

# MONEY

By Victoria Benedictsson

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## II

It was an uncommonly beautiful autumn day, and Axel Möller had put up the doors to the street to bring air and light into the dark shop.

On a sugar barrel in its farthest corner he sat down with his back up against the wall and his violin beneath his chin.

He was fantasizing.

There was a strange contrast between the inspired facial expression and the wretched potpourri that he was rendering. A painter who had only seen him would have been delighted; a musician who had heard would have been driven to despair. One could hear nothing more miserable than this helpless groping for something he never could reach; the striking up of well-known melodies that were not allowed to emerge as, muddling through them, he tried to make believe he was composing; then lastly these random runs, constituting the total outcome of his concert appearances. But there was no doubt that he believed himself to be producing something beautiful, and that he drew pleasure from this.

There was a darkening in the doorway. He looked up and could see Selma. Her contours appeared sharp against the sunny background; she was dressed in a close-fitting dark-blue dress that made her look even slimmer.

"I would like to hear you play but don't dare on your mother's account," she said laughing as she grabbed hold onto each door post and let her body balance forward as far as her arms reached.

His face shone with joy when he saw her, but before he could answer she was gone.

Even when she had gone he thought he heard a subdued laugh and saw a white row of teeth appear over there in the shadow. He laid the violin on the counter and thought for a moment. It was probable that she turned off at the gate and was walking home along the railway embankment. And in that case. . . It was a blessing that the overgrown current bushes were standing in the way of Mother's window!

He grabbed his hat, lying on one of the shelves, and sneaked out, leaving the shop to its destiny. After having walked around the gable, he walked directly across the field down to the railway line.

He came out ahead of her, for she'd had to make an angle. It wasn't worth going to meet her; perhaps his mother could see anyhow. He threw himself down in the grass at the side of the tracks and waited.

Soon he saw her. Her walk was determined, and she kept her hands behind her back. With her head bent down and her gaze fixed to the road, she seemed to be thinking.

Mr. Möller got up and said hello.

"Hmmp, are you lying there in ambush!" she asked laughing.

"Did I frighten you, Miss?"

"Oh, no, you don't look so awfully forbidding, and I'm not inclined to be afraid, either."

He got up onto the embankment and started walking beside her, but didn't know what to say.

She looked sideways at him. He had beautiful gray clothes and a modern felt hat. On the whole, she thought he looked "stylish," but it was dreadful, how stooped over he was when he walked! And then she never could tolerate eyeglasses.

"You see, I set right to it," she said in her free and easy manner.

He looked at her inquisitively.

"That is, I immediately got together with the old man at home there and told him I wanted to go to Stockholm."

"Well?"

"Well, it will be all right. I'm just waiting for a letter from my father. And he surely won't say no, since my uncle has said yes; because Papa admires Uncle a terrible lot. He probably thinks he'll be bishop some fine day!" She laughed.

"Well, did you suffer as much disgrace as you expected?"

"Oh, no, it wasn't so bad. And then of course it's always like water off a duck's back: I just give myself a shake, and it's all over. But -- by the way. . ." She stopped right in front of him, gesturing as if she had just recalled something, "Aunty doesn't think it

fitting for me to go out walking with you. Would you like to do it again?"

"What do you mean?"

"Walk to your place." She signaled toward the village and looked at him with malicious glee, waiting to see what impression her words would make.

He looked puzzled, didn't know what to reply. He wondered if she really wanted him to turn back.

"Because *I* am quite obliged to go home now," she continued innocently, "so if you're taking the *same road*, then I don't see any way of avoiding your company."

She bit into a finger of her glove while peering at him from the side.

He blushed in embarrassment. In his home they never made jokes, and he got a dim sensation that she was making a fool of him.

"Do you mind if I go with, Miss?" he said humbly.

That touched her.

"Oh, you're such a child," she said in a superior manner. "You could understand, couldn't you, that I didn't mean anything hurtful? How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"Yes, why that's dreadful. I'm not seventeen yet, and still it's just as if I were older than you. But that's probably because --"

-- You've read so much," he dared assume.

"Yes, maybe that too," she said decisively, "but now I meant that at boarding school I was always the one who was supposed to look after everybody."

He didn't find it at all remarkable that she had to "look after" people. Her mystical learning impressed him. And then he had never before met any young girl who habitually talked about being at "boarding school." Only in novels had he read of such things. It appeared to him dreadfully distinguished.

His mother's oppressing him had made him quite as unassuming as he was eager or honor.

They walked in silence a moment.

"Well, how is it going?" she asked at last.

"With what?"

"With your future plans. Have you spoken to your mother yet?"

"No."

He looked down, and it appeared as if he were ashamed.

"You don't dare?" "Oh well, I probably do, but. . ."

"No, you don't. Do you want --" She stopped short and looked at him. "Do you want me to talk to her?"

"Oh, I'd give anything in the world!"

He almost looked frightened.

"Don't you think I've done more than that for my friends?" she said with a proud little smile as they walked on.

He hardly knew what to believe: talking to his mother seemed to him almost the worst thing.

"And I want to tell you, that if you don't set about doing it, nothing ever gets done in this world," she resumed with infinite wisdom.

Once more they walked quietly beside each other. He saw with a shudder how quickly they were approaching the gate over there by the group of trees where she would turn off. And he had a thousand things to say. Now if she went to Stockholm, they might be separated forever.

He grew lost in reflection.

His mother couldn't live forever, after all. Then he would be free, and half the fortune would be his. Imagine if she'd wait for him! But it never occurred to him to ask.

He only looked at her, inquiring skeptically.

"Your training to be an artist won't take so long, will it?" he said in a low voice. "All of a sudden you'll go off and get married."

"Most likely I won't ever marry," she replied earnestly, "that's exactly why I want to work."

For him this was almost like a promise; it led him into quiet ecstasy.

She was silent as well.

"It would be such fun if we could meet when we get old," she said suddenly, looking up.

He met her gaze with such radiant pleasure, he would have liked to. . . no, he didn't dare.

Now they were by the gate. She opened it herself, ran lightly through and let it close with a slap. He had stayed on the other side.

She put her arms on the rim of the gate and looked him roguishly in the eyes.

"Put that in writing, that we both will be successes, each in his own domain. What difference does it make if you become a painter or what you become, so long as you show what you're made of and get ahead. Will you write that down for the record?"

She resolutely reached out one of her hands, with a worn glove on it.

"Agreed, I'll be responsible for my part!" she repeated cheerily, "and so we'll meet when we get old." She crossed her fingers.

He just stood there looking at her as she was hanging, self-willed, on the gate, but he did not accept the challenge and withdrew his hand.

"You'll be a success, all right," he said, "but not I."

"Is it always money, money!" she said smiling.

"Yes," he said quickly, "but in all the world there is no one I care about more than . . ."

His whole face blushed over his boldness.

"Nonsense! I care about everybody -- and you too," she said merrily. "Well, lets shake hands on that, at least."

She extended her hand to him over the gate, and he took it -- lamely, as if he had been afraid of it. Then she jumped down and walked away with rapid steps without looking back.

Now the letter from her father might definitely have come. She went into the house.

Before the stairway stood an elegant hunting coach with two gray horses in front of it. She knew them well. It was Squire Kristerson's. How beautiful they were! She could not resist petting them before she went upstairs.

When she came up into the parlor, there was no one there.

Really, was the squire down in her uncle's room? Well, then she had no desire to go and ask about the letter.

Instead she went into the dining room to see if there was any coffee to be had, but it was already gone. She opened one of the windows, knelt over a chair, and supported her elbows on the window sill to get a better view down to the horses -- a position that was more comfortable than graceful.

What in all the world could the squire be doing down in her uncle's room for so long? He always used to come up into the parlor to play chess with her otherwise. And they always became enemies, that was a certainty. She wondered if he had become seriously annoyed this time because she had so craftily taken his queen in the last game. It was true, he hadn't been there since. But why in all the world should he care about that? After all, he had checkmated her anyhow! Stylish horses! Must be fun to ride behind them! How splendid it looked when they nodded so that the small silver mirrors between their eyes flashed in the sun!

It was true, she hadn't met the squire since that evening at the doctor's. He had danced three dances with her. He -- who otherwise was so lazy!

She laughed at that.

He danced well anyway and led very firmly. But what did he think he was doing? Each time he executed a turn in the room, he put his arm more firmly around her, in a single grip, so she was forced to come up close to him.

She blushed now, when she thought of it. She wondered whether he always did that. The other girls said that he danced very well, and they had teased her about the three dances. But then of course she had also had her new dress, the one with satin trim (the one sewn so fashionably and so long).

She bent down and looked at her skirt; it was short, so that her feet showed. And they were big.

"Of course I know that, if only I had money, then I wouldn't go around with this old rag a single day longer," she thought. And so she resumed her previous position.

But it was annoying anyway, if he should think he was allowed some impertinence. If he did, he wasn't going to be allowed to repeat it. Would it do to tell him? . . . Oh, she would die of shame just from mentioning such a thing! But then what

was a person to do? Look strict. But what if he pretended then not to understand? Oooph!

Look, why there he was coming out. Stout and red as usual.

She sat looking at him with her fingers stuck through her yellow bangs.

The squire didn't look up. Still on the stairs, he spoke eagerly and in a low voice with the pastor.

It was probably "business," thought Selma.

When the carriage rolled away, she stood looking after it. The very sound seemed so distinguished -- a dull ring that charmed her. Oh, what horses!

But the letter!

She hurried down to her uncle's room. He was standing by his desk, his back turned.

"Did you get a letter from Papa, Uncle?"

He turned and looked at her.

"Yes, I got a letter," he said slowly as he shoved his gold-rimmed eyeglasses more firmly up on his nose, "but you're not going to be very happy about the letter."

"Why not? Did something go wrong?" she said .

"No, but Magnus doesn't want to let you go off to Stockholm."

"Doesn't want to?"

"No."

"Wasn't there a letter to me?"

"No."

"May I read your letter, Uncle?"

"No. Your father asks me to remonstrate with you. Now that I've thought more closely about the matter, I think he's right."

"What about?"

"You're still too young to think of such things."

"Too young, too young? Why, I'm getting older with each day."

"Yes, of course. That's why you'll have to wait a few years."

"No, that won't work; I'm going to start now, so as to have time. Art is long. Later it's too late. Later I won't want to."

He picked up a pen and tested the tip against his nail.

"Then you'll have to let it be."

He spoke quite calmly, with a low voice, as was his habit, but with the determination that impresses.

Her lips quivered from suppressed motion.

"But Uncle. . ." The words would hardly come out. "Help me, Uncle."

She walked up to him and lay her hand beseechingly on his arm, as she looked up into his face. It was an opaque, lame face that never showed any emotion.

"Not this time," he said and stroked her hair, calmly and clerically.

She too tried to show herself calm.

"It's no passing fancy," she said without looking up; "you know that I'm not so childish as I might appear sometimes, Uncle. Why, Papa has never had anybody but me, and in time I've had to learn to think. We've been such friends, he and I, and if he really understands how much this means to me, then he certainly won't say no. But he's so dependent upon you, Uncle, both in business and other things, and if you oppose it, then I can't accomplish anything. That's why you must help me, Uncle. I have always worked so diligently, whenever it came to drawing. You yourself have praised me so many times, Uncle, and that's spurred me on. Now it's got to be such a desire that I can't quit. Don't think that I'll grow tired or become dispirited, Uncle, if I just get to devote myself to what I want -- wood carving or drawing or anything in that line. But I'm not fit for the household. I will succeed and do you honor, if only I get to try. Now don't say no."

"Child, now you're being foolish."

"No, I'm not. I know that work is required for everything, and that you only should trust yourself -- it's always been poor Papa's fault, that he's been too lax -- it's also just to begin with that I need you; later I'll find a way -- I will. "

"Do I usually consent to haggle once I've said no?"

"I can beg my way if necessary."

She walked to the door.

"Selma!" His voice sounded sharp.

She turned around.

"Don't try anything crazy. They send the police after runaway children and escaped lunatics. Don't you know that?"

He smiled -- the slippery, cold smile that was his worst weapon and that so far she had only seen used against others.

It brought her back to her senses at once, but she was chalk-white in the face.

"I am neither a child nor a crazy person, and calm down because I will never go begging. I feel that I'm bound. I have no other choice but to bow to necessity."

She left.

When she was gone, the pastor sat down to write to his brother.

Selma made no more attempts. She knew her uncle enough to know that it would do no good. A deep dejection had come over her, and she was not herself. The willful, boyish ways were gone, and a stillness had entered into her manner that made her a different person.

As soon as they had eaten supper, she asked to be permitted to go to bed; she felt so tired.

The pastor and his wife were left alone.

He was lying on the sofa, as usual. But she had no socks to knit, for it was Saturday evening.

"Did you tell her yet?" asked the wife, paging through a copy of *Family Journal*.

"No. I didn't think it was worth it today, after she had that unpleasantness with the trip to Stockholm. When she's slept on the matter, she'll calm down, all right."

"I don't think that's necessary. I don't ever remember seeing her this calm. It's really been a relief today."

He merely put on a sneer that evaded his wife.

"But what do you think Richard will say about it?" she resumed.

"Who's going to inquire into whims like that, do you think? A boy student. . . hah! He'll have time to fall in love a dozen times before he has enough to marry."

"But my dear, what do they see in the girl? I'd go so far as to say that she's really ugly."

"She surely never could be called ugly, and besides she's well liked -- that freshness, you know. It's like beautiful winter fruit."

"Such ideas! But I wonder what she's doing up there. She couldn't go to bed this time of day, could she? I'd just like to have a look."

The wife left, and not much time passed before she returned.

"She's crying so frightfully I can't get a word out of her, but she is lying in bed."

The wife set the lamp, which she'd held in her hand, down on a table.

"It's quite un-Christian to carry on this way for such a little thing," she resumed.

There were afflictions that Mrs. Berg could understand, but there were also those that lay beyond her horizon. Among the former were diseases and deaths within the family as well as theft, fire, or a burned roast. But a sorrow such as Selma's was absolutely inconceivable to her.

I think I'll go up and talk to her," said the pastor hesitantly.

It hurt him so now. Selma was crying. His brave, clever Selma!

"I'll go with" said his wife with glad resolution: she was expecting a bit of sensation.

"No, you stay here, I'll go by myself," answered the pastor. There was an antipathy between Selma and her aunt that made the girl stubborn.

He took the lamp and went up to the little attic room, pattered a bit at the table and then looked off toward the sofa. Selma had turned to the wall and drawn the cover over her head. She obviously intended to give him the impression that she was sleeping. He walked up and put his hand on her shoulder. She trembled from the suppressed sobs, but not a sound was heard.

He felt moved by precisely that, that she was trying to control herself.

"Child," he said, "you don't realize that I'm interested in your welfare."

That was too much. His friendliness only made it more difficult, and he heard a half-stifled sob.

"Go ahead and cry," he said, "it will make things easier."

She was probably biting the coverlet, for suddenly she grew still and quiet.

"It feels burdensome now," he said slowly, "it always does when our illusions shatter. Don't you think I've felt it -- even I? But the more soberly we learn to look at life, the better off we are."

"I'm trying to do that," came an interrupted, dull voice.

"I know that. I know that you want to be reasonable. But you still have a lot to learn. And believe me, the one who says, with humble heart: 'Lord, thy will be done,' that one will make his way in the world most easily. Remember that it's He who's in control and you are in His hand."

"I can be just as unhappy for that."

"Those are words of impiety."

"I mean that he controls us all," a voice came from under the coverlet, "he controls those who are most unhappy, too, even those who never know anything but sorrow and misery. So that's no comfort."

"Child, what kind of words are those!" he said sternly.

"Well, there's nothing to prevent me from being able to feel things worse the longer I live. Why not me as well as all the others?"

"We must take our refuge to him in prayer."

In a peculiar way these mildly articulated words battled against his whole person; against the rigid, formal bearing; against the cheery, feelingless face and against his smug smile when he uttered them.

"I *have* prayed," a voice said rather sullenly.

"But you've done it in a shortsighted and intolerant way. Perhaps a pleasure is awaiting you that you never dreamed of."

"Beautiful!" There was a sob of disbelief beneath the cover.

He could not keep back a smile, for he did possess a certain humor: it was the

mitigating quality in his character.

The little dispute seemed to have done her good, though his grounds for consolation left her unmoved. The sobs came only as a backwash after a storm.

"By way of consolation, I'd thought of getting up a little surprise for you," he said with a cunning smile. "Aren't you curious?"

A lengthy sob was her only reply.

"Why, you're usually so glad to get money -- look."

He waited to get to see a couple swollen red eyes peer out, but the cover lay motionless.

"I don't need any money now." "But a hundred-crown note. . ."

Before the sentence was completed, she sat up in bed, blinking at the light with her red-rimmed eyes.

There really was a bill lying on the cover.

"Well, now what am I supposed to do with it!" she burst out, leaning her forehead against the wall.

"Naturally, you'll have to figure that out yourself."

"Am I allowed to do what I want with it?"

"Of course."

She didn't turn around, but it was clear to see that the fortress aimed to surrender.

"Don't I have to account for it at all?"

"No."

With a smile he regarded the white nightshirt back and one yellow braid, hanging down like a lion's tail. She was still thinking it over. Perhaps she suspected a trap. He almost liked her for that.

"Even if you threw it away in the road, I wouldn't care," he resumed, "I just wanted to show you that I don't want to be harsh or stingy." A touch of natural tenderness entered his voice.

"Does Aunty know about it?"

She turned around and looked obliquely over her shoulder.

"No."

He could hardly keep from laughing. She was as careful as a country lawyer.

"Really," she said, turning around to right herself on the sofa. "Well, I certainly am glad to have the money, but I can't get happy immediately for that, so, Uncle, if you mean that --"

Now he really laughed.

She looked at him quite seriously, somewhat affronted.

"All you need to say is: 'Thank you, Uncle,'" he said, "that's all I ask."

"Well, my thanks then, Uncle, but it is an awful lot of money." She limply extended one of her hands to him, and the affair was settled.

"You'll no doubt be dealing with more than that in your time; you seem to have a genius for getting on in the world."

"Yes, I do think so," she said with conviction, "because without it the whole thing would be nonsense -- I've told Papa that so many times. But he's just too darn stuck, he can never get free again."

"Good night to you, my child," said the pastor as he placed both hands on her fluffy head and kissed her. Afterward he turned to go.

Then at once there came over her a superstitious dread. She looked at the note; the largest sum she had ever owned.

Wasn't it blood money! What had she sold? Something inside herself . . . Her own pain -- and for money! . . . She thought of Judas.

"Uncle!" she cried, just as he was about to take the lamp. It sounded almost anguished.

When he looked around, she reached both arms out to him, as if for protection, or as if to pray for forgiveness for something.

He went up to her and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Care about me. Just a little, little bit. Oh -- I'm so sad!" She threw her arms around his neck.

He remained sitting a moment and let her press her swollen red face against the broadcloth of his cassock. But he felt no remorse, didn't take back the note. Why, he had acted magnanimously, generously, and his conscience was serene.

"Is it a sin, is it a sin?" she cried out fervently.

"What? Which?"

"The money, the money! -- to get paid."

"How can you talk that way? I'm giving it to you so willingly."

"No, it isn't a sin," she said with a deep breath, convulsive as a sob.

Then he left.