

THE GALLEY SLAVE
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1.

Dense layers of air. Slime creeping up the walls. An arrival from out of the swamp. Plague commissars afoot in the land. One strange introduction, one drunken beginning.

Dark spots of dampness were contorting on the wall. In the dead silence he could have sworn they were slinking together and apart, forming incomprehensible images in their monstrously slow motion. Down below it was wet through and through, the wall saturated to blackness with some slimy liquid that was pushing imperceptibly upward, toward the spots and their contortions. In between some whitish fluid collected into drops and then slowly slid back down into the swampy dirt floor. It was as though the chapel had grown out of the earth, as though all this damp, runny slime were saturating it and at the same time dragging it back down into the swampy ground. He reached his hand out toward the wall and felt the warm, supple slime on it. Goose bumps shot down his back and he flinched at the touch of this dead, living substance.

This sudden agitation dislodged him. His eyes were drawn from the walls to the door and the dark opening behind it. He went up to

it and for no reason took hold of its cold iron fixtures, and he shook the grate so that the door's lock gave a hollow clank. Inside there was a squawk, immediately stifled. He pressed his face up as close as he could and waited for his pupils in their eager orbits to pierce through the darkness and make out the shapes inside. The walls were rough and covered in some kind of whitewash that had turned gray from the dampness. There were wet spots shifting around here, too. Toward the back he could make out at first a heap of rags and then a tall figure that rose up out of them. A young man with symmetrical but clumsily chiseled and etched features on his face was standing tied to some pillar right next to a stout and bare, black cross. An arrow was sticking out of his shoulder, its tip buried deep in the flesh, with black blood gushing out of the wound beneath it. It must have been red at one time, he thought, and the walls must have been white. The arrows stuck out of his chest, his legs, everywhere on his body—this immortal had been shot through and through. Behind his pale, white face there hung a ragged, tattered flag. ST SEBASTIAN stretched across its folds and its faded pink field. Only now did he notice a shorter fellow on the other side of the cross. This statue was slightly bent, leaning its back against the altar. A pilgrim or a beggar or something dressed in beggar's rags. One hand was pointing at a blistering boil on its thigh, and something ran out of this festering wound too, something thick and shiny, some kind of smear oozing out. Both of them looked upward, both of them had their gazes fixed firmly on the black ceiling of heaven.

In this silence he could hear only his own breathing. Only his breath and the drumming in the pipe of his throat and his oral cavity as it drew in and expelled the dense air. Those two in there were stone silent. The black cross stood motionlessly between them, looking at him. He wrenched his whole body around and with abrupt yet still measured agility he dislodged himself once more from this knotty torpor.

After this he didn't look back at the chapel or the slime creeping over its walls. His wet boots waded through low grass. He could feel damp bunches of stalks lashing at his legs, their thousands of little suckers grabbing hold. It was hard going. The atmosphere was dense with humidity. Warm steam rose up from the ground and got under his skin. He felt something cool on his forehead and when he reached up, globs of a wet substance were sticking together there too. Sweat streamed out of his pores and his eyes misted from the strain. Painfully he pressed on through the dense layers of air. He walked across a grassy land bridge. To the left a swamp shifted its warm steam lazily amid its motionless high growths of reeds and darnels. From the right, dense undergrowth gaped at him and black and red sphericles shone between creeping, clinging vines. Fetid dead nettles pressed in on him with their dizzying smell. The sun stood high in the noonday sky. Its persistent glow shone through the dense mixture of air and fluid substances. He gasped and chased after the pockets of pure air amid the swollen element pressing in on him from all sides, preventing him from moving faster.

Eventually the underbrush broke and he pressed through the opening in among the trees and into the forest. The air was no better here. The lichenous mosses steamed just as much, but at least he could move more freely. The terrain sloped slightly up and he could sense more light up there among the tree crowns. He walked straight up the slope. When he reached the top, he walked face-first into a gauntlet of thorns; black, shiny berries dangled before his eyes. This was the edge. Alongside it ran a path, with green, level ground on both sides of it.

He sat down in the damp grass and threw his heavy bag on the ground. He wiped his wet forehead with his sleeve. He couldn't go on. The air was soft and unctuous. It pressed him to the ground. Now he knew: if he got up, he would have to slog through it like water.

A bell rang somewhere close by. The sound grew muffled and vanished in the sagging air. Then he caught the sound of many voices coming to him in waves, and before much time had passed, they were murmuring right behind him. Along a forest path a slow and undulous clump of people was moving through the misty, porous tissues down to the grassy flatland. As in a dream, first a brightly colored banner with bulbous little cherubs perched all red against its blue field bobbed past him overhead, and then the murmuring crowd in their holiday clothes gradually etched itself into the mist.

He got up, flung his bag and saddle over his shoulders, and followed the last of the herd. He tried to talk to a straggling old man, but the latter just kept mumbling to himself and lifting his eyes into the precipitation above him, toward the blurry sphere in the sky that stood in for the sun. He refused to be put off. He kept walking alongside the hunched old man, who kept falling farther and farther behind the rest of the procession. He'd have to get someplace eventually. This pilgrimage had to finish somewhere.

The wagon trail pushed back into the forest and then bit into a steep slope uphill. Now the ground beneath his feet turned muddy and slippery. Small, stinking puddles decanted their stale liquid into the holes left by their footsteps. The old man slipped several times. It looked as though he was about to fall and tumble back down the hill. He looked around bleary-eyed and then drilled into the stranger with his stare. The old man's fingers felt distrustfully over the fellow's face and clothes before coming to rest on the saddle. Then he said in a slow, tentative way, as though still considering whether to say anything at all, "Where's your horse?"

He threw his bag up over the saddle and took such tight hold of it with his right hand that it twisted his back. With his left he took the old man by the arm and slowly drew him toward the edge. He wanted to get into the trees, but the path was in a ravine and the slope was as slick

as if oil had been poured over it. At first the old man tried to get away, but then he yielded to the other's firm grip. They proceeded slowly to a place where the path assumed a gentler slope. There they stopped and then headed into the trees, where it was easier for them to advance.

It was only then that the stranger answered.

"I left it down below, in the swamp. I think it has mud fever. I drove it through the puddles too hard while it was overheated."

"Well then you boil up some ash," the old man said, pleased to be able to speak expertly. "And some pine cones. And then you use oil to spread that onto the horse's legs every day."

The stranger kept looking ahead. He could see the sweaty, tottering animal with the dampness spraying off its hide, coming to a sudden halt among the grapevines and staring vacantly ahead, unable to move forward or back.

"It was oozing a lot of pus already," he said after a while. "There was nothing I could do."

The old man became taciturn again. His distrust had returned all at once, and he kept his eyes stubbornly fixed on the ground.

"We got lost in the swamp," the newcomer tried to explain. "I didn't find my way again until the chapel."

They walked on silently. The forest began to thin out and down below wooden huts with black straw hats began to appear. The procession wended its muddy way through a village. A few dim figures rushed out of the mist enshrouding the houses and joined up with the pilgrims. The stranger and the old man picked their way downhill slowly and carefully. Outside the first clump of houses the old man began to fidget and mutter, as though hoping to take his leave.

"I thought maybe I could get a little warm milk or wine," the stranger said.

The old man wavered. His footsteps were leading him elsewhere, but the stranger's voice held him back. He sized this man up once again with his bleary eyes, then came to a decision. Come on; he squinted and turned onto a narrow path between two wooden fences, heading into a hive of blackened hovels.

The village was virtually empty. A few hens scattered underfoot and a few pigs refused to budge. The stranger sensed some motion behind the window of one of the houses. When he looked back in that direction, he glimpsed a woman's face darting out of sight. A few paces on and the old man shoved aside a wooden cover to reveal a yard dominated by a great heap of manure sitting in the middle of a single, stagnant pool of stinking water. He pointed the stranger to a log outside a wooden hut, called out something, and went inside. Moments later a woman's wizened face framed in limp strands of gray hair appeared in the doorway. She nodded encouragingly.

He sat and waited. An impatient stream of words came from the house. Back among the other buildings something darted again, and then a plump little woman appeared right next to the fence. Did he recognize this face? Had those black eyes been sizing him up before? There was something razor sharp in their anxious pupils. She dug into him, her hips swaying.

Then from the doorway there was a sudden shout of "whore" or something like it, and the little woman whooshed back in among the other buildings and out of sight. The old man was standing on the threshold with a dish of milk in his hands. He splashed his way across the puddle and offered it to the stranger.

He gulped down the warm slop until large drops of sweat reappeared on his forehead.

"A lot of whoring and rutting going on," the old man said, as though he were answering a question.

“Indeed,” the stranger said, eagerly accepting this opportunity for conversation. “The air is so strange here, humid and hot all at the same time.”

“Heat and bad air,” the old man whispered confidentially. “Makes people susceptible to especially vile and vicious demons.”

“Is that why everyone’s praying?” the stranger asked.

“Yes,” the old man said. “All the signs are here. Sickness is on the way. Only Saint Roch can save us.”

He wasn’t going to waste any time. Muddled old men were always making crazy prophesies.

“A horse,” the stranger said. “Where can I buy a horse?”

“Not here,” the old man gasped conspiratorially. “All the horses here have died. The innkeeper. In the next village down this road.”

The stranger heaved his load back onto his shoulders and waded across the stinking puddle. The air really is strange here, he thought. Down below, on the path between the two fences, he heard someone call to him. He turned around and saw the old man standing motionless, staring at him goggle-eyed.

“You won’t get far!” he called out.

He stopped again mid-afternoon and asked for the way to the inn. A sturdy fellow with sleeves rolled up to his shoulders showed muscular arms that were sunburned up to the elbows and white as milk above that. With big strokes he lit into logs with his axe so hard that chips would go flying and the logs would fly in two with the first blow each time. He was friendly and good-natured. So was the slender woman with sharp features who appeared in the doorway of the barn, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Straight ahead,” he called out. “You’ll be there soon enough.” He stepped inside and brought out a wooden bowl of fruit brandy. “In

this heat," he said, "it helps you walk." He told the stranger that travelers often stopped at his house. Sometimes they would even stay the night. He could, too, if he wanted. The fellow was talkative and inquisitive. But the stranger did not feel like wasting words.

"I have to keep going," he said. "I need a horse."

Clumsily he tried to thank his host, but the latter waved it off. "Be careful, then. The inn keeper is a brute," he said and strained his face trying to wink.

The road began meandering through some grassy swamp again. But this time it was easier. His destination was close.

Even so, the atmosphere remained saturated with warmth and dampness.

It was night when he reached the inn. Some light shone out of its windows. He banged on the door. Something moved inside and then someone opened the door a crack. A scent mingling smoke, wine and bodies wafted out through the gap.

"A bed for the night," the stranger said. The door opened and a fellow with a twisted, ill-humored face let him in. The light in the room came from two or three candles placed on the tables and the flame of an oil lamp in the corner, fluttering in the draft. Several men were sitting around one of the tables with jugs of wine, speaking in subdued tones. Everyone turned to look when the stranger came in. The other tables were empty. He threw his bag and saddle onto a bench and collapsed onto a vacant seat in the corner. Wordlessly the innkeeper set a jug of wine before him and sat down across from him.

"You come a long distance?" he asked.

"Mhm," the stranger replied.

The innkeeper glanced toward the neighboring table, where the men were straining to pick up their words, and he leaned in still closer, over the jug.

“Don’t worry, I’m not in the habit of asking a lot of questions,” he said.

He got up and went to a door that led further into the house.

“Guest for the night,” he called out.

“Need his horse fed?” a male voice yapped, and a head covered with a tangle of shiny red hair appeared in the doorway.

“No horse,” the innkeeper said, nodding his head toward the stranger’s gear.

He gulped down some porridge with large chunks of fatty meat swimming in it. Then he couldn’t hold out any longer. His eyes squinted from the smoke and fatigue and he could feel all the heat, all the humidity, and the dizzying steam of this long day course through his whole body. He called the innkeeper, who slowly got up from the next table.

“I’ll need a horse tomorrow,” he said.

The innkeeper’s eyes grew lively and interested.

“It won’t be easy,” he said and his eyes darted over the stranger’s clothes and bag. “Horses aren’t easy.”

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” the stranger said and went upstairs following the red-haired fellow, who stopped at a door and handed him a candle.

“It’s so you won’t be scared,” he said, smiling as the shadows flickered over his face.

The stranger shoved his bag under the bed and locked the door behind him. He put a dagger under the pillow and began to undress. His attention was caught by a printed icon that lay on a wooden bench next to the candle. It was a picture of that same vagabond he had already seen somewhere, but drawn bright red. His hand was pointing to a boil on his thigh, which was oozing a bright fluid. In the chapel, this morning, that’s where I’ve seen him.

He lay down and with his eyes shut looked at this red specter of Saint Roch. In his nostrils he could smell the humidity and the dizzying steam rising up from the swamp.

The innkeeper was waiting for him with a big smile on his face. It was a warm morning and all the signs were that the sun would dispel at least some of the humid muck that had been poisoning the air. It hadn't cleared up yet, but it was already a bit easier to draw air into your lungs. The innkeeper's face no longer showed a trace of the previous day's ill humor. And yet he greeted the stranger with such a strange smile—did we sleep well?—that in spite of all this good cheer the newcomer still felt his chest squeezed by some anxiety.

That passed once they'd sat down to talk.

"I have a horse for you," the smiling innkeeper said. "But I'm afraid you won't need it."

The stranger looked at him, confused.

"No, don't look at me like that," the innkeeper chattered. "There's no need for you to be in any hurry. This morning we had a visit from Justice Albin, a real big shot around here, and he said they've got visitors in town."

He paused and set some wine down on the table. Even though there was no one else in the room now, he leaned confidentially toward his guest.

"The plague commissar," he whispered.

The stranger shrugged his shoulders. It looked like the big news made no impression on him whatever. Disappointed, the innkeeper leaned back against the wall.

"I see you have no idea what that means," he said. "The office of the deputy of the provincial duke has issued a decree on plague roadblocks and quarantines. Nothing has happened yet. There's no

sickness. Just preventive measures. The thing is, no travelers can be out wandering the land.

Now it seemed as though the man understood what was at stake.

“I can’t move on?” he asked.

“Ah, at last,” the innkeeper sighed in relief. “You’ve got it now. You can’t move on.”

He sat back up and observed his guest carefully. The stranger took a swallow of wine and seemed quite calm. Then he drummed his fingers on the table and this movement betrayed the fidgety sequence of thoughts uncoiling inside his skull.

“Well, actually, you could go,” the innkeeper said soothingly after a while. “But they’re stopping and searching every stranger who passes through, and thoroughly. Not everyone is partial to that.”

He stood up and went to the door.

Wordlessly the stranger stared at the red drops of wine that slowly slid down the side of the jug and gathered in a bloody puddle on the table.

All morning he rode through the surrounding countryside. The innkeeper had sold him a good horse. He looked at the gentle green hillsides that the horse negotiated so easily. It was humid, but pleasant. Once the sun finally drives this steam off, this will be a fine, pleasant place.

At noon he ate quickly and withdrew to his room with a jug of wine. He looked at the small red icon and poured out a glass. He saw the old man in the red cloak standing by the fence between the black huts and calling after him, “You won’t get far!”

Down below they could hear the loud, gnarled laughter from his room.

That evening he came downstairs, his eyes bloodshot, and sat down at a table alone again. By nightfall the inn was full—local people and traveling merchants. He heard them swear. If it’s plague roadblocks,

then no more fairs, no more loads to haul, no more pay. All they could do would be to sit at home and count their losses.

Clearly the innkeeper hadn't been lying.

Wine saw him through the following day, too.

On the day after that, the innkeeper came into his room. He sat down and looked at the stranger and was silent, and that's how he left, too—without a word.

That night he woke from his vinous sleep and thought he heard the lock turning in the door. In the morning he decided to leave. He couldn't stay in this inn. One of these nights they were going to bury his wine-saturated corpse in the forest out back. One of these nights that shiny redheaded fellow was going to stab him while he lay in bed.

But the next morning was sunny. All the humidity and mist had been burned away. Out on the horizon the clouds pressed down to the ground and he could feel their hot embrace, but here it was bright and sunny.

As he was tying up his traveling bag, the door opened behind his back. He spun around and found the innkeeper standing there, leaning on the doorframe.

This time he said something.

"You're not well," he said. "I don't mean to pry, but you're not well. You shout in your sleep every night."

The stranger was silent. Then, smiling, the innkeeper added, "I really don't have any intention of holding you back, but it's my duty to tell you that pesthouses are being set up. Think about it."

He said this with his smile and then left his guest alone. This time something in the peculiar stranger had been touched. He sat down and buried his head in his hands. Doubts of some kind, questions of some kind, were building up inside him.

Slowly he untied his bag and headed downstairs. Two peasants were sitting in the tavern wordlessly with a jug of wine, filling their glasses. He pushed aside the jug that the innkeeper set in front of him and waited silently until the other two got up, paid, and left. He motioned to the innkeeper to come join him.

“I don’t understand why you try so hard to keep me from my journey,” he said quietly and calmly, “but you must have some reason for it. Are you waiting for just the right moment? Are you waiting to see if I’m traveling alone? If there might not be someone coming to join me? Are there very many bones buried in the forest behind your inn?”

The innkeeper smiled.

“There,” he said, “it’s possible to have a conversation with you after all. Until now all you’ve done is drink and gad about as if you were being hounded by some evil spirit. But now you’ve begun to think. As God is my witness,” he said, “I’ve never been one to prey on lone travelers. I’m just warning you. It benefits me if you stay. It benefits you if you stay. A pesthouse is a vile place. And the grueling questions that the judges and investigators ask at roadblocks are even worse.

The stranger looked him straight in the eyes.

“I’ll stay,” he said.

The innkeeper nodded in satisfaction.

“But not in this inn, full as it is of your good intentions.”

The innkeeper squirmed and started waving his arms in the air.

“This is the best inn,” he thundered, “by far the best inn anywhere around. Everywhere else they’ll just cheat you, worst of all they’ll pry into your business. Not me. I welcome every guest.”

The stranger kept his eyes fixed on the innkeeper.

“That’s not the point,” he said. “I want to find more settled lodgings. At least for as long as this idiocy lasts. I need a house, a place to live.”

This brought the innkeeper to his feet. He paced uncertainly back and forth between the tables. Finally he came back to the stranger's and leaned on it with both arms.

"You'll stay?" he asked, perplexed.

"Yes," the stranger said.

"And you have enough money for a house?" the innkeeper said.

"Yes," the stranger said.

"And here I thought you were just some escaped galley slave," the innkeeper said.

That evening the deal was settled. The innkeeper came into his room with a definite offer. Nearby there was an empty house. He was not to ask why it was empty. He could move in. He would need to pay the innkeeper and Judge Joseph Albin in town, to avoid unnecessary prying. He could stay.

The next day he had a look at the thing. The house was abandoned, but in good shape. He would stay. That same day he went into town. He had a long discussion with the judge. He would stay.

The next evening he moved in.

And so he stayed. Suddenly, and under the influence of drink, he decided to confront his fate. Suddenly and simply he entered his story, with no end in sight.

He came at night and he came alone.

That's how this wretched thing begins.