

MONEY

By Victoria Benedictsson

Translated by Verne Moberg

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III

The following morning when Selma awoke, she felt heavy and ill at ease. Her aunt came to pick her for church, but she wasn't ready and promised to come along later. She finished dressing with the greatest haste and lastly put the hundred-crown note in the cuff of her dress sleeve, where she fastened it with a pin.

The worship service had already begun when she neared the church building, and the organ was audible in the yard. She would have liked to sit down on a bench to enjoy the beautiful autumn weather, but of course that wouldn't do. How fresh it was here! . . . and so quiet. The dew lay thick over the matted grass and it gave off a bluish tinge; the air was cool and salutary to her burning eyelids. here seemed to be a weight over her chest, and she breathed in deep, arduous draughts, as if to remove it.

When she entered the church, all the front rows of chairs were so full that she took a seat way down in front beneath the platform, behind a pillar. The chair was shorter than the others, and she had to sit there alone. That was what she wanted. After much difficulty she found the right verse of the hymn, but her hands were trembling, and it strained them to hold the book. What could it be that made her so nervous? Was it the music, or the emotional events of the previous day, or perhaps simply the fact that she had not eaten breakfast? She put the book aside and leaned down in the chair, glad to have got such a secluded spot.

How remarkably moving the hymn singing was today! She would have liked to pray, but she could not, for actually she had no religion. If she did have any, then at least it led to a singular paradox: I don't believe in God; this is why he will punish me.

Today especially she felt it so alive, both the fact that she did not believe and that he would punish.

When the minister went to the pulpit. From where she sat she could not see him, and his words made an impression different from the usual. The voice now came into its own, and it had an uncommon power.

Otherwise its effect was weakened by his facial expression, which retained its chill, even though a motion seemed to breathe through his intonation.

The voice was not strong and, if forced, would have become shrill. He therefore spoke in a low, seemingly subdued tone. But the interest in what he said was kept alert by this masterful modulation, giving the lecture both strength and variation without overtaxing his vocal equipment.

It was the Fifth Commandment that he preached about, and he described how damnation and destruction will be the wages of those who rise up against father and mother; how the hand of the Lord shall rest heavily above their head, and how earthly fortune will never flourish on their path. There seemed to be something hiding behind his very tone, like a devastating secret judgement, and a shudder passed through her.

How dreadful it must be to drag along through one's entire life under such condemnation -- irrevocably doomed to misfortune!

As long as she heard him, she had to believe; she always did. The doubt didn't come until afterwards.

It was so dim down there beneath the platform where she was sitting behind the pillar, as if concealed from the rest of the congregation. A strange anguish passed over her, as if death and doom were close at hand and she were an evil doer who was to be slain. After all she possessed this argumentative mind that could rise up against father and mother, if . . . She did not finish, for now his voice softened.

He reminded his listeners that there was no more than a single commandment to whose fulfillment the Lord affixed the promise of earthly bliss. And he articulated slowly:

"Thou shalt live long upon the earth, and it shall go well with thee." It seemed like something quite new; it was no longer the worn-out catechism lesson she had learned from childhood; it was something great, glorious, leading her to draw a liberating breath.

Then he paused.

And slowly, as if in a dream, came the commentary. He said that happiness can possess such a depth that it outweighs a whole life, even the years do not number so many; he illustrated how the parents' blessing builds the children's nest, and he unrolled this blessing like the softest carpet over all life's thorns.

Selma's mind grew pliant. She thought she had sacrificed all for obedience, everything she had loved and hoped for. Would he ask for more . . . more . . . ? What

wouldn't she give for a single one of these glimpses of sun, sufficient to compensate for an entire life!

When the final hymn had at last been sung, she had to linger a moment to eliminate the traces of her emotion. Meanwhile the stream of people had reached her chair, and it was necessary to wait till the crowd thinned.

She supported herself against the pillar and watched the people passing by. Here came Mother Möller with her daughter. The latter was arrayed in tassels and gewgaws on a dress as elegant as a lady from town, though she wore a kerchief upon her head -- a thick silk kerchief with six-inch-long fringe -- and she strutted up the aisle with an expression that seemed to say: look at me, look at me! Her mother walked beside her, arched her neck, and screwed up her mouth so her nose looked even sharper than usual. When she passed in front of Selma's chair, she looked in, and her critical gaze swept disdainfully down over the old summer coat and paused at a glove that perhaps did not fit as well as it ought. Selma bowed her head in greeting, but she pretended not to see it.

The insult was obvious, and Selma grew bright red. "Old Grater Face!"⁶ she thought in her pithy boarding school language, and the indignation seethed inside her.

Then the crowd thinned somewhat, and she went out. Farther up the aisle she saw Axel Möller, who was going to have to pass her by. She pressed ahead as fast as possible, and then she came out into the churchyard, where the people dispersed. She stopped at a grave and awaited her aunt, who had paused by the church door to speak with a couple farm wives. She lay her hand on the iron railing of the grave to get support, for she sensed that she was trembling. Here he had to pass close by.

He blushed lightly and came directly toward her.

"I'll be walking on the railway embankment at four o'clock -- meet me; I have something to talk to you about," she said quickly and then turned away, as if they had only exchanged a greeting. At the same time her aunt came, and she walked toward her.

"Child, how pale you are," said the latter. "Are you ill?"

"I have some pressure above my chest and a pain in my head."

"And you're so healthy otherwise!"

"Aunty, you know that I'm a touch anemic," she replied in an indifferent tone, but with a sad smile unlike her usual one.

They walked home in silence.

The mood at the dinner table was rather tense. Selma, who otherwise either talked or through her tricks and inventions livened the others up -- even if she reaped an occasional reprimand -- was completely quiet and still today, and the conversation was kept going almost exclusively by the pastor. His attention to his niece was also striking; he treated her quite like a grown lady. He aunt sat observing it all. It vexed her.

Now they would just see what a splendid lady that young thing was going to be! For the fact that Squire Kristerson was rich could not be doubted now, and he would probably get richer in time, since despite his phlegmatic nature he was a clever farmer, and that estate he bought was considered to be a bargain. Naturally she would get everything she pointed at -- young wives always do. And sure enough, she would soon learn to stick her nose in the air (they get stuck up so easily), and maybe she would even come riding behind a team of horses!

Mrs. Berg cast an angered side glance at Selma.

How could people see anything beautiful in the girl! Why, she was ugly as sin. And even her own Richard. . . hadn't he been very interested in her! Certainly they would seem to quarrel with each other, but the truth was nevertheless that he neither heard nor saw anyone but her. Her maternal pride felt thoroughly wounded by his lack of taste. He had spoken of her freshness. Pooh! Today she certainly looked as pale and red-eyed as if she'd been working overtime for ten nights; oh, yes, just let her go through it a few years, and that freshness will wither all right. And what big hands! What was it Berg was talking about yesterday? Why, it's enough to make a person sick. And that kind should be allowed to go and get married! . . . who couldn't even fix a decent pan gravy. But she didn't want to get involved in this whole affair. Berg might do as he pleased, but in the end he would get them together, you'll see.

"You looked really wretched today," the pastor told his niece, "you'll have to take a little noon nap."

"No, I'd rather go out walking," answered Selma. "I feel dead as an October fly, that's all. A person has to perk himself up a bit."

"Well, do what you can, just don't go around with a long face that way. It won't do."

"Oh, it never lasts long," she replied with an attempt at her usual brisk manner. "I'll just spit in my palms and get a better grip."

"But Selma!" burst out her aunt, reproachfully. She was glad to have reason.

"Calm down, Aunt, today I can't, but maybe tomorrow," Selma replied laughing, looking up with her light gray eyes, that were lackluster from tears, but still roguish.

Her uncle nodded encouragingly to her, to his wife's great mortification.

As soon as the old folks had gone to their midday naps, Selma went out.

She took the road around the gate and turned in at the railway track. Her walk was swift as usual, but the happy-go-lucky expression on her face had made way for a resigned earnestness. However, the exercise and fresh air gave her color.

Before she had got halfway to the second crossing, she saw the young man come walking. Her heart beat audibly; it would be so difficult to find words, but her mind was made up.

When they reached each other, she nodded hastily and turned right about face, so that they came to walk side by side toward the parsonage. Then they walked for a while. She searched for words to an introduction, and he felt confused. Why, it was a regular appointment she had made, and it was not really fitting for a girl, he thought. It had lowered her in his thoughts; he watched her more soberly, and the earlier superiority was gone.

"I expected too much of myself," she began in a subdued tone that revealed some emotion. "I can't talk my uncle into letting me make the trip, and I have to stay."

She fell silent a moment. It felt so tight over her chest, she coughed a moment to clear her voice.

"It's completely different with us women than with you men," she said with a seriousness that became precocious. "With you it's considered a duty to strive for independence; with us it's almost a flaw -- at least so long as we're not old maids. I thought before that everything depended on money, but it doesn't. Even if I had money, I still wouldn't make it happen now. I'd thought a little about trying anyhow -- that is, to travel without permission and try to get help from somebody else, but it wouldn't work; I understand that now. They would just consider me mad and laugh at me. And besides. . . I don't know what came over me in church today . . . it seemed to me that in that case I would be dogged by misfortune. I wouldn't have cared about that, if it had been something else. But my work! . . . imagine, always to fail! I never would be able to tolerate that. In that case it's better not to try."

He walked quietly and listened. Was this what she had wanted to say!

It was nevertheless a remarkable whim to want to make an appointment with him.

"With you it's a different matter," she continued eagerly, "for all this doesn't concern you. You're going to take my money -- I have a hundred crowns with me that are my very own -- and then you'll go somewhere and get a job, anything at all, if you just make a success of it."

"That's impossible," he answered almost startled. In the face of this newly roused energy he felt as if he were standing by some water and each moment could expect to be pushed in.

"Impossible?" she repeated and giggled, "That's this now you're saying! Why, before it was just money."

"Mother doesn't want it. What you said yourself about misfortune goes for me too, doesn't it?"

"Have you ever heard of fortune deserting a fellow because he'd gone his own way? No, if anybody is to have misfortune, then it will be me, you can be sure of that; I feel it."

"But when you can't yourself, why. . . ?"

"For just that reason. For the very reason that I myself am not allowed to be what I want, for just that reason I can't bear to see you go around here being nothing either. Don't you understand that?"

"And am I supposed to accept your. . . ?"

"Yes, what would be so strange about that? What do you think I care about money now? For that matter I could just as well throw it in the street. Don't go and get a guilty conscience over it. You know yourself that you've gotten on the wrong track; change now."

"But how far do you think one gets with --"

She gave a start and a burning flush poured over her face, all the way down to her throat. The sum was too small. It struck her at once. She hadn't thought of it before; it had seemed so large to her. And now she was gripped by shame over having made herself ridiculous.

"My uncle really was right -- I am a child. But I'm not going to remain one for long," she thought. It hurt her so that she wanted to sink into the ground out of shame. She said not a word and did not look at him but started walking more quickly. He kept an even pace at her side but didn't know what he should come up with to say. It was equally painful to both of them. Only one thing did he have clear, and that was that he had caused her pain. He burned with desire to compensate for it.

"You can imagine, can't you, how thankful. . ."

"If you would just stop talking about it," she exclaimed, "why it was so silly, quite idiotic. Was that anything to offer! But that's how I always am."

"And to think that for my sake you. . ."

"Be quiet!" she burst out, turning pale, "It makes me furious to hear that, and if you mention a word to anyone. . ."

Her pupils grew in her eyes so they became almost black, and she'd stopped right in front of him.

"For goodness sake. . . I just meant. . ." he said apologetically, and the narrow-shouldered, bent figure seemed to collapse even further.

"Well, so enough about that," she said harshly, and then they went on.

"For you or someone else in the same situation," she resumed in a while, "it would have been quite the same. I've told you that: that's the way I am."

They were at the parsonage crossing.

"This is where we part," she said.

He was silent. It felt so hard, all of this. Selma stepped up on one of the large stones that were lying by the road, put her hand on the gatepost and looked out over the landscape. It was lying there, mown and desolate. Not a human creature as far as the eye could reach, but far away appeared the forest and the mountain ridge in hazy blue contours, and below glistened a bay of the lake. She took it all in with one long gaze. It looked like a leave taking.

"It's beautiful here anyhow," she said with a sigh. "I would like to have become a painter."

When she lowered her gaze, she became aware of a little wagtail that ran about in a stubble field, constantly bobbing its tail, which she lifted high up so it wouldn't be a hindrance to her. And then she scampered off as soon as her little legs were able to run!

Selma was delighted. She had forgotten Mr. Möller and the whole world. Her glances followed the motions of the bird, and she smiled so that her teeth were visible and her eyes were shining. She herself stood there so full of life's energy, illuminated by the sinking sun.

And down there the wagtail ran about with engaging little motions. Now and then she paused, gave a little nod, found something new to snatch up, and then it took off in a new direction.

Finally Selma looked down at her friend, He looked troubled and was poking among the rocks with his cane.

"Good-bye," she said quickly and jumped down. "Good luck."

He had been standing there reflecting and gave a start at her voice. There was a sound of something bitter and scornful in it. The gate closed, and she walked up the road with her usual willful walk and her hands in her coat pockets.

He remained standing by the road and followed her with his eyes: she turned in by the gate to the garden of the parsonage, and then he saw her no more.

The sunshine itself seemed to darken through the sense of miscalculation that crept over him, augmented by something of self-accusation. How he had perceived her. . . how he had acted. . . and what all shouldn't he have said! What wouldn't these minutes have been able to imply, if he had known how to use them! How he would have been able to confess to her all he had thought and felt! She would have understood him.

Now the opportunity was gone and would perhaps never more return.

Her happy disposition had a secret power over him, and he never experienced it so vividly as each time they parted. It felt as if she were taking with her something of his inner self, which must painfully be torn loose, and today it was worse than ever.

He threw himself down on the heap of stones beneath the trees. It was as if the whole world were dead and he alone were continuing to live with his remorse and longing. Or she would never come again, he felt it, and his only relief was to further lacerate himself by evoking in his imagination the outlines of everything that could have been and was not. He drew real pleasure from tormenting himself with all the possibilities and entered a bottomless void, in the desire to be able to feel it to its full extent.

"Never, never!" he repeated, and with each time it felt as if his heart would burst. Couldn't one die from it. . . die from it!

To his sick imagination, she appeared as something at once infinitely remote and divinely lovely.

Morose and downhearted, Selma came home. Even she felt empty, but it was of a different kind. All her free moments thus far she had spent constructing future plans and castles in the air. Now they were all upset and she regarded the fragments irresolutely. What should life be filled with, what was there to hope for, to strive for? And in all this the shame lay burning -- the shame of having exposed oneself, of having made a fool of oneself, of having been repulsed.

She went to her usual place in the dining room window, where she was accustomed to sitting and looking down at the chickens and the pigeons. It was her usual way of passing time when she was in a bad mood.

The old people came in, newly awakened, and they drank coffee in silence. Then Selma resumed her place and Mrs. Berg went out. The pastor remained and stationed himself by the other window.

"Kristerson is coming here this evening," he said. "Then you'll have to play a game with him -- that will cheer you up. "

"You don't say! We always become enemies -- that's what happened last time."

She stretched her neck to be able to look at a blue pigeon cock that bowed and spun around down by the yard while cooing zealously.

"Hmm, without that bickering I really don't think you would get any pleasure," observed the pastor with a smile.

"That may well be, but the squire isn't nearly so infuriating as Richard. Isn't he coming home till Martinmas Eve ?"⁷

"No. Do you miss him?"

"Oh -- no. But I thought he would come home for your birthday, Uncle."

She made a face of dissatisfaction, and a brief silence began.

"What do you really think about Kristerson?" asked the pastor after a time.

She hesitated a moment with her answer and stuck her head out the window in order to see better. The short-legged rooster had got into a fight with the long-legged one. How would that go?

She drew her head in.

"Yes, he's quite nice, but it's dreadful, how fat he is."

"An exceptionally good fellow."

She looked out at the yard again, extremely interested in the cock fighting. Even her uncle was watching it, but without interest.

Why, Uncle! I never thought that there could be so much spunk in the little one," exclaimed Selma, admiringly.

"Why not? Little fellows. . ."

She gave a laugh.

"Yes, but little roosters!"

"It's remarkable how childish you can be." he pastor's tone of voice was a bit intolerant.

She turned completely around and sat down on the chair so she was looking him right in the face.

"Yes, I am, but I'm going to give that up now. If only I could understand what I'm going to be."

She could not resist the temptation to cast a glance sideways out at the yard, and to her annoyance she saw that the victory was leaning decisively in favor of the big one.

"When it comes to that matter I think I can give you a piece of good advice," said her uncle.

"Can't you separate them! Why, they're clawing each other's eyes out," she shouted impetuously to one of the maids walking across the yard.

"But child! Isn't it possible to let the roosters alone for the meantime? I really have something to talk to you about," said her uncle intolerantly. "Come down to my room."

"That's not necessary. I'll just walk away from the window -- that will help." She went off and sat down by the dining table. "What is it?"

He wished that she would have taken a more appropriate position than sitting there dangling her legs, but then he thought that it wasn't worth fussing over trifles now.

"It was your future I wanted to talk about. I don't think you can become anything better than a wife to a good man."

"Well, if one were to go around waiting for that, then. . ."

"But you don't need to go around waiting. Kristerson has asked me to inquire if you would be his wife."

She ceased the pendulum motion of her feet and looked up inquisitively, rather indifferent.

"Na-ah," she said afterwards and resumed the swinging. A short pause developed. Then she jumped down off the table and walked up to the window.

"Was that all you wanted to say, Uncle?" she asked, turning around.

"All? The most important step in life. . ."

"Yes, that's true," she admitted liberally, "if a person gets married."

"A person would do well to take such a proposal into consideration at least, if she wants to be regarded as an otherwise sensible person."

She sank down on the chair in semidespair and folded her hands together on her knee.

"But if I could understand what he wanted with me!"

The pastor turned around and looked out the window. A quality of ridicule passed across his lips.

"He likes you, naturally."

"And you think I should take him, Uncle?"

"At least you should think about the matter."

She started to look contemplative. The chickens raised a common cry without her condescending to pay them a glance.

"What good would that do? I couldn't keep a house!"

"You wouldn't have to either. I don't even think that Kristerson would bring it up."

She became even more reflective.

"I wonder what Papa would think."

"It would naturally be an extremely great joy to him. He has worries enough on his own, and Kristerson is a fellow that anybody would want to have as a son-in-law."

"Do you think, Uncle, that Papa would want it?"

"I certainly do think so."

She was quiet a moment.

"But to marry him! . . . Do you know, Uncle, it carries respect with it."

"Why?"

"Oh -- he's so fat, and then he looks like a shaved pig."

"But child!"

"Yes, and then he's exactly as old as Papa."

"So what? Magnus is young enough so he can go and get you a stepmother any time he likes, and wouldn't that be just nice, for you to be at home if he does. Better to put your legs under your own table in that case."

"Hung! Papa can't afford to get married, let me tell you," she exclaimed laughing. "So that's just scare talk."

The pastor was silent. One had to proceed gently, for she was really more cunning than one might believe of her. He drummed his fingers on the window sill with an indifferent expression. It looked as if he intended to let the subject drop.

This time it was she who took it up.

"And then I'm so young. Why, I might come to like somebody else," she said.

"Like? . . . after getting married! . . . that could never enter into the question, could it," he said slowly and disapprovingly. Then he turned hastily toward her, as if he had thought of something new. It was true. . . "I've seen you and young Möller walking together a couple times -- what's the situation there? You haven't gone and fallen for him, have you?"

She turned bright red.

"Me! Fallen. . . ? No, not one bit."

"Well, I just thought so, since you didn't want to hear about the other at all. But in that case, let me tell you, it's nothing to rely on, for eventually there will probably be a couple of Jöns Ols' Marie and him. You should know that Möllers are the kind of folks who keep an eye out for the money."

"Heck! He can get married to whomever he pleases, so for all that, I could just as well have the squire."

She meant what she said, but the resentment was simmering inside her all the same, and she wondered if he were thinking of Jöns Ols' Marie when he rejected her measly hundred crowns.

The blush rose higher and higher, to her inexpressible annoyance, but the pastor pretended not to see it.

"This fall Kristerson intends to move to that estate he bought; it's supposed to be very beautiful there," he said.

"It's something, what stylish horses he has," she observed.

The pastor was silent. It was beginning to take effect, and he wanted to give her time.

"When a person is as rich as he is, he can have what he wants," he said after a time.

"Is he really so rich?"

"I'll vouch for that," answered the pastor.

There was silence. She thought of a big gray horse. . . or perhaps an all-black one. And then a riding dress with a train, to be worn up on the arm. . . a little lady's saddle, of that light new construction. . . naturally also a servant boy at the stirrup: when one is so rich one can have what one likes.

She looked down and with great care put a fine little crease in the trimming of her dress.

"Uncle, do you think he would keep a riding horse for me?"

The question came quite shyly. A single word would have frightened her back. With this child one had to bargain as carefully as with the Evil One for a sinner's soul.

"On a farm like that, why they have the stable full of horses," said the pastor carelessly.

He knew these waters all too well, and however intrepidly the little bark held up against the wind in the beginning, only one more sudden wind shift would be required to bring it down.

"I'm so young," she said. That was the last faint protest.

"Yes. It's an exceptional honor to get such an offer at your age, and I don't actually know how you deserved it," he replied with his finest smile.

That tickled her vanity. Engaged so young. . . that would attract attention.

Her face was pale and had only two sharp red flames reaching from her cheeks down to her throat; by their stamp of agitated passions they disfigured the young face. She looked at her left hand. Oh, to know how things would develop with the engagement! . . . a heavy, thick ring of twenty-carat gold.

How would the expression on Mother Möller's face look now? In her mind she saw again her scornful gaze, which in church passed over her outgrown coat. here was a flash in her eyes and she looked up.

"I look pretty needy," she said, turning the underside of her dress sleeves outward to show how worn they were. "It would be just too awkward if he would have to dress me up."

"I'll give you all you need; I'll do that gladly for the daughter of my only brother."

He felt so happy over his victory. It was also with uncommon cordiality he opened his arms.

She jumped up to him, threw her arms around his neck, and looked at him with two light gray eyes that were shining with lust for life. Her thick, bushy hair lay down on her brow, and she smiled with her bright red lips at the thought of all the envy she would rouse.

Suddenly she became serious.

"Do you think he will care about me?" she said. It was her habit to use the familiar *du* as a caress.

"I'm sure of that."

A sunshine smile flew over her face and a new thought through her inexperienced mind. Now she was almost beautiful.

. . . If he would care enough about her. . . !

All of her old plans and air castles rose again.

The pastor stroked her hair affectionately; he had nothing more to say.