



SHADOW & LIGHT



A Short Story
by
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AUGUST 12, 2020

Wake, the morning grey.

Dull and bitter greeting me,

For the coming day.

These dreary words accompanied her thoughts as she awoke. It was a dull and gloom morning, a trend that had become quite frequent these past few days. As she sat underneath the clouded glow of the rising sun, its sullen rays reflecting her stolid, alabaster complexion, she reflected on the events of the past few days...

She had travelled extensively from her scenic yet somewhat isolated home over the past week. Sent by the people of her village to the city of Providence to procure supplies. The trip was familiar to her as she had made previous expeditions there trading furs and produce generated by the local community, whom she was often consulted on matters involving the well-being of the village due to her perspicacious nature. A discerning temper able to distinguish the fabrics and thread interlaced in the tapestry of nature. She departed alone on horse-drawn wagon, bringing with her the necessary provisions for nourishment and that of defence, namely an old revolver.

The Journey

It was a midsummers morning the day she left, with the aim of arriving at the city by nightfall. She started from the village with a casual canter, humming old tunes long forgotten by the flow of time as she went. The morning was peaceful, picturesque even. On the soft breeze carried notes from the songbird's chorale, gently caressing the ears of all creatures below. She continued on, enjoying the serenity while she could, for she knew an ominous stage of the expedition was about to make itself known.

It wasn't long before all gradually grew hauntingly quiet. She had reached the opening of the Cursed Backwoods, a vast stretch of forest concealing a central valley crossing - its namesake reflecting the long held local belief that a coven of witches dwelled deep within its heart, joyfully enacting many a mischief on unlucky travellers.

She advanced forth unperturbed, for her nature was not one to give credence to superstition of folklore. The carved-out course through the forest resembled that of a vivid scar, crudely cut and laden with a miasma of lifeless trees and shrubbery on either side, which only added to the morose atmosphere conceived by the smothering of the serene journey so far.

A mechanical melody of the flat rhythmic thud of her mare's hooves and constant drone of the carriage wheels was all that was to be heard now. It was as if the forest had come alive, vexed at the very presence of this wandering woman and her domesticated beast, and sought to drown out any and all agrarian ambience that may lend comfort to the disquietude of a contemplative mind.

Her thoughts began to wander, as they often done autonomously when in moments of stillness; she imagined the forest to be sentient, doing all in its power to repel her advance, as if to guard some closely kept secret or preserve all that dwelled within from outside disturbance.

Shadows from the trees waxed and waned along with the approaching afternoon as if to warn of a coming transgression of an unwritten law. “Seems the nymphs’ shudder at the very sight of me,” she smiled to herself “Something wicked this way comes...”

She had reached the central valley of the woodland wherein lies a small winding river. The section of the stream chosen for the crossing, she noticed, had the contour of crow’s feet - a symptom of its ancient origin and a harbinger to its future end. Eventually it would wither and die, along with the fauna it supports, giving way to whatever feature would fill the void. Perpetually snared in the cyclical dance of life, death, and rebirth. She made haste in crossing the river, for she wasn’t entirely convinced of the integrity of the aged wooden bridge sheltering a steep plunge into the depths below.

The remainder of the pilgrimage was fraught with paranoia. With the coming of dusk heightened the creeping sense of dread emanating from the forest, she proceeded cautiously with one hand gripping the reigns, the other on her revolver, every so often unceremoniously twitching at a perceived movement in the darkness.

As the end of the forest came into sight, with a sigh of relief she reflected on the journey so far:

Dead harmony, Creaking pass, Water.

Descriptive nature, Inner thoughts.

Day to night, Dark delusions.

The City

She emerged furtively out of the forest exit into a clearing with a direct line of sight of Providence, which was now within walking distance. Amidst the pitch-black night sky the city stood as a light, uncomprehended by the surrounding darkness.

At the entryway stood a timeworn monolith with the city's name etched in block capitals which bore a subtitle that read "There are more things in Heaven and Earth...", the rest was too weathered to make out.

The weariness of the journey had overcome her, she sought out lodgings for the night. Not too far past the entryway she found Heaven's Night Bar & Boarding, a modest auberge more so used for short-term wayward travellers than long-term residents, despite what the pungent stench of lingering liquor would otherwise suggest. She filled the provided feeding trough and bucket with supplies for the horse and ventured inside.

With her admission payed she drifted upstairs to the unremarkable room arranged for her. Heaven's Night was filled with jovial shindigs from the high-spirited patrons of the bar, who were celebrating some important event or other - it was the late hour at which the particulars of such things don't interest an outsider. That night broken sleep came, every hour or so being awakened by the cheers, jeers, and jaunts by the drunken crowd below.

In the morning she set out to procure the supplies for which she came for, deciding to go to the general store to get foodstuffs, clothing, bullets, and to the apothecary for medicines. Along the way she passed the city's central clock tower, an imposing structure with a leonine apex that was one of many monuments dotted throughout the city.

She came to a stop when she was interrupted. "Spare some tin for my aching hunger miss?" a faint, puerile voice cried. She looked down from the horse to see a straggly-clad boy no more than a sprog with wild auburn hair and dark, dark eyes.

"I can't spare any money, but if you'd be willing to help me with a few errands I could afford you a meal." The boy nodded in agreement and she motioned for him to join her on the wagon. As the pair went toward the stores the woman inquired to the boy:

"Where are your parents? Family?"

"My parents... gone, don't have any other family," he replied sullenly.

"I see. And what am I to call you?"

"My name's Cairbre. And you?"

"Diana," she said with a reassuring smile.

"Ok Ms. Diana."

"So, tell me Cairbre, how do you come to be destitute?"

"Since I've nowhere to stay, I've to sleep at the orphanage. I hate it there! The food is mushy, and *they're* always telling me what to do. They say if I put my trust in the creator, he will take all the bad things away. Is that true?"

"Well, people with big opinions usually have little knowledge on reality child. I'm not one to guide you in belief, but I find it's better to trust in one's self more so than a creator," at this both grew quiet, the boy noticeably in deep thought on the subject.

At the darkening of day, discordant chiming from the clock tower rung through the city like an arrow in flight, signalling the end of the business day. The boy turned out to be of immense help in loading supplies into the wagon. The pair headed back to Heaven's Night for the promised meal.

They entered the dining area. Two soups of the day were provided, and they ate. The boy hastily slurped down the soup, ravenous with hunger. Diana offered a stay in the room for the night and Cairbre readily accepted, figuring anything was better than going back to the orphanage.

"You take the bed," said Diana upon entering the room. The boy excitedly scampered past her and leaped onto the bed, crying "Much thanks!" as he landed with a resounding thud.

He sat up and earnestly said "Ms. Diana, thanks for taking me along with you today, it was quite fun!"

"Well you were a great help today Cairbre. I'll sing your praises to the people back in the village on my return!"

"So, you'll be going. Will I ever see you again?" He inquired sadly.

"I'm not sure, but never fear, close your eyes, I'll be here in the morning."

Darkness reigned.

The Stranger

Cairbre's eyes flickered open, gently disturbed by the caressing morning sun.

"Mornin' youngster," beamed Diana's voice, "Here," she handed him half a bread roll.

"Thank you! Ya know I've been thinking," he said, munching away, rubbing sleep from his eyes, "Can I stay with you? At your village I mean, I'll do any odd jobs you can think of, please?"

"I don't know, that's a very big decision to make, have you really thought about it?"

"I'm trusting myself on this, ya know, like you said."

With smile on face she replied "Well can't argue with that. Very well, you're welcome to join me."

So, the pair set off, homeward bound. The journey would take longer due to the wagon being laden with cargo. Hours passed and before long they were back deep in the forest under a starry sky. Cairbre had fallen asleep under the moonlight, so Diana decided to set up a makeshift campsite so they could rest awhile. The site chosen lay at a crossroads; one path to the village, the other back to the city, and the final into the unknown.

She succeeded in kindling some embers when out of the shrouded dusk came a stranger. "Hullo there traveller! D'ya mind if I rest awhile at this here fire?" inquired the half-illuminated figure.

"By all means....," Diana responded hesitantly, weary of the stranger's intention.

As the man came into light his features could be better distinguished; he was a youthful, well-built man with a bow strung around his shoulder and modestly clothed.

“Thank you kindly-” he suddenly stopped, “No need to sic your dogs on me! At least the six you’ve got leashed in the steel,” he said, rather playfully.

Instinctively, Diana had gripped her holstered revolver as the stranger approached.

“Apologies can’t be too careful. What is your name?” she said, stoically.

“Aeiballon.” He replied, taking a seat across the fire, “A letter for each of my admirers! Yourself?”

“Diana.” She responded bluntly.

“Well met Diana. What are you hauling anyhow?” he asked, motioning to the wagon.

“Food for the hungry; medicine for the sick.”

“Ah, providing for your people, a noble charge indeed. And the boy?”

“A wayward youth I’m fostering, I only hope I can aid in providing him purpose and triumph in this world,” she said looking at the sleeping Cairbre.

“Often times it is not the ruggedness of our environment, but rather ill-fitting shoes that cause us to stumble. Provide him the tools and knowledge to forge his own Thermopylae, guarding him against any sons of Eurydemus. This will afford you a better effort than most,” he exclaimed Ominously.

“In addition, I should disillusion him to any exaggerations such as Herodotus’ millions...”

She reflected on this awhile, the stranger maintaining a muted silence. After a time, she rose saying "Well, we really should be getting back to reality."

"Safe journey Diana, perhaps our paths' will cross again!" Aeiballon sat by the dwindling flame, staring longingly at the departing carriage as the hushed wind seemed to chant:

Pierce through veiled darkness,

Staring into shadowed night,

Upon all that burned there.