

Going My Own Way

Oleh Hovda

Today is the seventh or eighth day of my suffering since they bricked me in. But perhaps less time has passed, since my mind is still quite clear. My feet burn unbearably from standing continuously. I am strong and I will live for a long time yet. Much longer than I would wish. But I do not regret what I have done.

My desire to see the world gave my feet no rest. In the last ten years I have visited seven distant lands. I had never been in this country before, and as soon as I arrived, I immediately suspected something was amiss. My soul protested and urged me to turn back immediately, but my mind, seeking adventure, could not turn back without uncovering the truth.

I passed through settlements, noting the picturesque houses with cultivated orchards and carefully tended vegetable gardens without a trace of weeds. From the very beginning I was struck by the beauty and the wealth of these settlements. And by the indifference, too. Not one of the residents stepped onto a porch or came through a gate to have a look at the stranger, or ask what news I brought, or simply enquire what my business was. There were no children running about in the streets. Even the dogs, dozing idly, remained indifferent to my appearance.

Meanwhile, behind each fence orchards and gardens were buzzing with work. Sweat poured from adults and children alike, leaving dark stains on their white linen shirts.

On the square in front of the church sat a young woman, begging. Her three little children played in the sandy dust. All four of them were clad in tattered rags. At the beggar's feet lay a shard of broken pottery that resembled a pair of cupped hands, but it contained not a single coin or crust of bread. My hand involuntarily reached behind my belt for a few silver coins and I gave them to the woman.

She leapt to her feet, calling her children to thank me, but I hastened on my way.

I spent my first night in this unknown country at the edge of a forest. Firewood was plentiful and there was water nearby. I still had sufficient rations in my knapsack to last me several days.

I was underway before the sun rose. Traversing a hill, I descended a gentle slope into a valley, where I saw a small town, surrounded by a wall and encircled by a wide moat connected to a river. Small farmsteads and attractive villages surrounded the town. The road led me through one of

them. It was apparent that everything here was just as in the first settlement I had encountered, except that the dwellings were even more opulent, evidently because the town stimulated a livelier trade in meat and vegetables. I passed the farmstead and did not stop anywhere nor venture to enter anyone's yard to ask for water. As the heat became more oppressive, I made for the river, where I might drink and bathe. There I heard a cry. A young woman was pleading for help.

I quickened my pace and quickly reached the river bank. First I saw two horses in military trappings, then two burly fellows armed with swords. They were restraining the girl, twisting her arms, and snatching at her blouse.

"Stop that, you swine!" I shouted at the youths.

What business of mine was the honor of an innocent girl? Why not allow two young men a little amusement? Because I can't stand villains!

The one unlacing the girl's blouse turned in my direction, and, seeing a slightly-built man brandishing a stick instead of a weapon, he gave a wry smile and spat into the water. He drew his sword from its scabbard and rushed at me.

"Tired of living, swineherd?" enquired the man who was holding the girl in an almost friendly tone.

"Ha!" cried his companion, baring his teeth and brandishing his sword. The weapon glinted and whistled in a circle above my head and came down by my right foot. "Hobble away, before I cut off your miserable head."

I did not move an inch. In one bound he was next to me and made a gentle, half-hearted jab at my side with his sword. I struck the flat of the blade with the edge of my hand. The kick to his temple was the last thing my attacker felt in this world. He fell backwards into the river and remained prone under the water.

"Aha," cried the other man, "I see you have serious intentions towards her!" Pushing the girl in my direction, he dashed to the river bank, leapt into the saddle, and rode off on his horse as fast as he could towards the town. As for the girl, she ran off to the farmstead.

The sight of the dead man quenched my desire to drink the water. It was another five or six minutes' walk to the town gates. Atop a tower of the defensive wall I saw a decrepit old man with a stone tied around his neck.

"Wait, sir!" I cried, breaking into a run. But the suicide took a step forward and plunged into the water.

In an instant I reached the moat and dived in after him. A few minutes later the man was on the bank. I squeezed the water out of his lungs and forced air into his lungs. At that moment someone bent my arms behind my back and tied them firmly with a length of rope. I turned around. Before me stood armed town guards.

"What's going on?" I asked in surprise.

"You have broken the law and must appear before our Ruler's court

for judgment," replied one of them, observing me with indifference.

"I am a foreigner and do not know your laws."

"You can explain that to our Ruler."

The Ruler was a short, broad-shouldered man with sinewy arms and an alert appearance. He wore a gold crown on his head and a magnificent suit of armor.

"Your Majesty," I said with a deep bow. "At last I can learn what your servants accuse me of."

"I do not think my words will be of comfort to you, foreigner," said the Ruler in a soft voice. "You have committed a serious crime and your punishment will be death."

"But I have been in your country for only a single day!" I cried, desperately trying to release the bonds.

"In the course of this day you have thrice broken our laws."

Realizing what he was referring to, I said to him:

"What you are calling a crime is known in the world as Goodness."

"We live by our own laws, handed down to us by our fathers and grandfathers."

"But what I did was good!"

"Good?" The Ruler raised his eyebrows in surprise. "I see you truly do not realize the harm caused by your actions. You gave alms to a beggar and in an instant she made more money than an honest worker can earn in a month's hard labor. Will she ever seek work now? She will starve rather than work, for she will expect some benefactor to turn up again. You rescued a girl from those rapists, and in doing one 'good' deed you simultaneously committed three bad ones. First, from now on the girl will always be afraid of men, for imaginary horrors are always more terrifying than experienced ones. Second, you made a coward of a soldier and I was obliged to execute him, since he could no longer be trusted. Third, you killed the other soldier. And if a hostile army appears outside the walls of our town tomorrow, it may happen that for the lack of two swordsmen the balance will be tipped in favor of the enemy. Then our whole nation will be violated, not just one village girl. And, finally, you prevented a suicide, saving the life of a person who had already taken leave of this world because he saw nothing good in it. He will not have the strength to jump into the water a second time. To the end of his days he will drown his misery in hard liquor or some other stupefier and be a burden to all who come into contact with him. So where is the 'goodness' of your actions, foreigner? Good deeds are like weapons, they need to be used properly."

"You speak wisely, Your Majesty, but have you not considered that a country whose people are indifferent to one another is easier to conquer?"

"I am sorry for you, foreigner. If you had shown remorse for your imprudence, I would have ordered your release. But as you have not done so, I have no right to grant you freedom, for you might continue to cause people

harm. You will die in a manner that will cause you to understand your error."

The Ruler made a sign to the guards, who seized me under the arms and led me away.

I lay awake all night, imagining the various tortures the cruel Ruler might subject me to.

I made my Last Confession and was then led me out to the wall of the castle courtyard. There the sentence was read out. The Ruler had ordered me to be bricked up in the wall. After all the horrible tortures I had imagined all night long, I felt a sense of relief.

They took me to a niche, secured a hook in the wall, and tied my arms to it. Then they began to brick me in. I felt no fear, since I knew what awaited me: a few minutes in total darkness, then suffocation. A few gasps and that would be it—eternal silence and peace.

The bricklayers did their work swiftly. Only ten bricks remained, eight, six, four, two...

"Stop!" I heard the Ruler's voice in the courtyard. "I want to do a good deed for you after all, foreigner. You will not suffocate. The bricklayers will leave a gap so you can breathe. Farewell!"

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