

Criminal's Blood

By Victoria Benedictsson

Translated from the Swedish by Verne Moberg

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THE SUMMER EVENING, still and calm, swept a white veil around the alder trees in the marsh, thickened to dusk between the trunks of the oaks and turned almost dark in the underbrush of hazel and hawthorn, but above the forest's desolation stretched the leafy vault of green, unmoved by a breath of wind.

On the edge of the forest a man sat upon an overturned lime trough: he sat as if he were waiting, and his eyes didn't budge from the little footpath that ran from the yard out along the pole fence, turning into the woods a ways from the place where he was sitting.

There was the cumbrous carriage and broad shoulders of a farm worker, there was the plainsman's unconcern about his large mouth, but there was the confined fervor of the forest dweller in those eyes which, pinched beneath the thick, mobile brows, stared ahead at the empty footpath. His slack exterior here concealed the racial marking of the crime of passion, and the open but finely formed wings of his nose were sensitive as the nostrils of a full-blooded horse.

There was a sweaty, red stripe on his low brow, where his sunburn had not reached, and he shoved his cap back on his head so his damp hair stuck out beneath his visor like a poodle's matted shag. Now and then he passed his sleeve across his chin and mouth, as if the sweat had still come through. When he grew tired of supporting himself against one knee, he merely changed position, so the other elbow and the other knee that had to bear the weight of his upper body. There appeared to be no impatience, no mental excitation in his face, only this expression of suppressed pain that made his mouth appear even wider than otherwise and gave more definition to his crooked nose as well as his much too strongly developed chin.

The dusk grew darker and the air acquired a chill, like dew, but he -- the man sitting there -- didn't feel it; he stroked his face as often, and the sweat formed without interruption.

A farmhand came walking out of the house but turned off down by the meadow and did not follow the footpath. The lone man bent to one side, so he was hidden by the bush he was sitting by, but it was unnecessary: the fellow hadn't looked his way.

The night grew cooler, and behind the man waiting the moon had begun to rise, hidden by the woods. It was late, and every sound was heard faraway with a strange clarity -- a dog's prolonged howl from inside the village, or the bellow from

some cow in the woods. Otherwise everything was asleep -- everything that was awake during the day or wasn't walking on some forbidden road.

The lone man stepped up heavily and walked ahead toward the house. He slipped along the wall and stopped beneath a window. He thought for a moment. It vexed him so, what he was doing now. Why couldn't he go to the dance hall instead -- drink and sing and play around with the girls? Why couldn't he care about them instead of her? There were certainly many he'd just need to reach out his hand to.

With a sense of shame he reached up and knocked on the window glass.

His heart started to pound. It was as if he'd received blows and all the people had seen him take it without striking back; but he knocked still another time, more strongly than the first. If he was going to make himself into every man's fool, then it wasn't worth flinching!

He was just about to knock for the third time when he noticed a movement inside. He looked up: something came into view inside the glass. He immediately sensed that it wasn't her, and he shrank back in humiliation, but since he had said A, he had to say B and accept what was to come.

"Is that you, Per?" said a woman's voice, and the window was opened slightly.

"Yes, it's me," he answered directly and reluctantly, without adding anything.

"Anna isn't at home, and I hardly think she'll get home before daybreak," replied the voice in a gentle tone, and the window was closed. He heard a muffled giggle from inside. It was as if the blood had run out into his skin and stuck him with a hundred needles: it flew up into his face with a blazing heat, and it beat like hammers in all his veins.

Why had he asked? Shouldn't he have known the answer before? And why didn't he hit Malena in her spiteful face? Strike her with his fist, like this, so the blood would snort out her nose and mouth! It would have been a consolation. Why hadn't he hit her?

He looked toward the window; it was closed and the blind was drawn. It was too late. This always happened to him. But he would get all of them -- all!

His breath urged out in great puffs through these mobile nostrils; it was as if he had endured a pain which made him clench his teeth to keep from screaming.

Then he started walking forward on the path; his legs found the way by themselves, like horses without a driver. He was not there, he didn't know whether he was walking or standing: his thoughts were with her, coming home by daylight; she would laugh -- her too -- when she learned he'd been there. And she was not alone. He thought he heard them whispering and laughing, laughing each time they mentioned his name. And they could talk of nothing but him, it never occurred to

him that they might be speaking of anything else. Tomorrow they would only ridicule more, once they'd learned he had walked all the way up to the house in vain looking for her. And he would have to go about alone in the woods and fields, alone like a locked-out dog. But he would mark them! . . . leave them marked for life.

Mark? Yes. And go to jail for it, and sit there locked up, while. . .

No, wasn't he bound hand and foot and doomed to become everybody's fool! A sense of powerlessness came over him: he would have liked to cry like a child -- to weep and wail.

He would like to sell his blessed soul for this one thing: to have her alone to himself, to own her for always, to take her away from all the others. . . But not this laughter! . . . The thing she never could refrain from, this quiet laughter, like a bird's chirping, as a result of which he could never believe her.

He had always expected it would turn out this way. It was precisely because of this that he had grown so fond of her. For when she left him, it was as if he never would get to see her anymore, and when they met again it was as if he had seen someone arise from the dead; it was a miracle from heaven, it made him so glad he didn't know what to do with himself.

And he thought of the many times he had gone down by the footbridge in the dewy grass, waiting and listening -- sometimes in vain -- hour after hour; of the next morning he had walked heavily and warily to work thinking that everything was over now, and that then he had been able to meet her on the way, out of pure coincidence, seen her coming there so fine and light in her neat cotton dress, with a light scarf upon her head, and that she had laughed away all his complaints and promised to come another time instead. And then the same story over and over again. And this gloominess, that grew and grew until it was an excessive burden to pull! He thought the whole world was merely a swamp into which he was sinking down deeper and deeper with every step, while she sprang past him on light feet across the grass.

Never had he cared so much about any person, not even about his mother, and yet he thought he should let her go, if only she would tell him she was happy for the time they'd had together, that she hadn't regarded him a fool.

But to keep quiet and leave! To let him wait and wonder and agonize and to torment himself with empty, useless thoughts. . .

He heard someone coming and slipped quickly behind a tree; it could be *them*. And hidden in the shadow he saw them walking by with their arms around each other's shoulders. She was the one -- whispering low. The lone man bent forward like an animal lying in wait, but he couldn't make out one word of what was being said. When they had got farther away, his ear picked up this low, genteel laughter, with which she could drive him down a rat hole. So they were talking about him! This laughter couldn't be about anybody else. Of this he was certain.

Yes, yes, yes; it was over now. He would weep and pray; and she could laugh. He could say that he wanted to kill himself, and she would laugh anyway. But if he did! Then she would get to feel anxiety and anguish. . . He probably wouldn't be the first man to kill himself grieving over love!

He continued on his way and thought how it would go. A leather strap with a loop in it running free -- that was all that was necessary.

And would he then be gone? . . . Then she would feel all the more free.

He stopped abruptly. There was a movement in his blood, he didn't know what. He felt as if he'd been in peril at sea and had wanted to deliver his soul up unto God's hands, but now he held the rudder in hand again and was steering into the wind. Just as well if everything should fall apart. She shouldn't boast about having played his sweetheart and done him wrong. To think he was supposed to give up the game

His steps quickened, and when he came up to the house, he didn't want to go into the stuffy hired man's cottage. He climbed up in the hayloft: he could sleep there, and there he was alone.

He prepared himself a bed in the hay and opened the flap out toward the woods so as to get more air. And then he went to bed with his clothes on. But sleep he could not -- he just lay and thought. Everything was so strangely sharp and clear. He thought of his father -- the old man with the wax-yellow, prison-air face and the shy eyes that seemed to be able to see through marrow and bone.

Would he himself walk the same road? Was that how people got into accidents, went to jail, and became dishonorable for life?

For his father it had probably been different; he had done his deed in rashness, maybe while drunk. But anyway there was no getting away from it if you had it in your blood; he realized that now.

"It's settled," he said quietly. There were two wills inside him, and the one that was stronger was not his own.

He lay for a long time thinking -- not about whether he should do it or not; he just thought because he couldn't help it, and because he couldn't sleep either. When he thought that the night must be over soon, he looked at the clock, to see if it was time to get up for work. It was only one.

Then he got up and walked forward to the big opening through which they forked the hay at harvest time. He supported himself against the boards at the edge of the roof and looked out into the night: you got so warm lying there, and there was a pounding so pungently hot in all his veins -- it was better to stand there cooling off.

The sky was cloudless, but it was as if the stars had not had power to shine. All was heavy, dead, still. Before he had thought of doing away with himself, he

had these thoughts for the first time when he was a fifteen-year-old boy and the juryman's gray horse had broken its legs on account of his carelessness. Yes, he took it heavily -- everything. He could never talk with anybody about what was weighing upon him, and what others could dismiss as a joke gnawed away inside him like a serpent. He did not have an impudent mouth on him, like most of the other servants, nor was he compliant or easily swayed like some of them. When a person did him wrong, he always thought of retaliation. But so far he had done no harm. Once he had thought of setting fire to the farm, and another time he had intended to lie in wait for the head of the house and to beat him to death, but it had stopped at empty thoughts, and he'd felt as if he could do it or not; it was up to him. But it wasn't like that now. Even if he were to suffer the torture of hell for it, it had to turn out as it was deigned: either himself or her.

He got tired standing and threw himself into the hay. If only he could sleep!

Such a night, so long! He'd had time to think through his whole life again, and everything he was going to do now, and everything that was to come, and when he looked at the clock, no more than five minutes had passed, and he began the same thing over again. At last it was as if he'd been lying in an anthill, and he wanted to moan in agony, but he couldn't get rid of his thoughts, and they nearly left him breathless. No, there was no use lying there. He stationed himself once again by the opening.

It often happened that he could not sleep. Many a night -- like this -- he had stood up looking into space, alone with his evil thoughts. Then the sky had been wide and high above his head, over his temples cool wind had passed, and inhaling the night chill was like being roused from a cruel dream.

Not like now.

He looked inquiringly up toward the sky, it was cramped and gray like an obstructed drawer. What he breathed in was not air: it was something tepid, stuffy, that was repulsive and nauseating.

A strange night! There was nothing alive. Not a cloud crossing the sky, not a bird cheeping, not a breath of wind.

And inside himself there was something he couldn't escape, something that had swollen up large as a formless fungus, something that could be destroyed today and would shoot up tomorrow.

He had a feeling there ought to be something that could help him, but he also knew it wouldn't happen. It was too late now.

Was there no help then?

No. . . they would all laugh, or consider him a fool. No one would have the right word to solve the thing, binding the whole word this night. They would all let him go -- without saying this word, which he himself did not know. His throat was

painfully dry, and he suffered all the anguish of death hundreds and hundreds of times, but he stood there so idle and listless, as if nothing were happening. For all was in vain.

A strange night! He strokes his hair, which was matted and wet. Would it be gray tomorrow? Would he bear the mark of this night his entire life? Would the people see that he'd lived twenty or thirty years in these advancing hours?

BUT THE MORNING came as if nothing had happened, and where the night vigil ended, the work began. His hair was not gray, and his face not yellow -- like that of the old man there at home -- his power had not faded away, and he was the same person as

But all thoughts were dead, all life was dead -- there was only one thing: the *deed*. What was to be done. Himself or her. It didn't matter which now.

He wanted to talk with her first. Maybe there was still a way out, but he didn't think so.

When evening came, he sat once again on the trough at the edge of the woods. He waited patiently until he saw her coming, and not until she was close up to him did he get up.

"Jesus! I was scared." She had let out a scream.

"You weren't afraid of *me*, you were afraid of what you were getting into. You're ashamed!"

"What am I supposed to be ashamed of!"

I have something to tell you," he said without heeding her question. "Sit here and let's talk." He showed her the lime trough, where he had been sitting.

She didn't reply.

"You've been together with me so many evenings that there's nothing to worry about," he said gruffly.

She gave a start. There was something in this face that frightened her and forced her to obey.

"I'll sit down here," she replied, sitting down on a rock.

He went back to his place on the lime trough.

"You're not exactly hard up for a fiancé these days," he began after a pause.

"I don't think it makes any difference what I have or don't have," she retorted with forced insolence.

"Oh, yes? Well, it makes a difference to me."

No answer came.

The moon was behind the forest, and it couldn't have been darker than it was.

He sat looking at her. She looked like a city child, so fine and pale. And as he looked, his face clenched up in a kind of menacing agony. She writhed beneath his look, staring so oddly. "I haven't taken out any lifetime lease on you, have I," she said in an effort to deliver herself from the fright. "I have permission to do as I please, haven't I?"

"Yes, you have," he said.

"But you could have come to Höghult last Saturday anyhow, the way I asked," he resumed after a pause.

"No! Because now there's going to be an end to it," she said, looking him in the face.

He raised his hand and stroked the back of it over his chin and mouth. There was a moment's pause before he produced the answer.

"But you knew that it was serious," he said then.

"It doesn't always matter what you know, does it!"

"No, it doesn't." He struck his clenched fist on the lime trough.

"And now I'd like to go," she said, trying to get up.

"You're staying!" he shouted and gave her a push so she sat down.

"I don't know what's got into you this evening," she said uncertainly.

It's *this*: that between us now it's going to be either one way or the other."

"It can't be more than one way. I'm not going out with you anymore

"But you can go out with him," he pointed up to the main building. "You can go out with Per Ols's Henrik, and you can go out with others."

"You're lying!"

"Am I?"

She got up again, but he threw her back, so she had to catch herself with her hands to keep from falling.

"Lord, how you carry on!" she called out, half stifled. She was now so afraid she was trembling.

A man's shadow came from the main building and slipped into the little woods on the other side of the yard.

They had both seen it.

"What do you think a gentleman such as himself wants from a lass like you? But I want to marry you!"

"Thanks! I think it's time to go."

"Even if you got into trouble, I'm going to marry you anyway," he continued in an irascible whisper. The other fellow might be so close that he'd have to hear the words if they were spoken too loudly

"And get a father-in-law who had sat in the palace! Such fine family."

If he tried to hit her now, she would only have to call for help. But he didn't let on. He just flinched, as if he'd been struck himself.

"Pa did it on account of liquor, and you know that," he answered almost humbly. "We're Bolsättrings. Our blood boils easily when somebody gets too close to us. This thing -- with Pa -- has been plenty for me, without *your* having to remind me.

"But a person just can't wash such things off, can they?"

"There are a lot of things a person doesn't really wash off, once he's really got into it.

"They give us prayers at church four times a year, and that's more than enough."

Now she stood up again, and he let her stand. But he gripped her wrist hard.

"You wouldn't have had to start, if you couldn't bear me! Now you're going to let things be the way they were."

SHE TWISTED her wrist in vain to get it loose.

"And if you're not able," he continued urgently, then just be to me this evening the way you were before. I get in such a strange mood, when I think of how

we two were together. . . How many times I sat there by the footbridge and waited. . . If you had wanted to beg the heart out of my chest, I would have said: `take it.'"

"I'll settle for less."

"You shouldn't speak in that tone of voice! You don't know what's inside me."

"I certainly wouldn't care to find out!"

He had got up. He just looked and looked at her, but her gaze turned away from his.

He thought she should sense that he'd rather go off and die than do her any harm: if only she would soften him up with a word. He thought she *must* understand that. This is why he stood looking. But it was impossible to say anything she wouldn't counter with scorn.

"You're the only person I've cared about," was all he said. "And maybe we'll never see each other anymore."

"Are you trying to tell me that you're going to go and hang yourself?" Her words were derisive, and she smiled lightheartedly. She knew of course it was just a warning shot.

"That -- or maybe something else." His voice had grown thick and unclear.

"Then I want to give you a piece of good advice," she said laughing and peering out between the bushes for help. "Take a rope that can carry a steer and fix it so there aren't any knots. Otherwise you can hang yourself and still be alive."

"You're not human -- you satan!"

It sounded like a dull blow, when he gave a jolt, and he heard a scream as if through a great surge of water. He lurched and jerked, he dreaded hearing that laughter again -- at those who stayed alive.

But it grew quiet, so strangely quiet. There was no one laughing any longer.

Someone came running so the branches crackled, and he saw something lying on the ground.

Two stood there staring at him. It was the family's tutor and one of the farm's hired men, now he knew them. And at once his head became clear.

"Take me to the constable," he said and with a look of disgust threw the knife away. "But there will never be any regret."

