarka never went outdoors. "For all the good that she will do," said the lady, "it is better that she stick to the embroidering."

One day when we had finished working and were leaving the orchard, the lady said:

"It is my guess that Odarka is not embroidering! Probably she is either sleeping or dozing."

"She is definitely not embroidering, mother," replied one of the young ladies. "This I know for certain."

"Quiet, everybody," said the lady. "Let us see what she is doing."

They approached the house stealthily ... and entered. Odarka was lying down, with her arms folded behind her head. She was ever so pale! Her eyes were the only bright thing about her. She lay there staring at us intently. Even the lady stopped and did not say a word. I took her into her room and laid her on the bench. She never after rose from it.

She kept on asking:

"Dear aunt! Open the door and the window; let me look in the direction of my home!"

The nobles agreed amongst themselves to send for the old woman, who was skilled in the use of herbs. She came, asked some questions, poked at Odarka, and shook her head.

"My poor child!" she said. "Evil be to those who have crushed you as they would a fragrant flower. You have not long to live!"

With that she gave the girl her blessing, began to cry, and left.

VIII

The lady thereupon ordered the girl to be taken to the hospital. "My lady," I begged her, "let me go and look after Odarka! I will

serve you sincerely in whatever you ask and will look after the girl as well."

"Oh, what a silly notion!" said she, "They will look after her there better than you ever will," and she refused to let me go.

On Sunday I managed to get away and went to see her. I entered to find that her bed was by the window and that the window was open.

"When the girl began pleading and begging to have her bed placed by the window," said the old female attendant, "I could not refuse her."

"How are you, Odarka?" I asked.

She looked at me and said:

"Dear auntie, the plum and cherry trees are blooming now at home, and it will not be long until the poppies also are in bloom. Any news of father and mother?"

"No news yet, dearest," I said. "When there is, I shall let you know immediately. Do you want anything, Odarka?"

"No, auntie, I don't want anything; just don't let them move me from the window."

IX

So I visited her on Sunday, and on Thursday we heard that she had died. I ran to the hospital; she was already laid out for burial. A solitary candle burned beside her, but no one was about. She was so pretty as she lay there, like an angel of God!

The old attendant came.

"Oh," she said, "how I have cried for your child, dear! And how quiet and gentle she was! I have never in my life seen such a pure soul! I came to her yesterday; she was leaning on the window."

'Oh,' I said, 'what are you doing, girl?'"

'Let me look over there,' she said, 'let me look over there again. That is where my father and mother live.' And she cried so pitifully, like a little bird: 'Let me!' And I let her. I held her up a bit — she looked into the blue distance, and her warm tears, like pearls, poured onto my arms. The sun was setting. She noticed that the cherry tree was blooming in the orchard and asked: 'Please bring me a cherry blossom, granny!' I went and brought her one. She took it. 'Oh, how fragrant and fresh it is! Thank you, granny!' She lay down with the flower beside her. The sun is near to setting/ she said, and began reminiscing about her parents. She called to them and pleaded with them: 'Father! Why have you left me? Mother, take me home! Oh, you have left me, left me all alone! ... Mother! . . . Father! . . . My dear beloved parents! . . .' May the Good Lord take her to His bosom!" said the old attendant. "I have never in all my old age cried so hard!"

On Friday they buried her. When they lowered the coffin into the grave, white doves circled above it. The sun cast its golden beams upon the ground. The morning was so bright and peaceful: no wind blew, not a cloud was to be seen. A pure soul had left this world!