Gaute Heivoll

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THE TALES OF ESTRAGON

*The Ratcatcher of Sorø*

Translated from the Norwegian

by Martin Aitken

(Sample, chpts. 1-2)

CHAPTER ONE

Visiting Estragon

Estragon stood with an altar candle in his hand as I approached. A calmly flickering flame. His eyes gleamed, and once again it struck me how very much he resembled a man.

 ‘Is that you, Siful?’ he said. ‘I heard your playing in the church today. I hear the organ even down here!’

As usual, I had played during the Sunday service. Andersen had given his dreary sermon. Afterwards, I had gone between the pews with the collection box, though all that came in were a few coins and a couple of notes. When it was over and everyone had left, I tidied up, snuffed the candles and put the hymn books away. I placed the money in the safe, locked the vestry door and dropped the key into my pocket.

I offered to lock up after Andersen and followed him out onto the doorstep. He has never suspected. Always so kind, but forgetful too. He’s getting old. That’s why he’s given me the key to look after.

 ‘You’ll be going home soon yourself?’ he said.

 ‘Soon,’ I said. ‘Once I’ve closed the trapdoors in the tower. And checked the mouse traps.’

Andersen smiled tiredly as he buttoned his coat, then laid his immense hand on my shoulder. I shuddered, but he failed to notice.

 ‘Whatever would we do without you! You take care of everything!’

I stood for a moment, his footsteps growing fainter as he made his way down into the town. Then, when he was gone, I returned inside, turned the great key in the lock of the church door, put out the remaining candles and let myself into the vestry again. There I took the two crumpled notes from the safe, breathing in their smell before putting them in my pocket along with the coins. I paused and listened. I do so always. I am very careful. For perhaps eight seconds I stood without moving. And then I stole through the door behind the organ pipes.

From my little room there I followed the passage into the silent darkness. Under the trombone pipe I opened a trapdoor in the floor, locked it behind me from below and slipped into the shaft that leads into the church wall itself. I scurried along, the coins jangling in my pocket as I went. Soon I reached the fieldstones at the base of the wall, where now and then I encounter slow-worms and dung beetles, the occasional sleepy toad. From there the tunnel continues among the coffins in the churchyard. It is darker beneath the earth than inside the church wall. To begin with one sees nothing, and all one can do is to press on. But yesterday all was illuminated by the light of Estragon’s candle.

‘I brought you these,’ I said, taking the notes from the pocket of my coat and holding them out in the light. Though he is almost blind, Estragon saw what they were immediately.

 ‘Oh, how kind of you, Siful!’ he exclaimed, bringing his nose to them and breathing in their smell.

 ‘How very, very kind! We shall feast again tonight!’

Inside his entrance hangs the shard of a broken mirror. It is a remarkable mirror. When whole, it hung in the study of B.S. Ingemann, the hymnwriter, at Sorø Academy. One’s reflection is slightly distorted. It is as if one is seeing oneself for the very first time. Or perhaps someone one knew a long time ago.

 His casket itself is crammed with all kinds of strange objects: the gilded revolver from the time he crossed Europe on stilts, his aviator goggles from the war, the botanical illustrations that adorned the walls in his time as a schoolmaster, a pair of ink pots and the white goose quill. However, I remain unsure as to whether one can believe all the stories he tells. Sometimes I am certain he is fibbing. And yet he is so kind and engaging. For I am the only one he has. And no one else knows who I am.

Estragon poured me a little of the communion wine of which he always keeps a reserve. I smiled as he filled the cups of fine china before we went to the table to tuck into our notes. As we dined, he asked if I had any gossip to pass on, and as I told him about the service and how forgetful Andersen had become, I heard the wind howl through the frozen churchyard above us. Afterwards we sank into our two armchairs and I felt a wave of contentment pass through me as Estragon lit a pipe. As I sat, I stared at the wooden club. It was leaned against the wall, throwing a shadow that reached almost to our feet. I felt Estragon observe me with an artful smile on his uncannily human face.

 ‘Is that Glambek’s club you’re looking at?’ he asked.

 ‘Indeed,’ I said. ‘How hideous it is.’

 ‘Horrible, quite horrible,’ Estragon replied. ‘But Glambek himself was even worse.’

 He picked a remaining shred of money from between his teeth. I listened to the wind as it whirled the snow through the darkness of the world above. He looked at me, and his right eye twinkled. It was the diamond, visible only of late. Perhaps it has always been there, but only now so noticeably. Then he spoke:

 ‘I have told you about Glambek, have I not?’

CHAPTER TWO

The money under the floor

‘I had left the abbey church at Sorø and arrived in the city of Copenhagen,’ Estragon began. ‘At the premises of Johannes Jensen, a bell founder in Kannikestræde, I crept into a church bell and was loaded onto a ship the following day. After some days at sea I clambered ashore without an idea as to where I was. The journey had fatigued me. A wind whistled around the corners. Rain dashed the cobbles. I crawled from the harbour and sought shelter in the first house to which I came. A letter G cast in black iron hung above the door. It swayed and creaked in the wind. I found a crevice in the wall and squeezed inside.

I emerged into a maze of passages and crawlways criss-crossing within the walls. Under the floor were abandoned nests and dens lined with warm and comfortable goose down and aromatic mosses, all that a frozen wretch could wish for. The house was still and peaceful as a church organ at night, and there inside the wall I curled up to sleep.

The next day, I investigated the house more closely. Many must have lived there before me, under the floors and inside the walls, but all had vanished, the nests and dens were empty, and the hush and solitude gave me a sneaking sense of disquiet.

As I explored, I happened upon a box, seemingly hidden under the kitchen floor. It was of tin and would have been impossible to gnaw my way into had it not been left unlocked. It turned out to be full of money. Notes of paper money, neatly ordered in perfect piles. The delicious smell rose up to greet me. For some time, I simply stared. Then, cautiously, I ran my paw over a five-krone note. It was smooth to the touch, without a single crease, as if it had never been used. I breathed in its aroma. Tentatively I passed my tongue over its silver threads. Its taste was quite another than the sour coins I was used to from the collection box. It tasted sweet, of sun-ripened peach, of luscious grapes, the finest communion wine.

I put the note back exactly as before, closed the lid and crept up through the wall until reaching the eves under the roof. There I sat for a while and looked out over the town in which I had arrived. It felt almost too good to be true: I had happened into a house full of nooks and nests, crevices and passages. I could sleep in a new place every night, and moreover I had found a money box crammed with sweet-smelling notes. It would make not the slightest sense to move on. Everything I could wish for was there.

The thought of the five-krone note prompted me into the wall again. This time I took a different route. All of a sudden, something gleamed in the dust. A monstrous rat trap had been placed through a hole in the skirting board and now lay before me in the dim light. A moment’s inattentiveness and unwittingly I would have stepped on it and released the mechanism, and its steely jaws would have cut me in two.

As I sat to regain my composure, a door slammed somewhere in the house. I crept around the trap and scurried through the floor until finding a knothole through which I could look down into the hall below. A tall, wizened man had come in from the rain. It was Glambek, though of course I would not know his name until later. He shook his umbrella, sending a shower of droplets into the room, and grunted unintelligibly as he hung up his damp, dark overcoat.

I remained motionless and watched him. No sooner had he stepped into the kitchen than he loosened the floorboards and took out the box from the hiding place where I had sat and savoured the taste of the five-krone note only a short time before. He took it with him further inside the room and silently I followed after him, finding another knothole above the lamp from where I looked straight down at the notes he placed in front of him on the table. I was afraid he would discover that I had licked the five-krone, but he was clearly more concerned with a new bundle he pulled from the pocket of his frock coat. He placed it on the table, then disappeared for a moment before returning with an iron he filled with glowing embers. For some time he stood carefully smoothing the notes with it until they were uncreased and fine. He sang softly to himself. Or perhaps to his money. Whatever the case, his voice was abominable and hideously out of tune. When he was finished, he scratched the sparse hair of his scalp and a little snowfall of dandruff descended onto his shoulders. Meticulously, he then picked his nose and with a blissful smile licked the sticky mucus he found there from the tip of his finger.

That evening I discovered that the rat trap I had come upon was not the only one to have been placed within the walls. The house was littered with them. Before retiring to bed, Glambek made a round to ensure that their steely jaws were primed and that nothing had nibbled at the bait. I watched him closely. In one hand he held a flickering candle, in the other a hefty wooden club, and thus he went like a ghost from cellar to loft while muttering to himself unrelentingly. Here and there he paused and stood for a moment to listen, candle held aloft, as if somehow he could hear the thud of my heart. Then he would raise the club and without warning strike the wall with such force as to make the whole house shudder, compelling me to bite into the woodwork so as not to be dislodged from my vantage point in the ceiling.

The next morning, Glambek took his overcoat and umbrella and went out through the back door. I scurried to the eves from where I could see all that happened in the yard. It was cluttered with junk. He owned a large horse-cart with wobbly wheels, and a skinny horse as wizened and humourless as himself. He climbed onto the seat, cracked the whip over the old nag and together they trundled out through the gateway and into the town.

I was alone then in the house, and crept from the wall, wandering about the rooms like a man. I searched the drawers and cupboards of the kitchen for something to eat besides money. There was little or nothing I fancied. Indeed, there was hardly anything at all apart from bags of some grey, soily substance from which I had seen Glambek make soup. Eventually, I had to content myself with an old and wrinkled potato.

Having eaten, I went upstairs to his draughty bedroom. I opened the drawers of his bedside table and looked in his wardrobe, where only two black suits hung, both reeking of mothballs. Then I descended to the cellar. A sickly, rotten smell greeted me as I opened the door. Warily, I went down the narrow stair. A rat trap, monstrous as the first, had been placed on the bottom step, a further two against the walls. I found myself in a large room, damp and whitewashed, a heavy, bolted door at the far end. Twenty, perhaps thirty caskets stood upright at the other. Some plain and unpainted. Others decorated, with gilded angels on the lid. One of the caskets had been closed and placed over by the door. I crept towards it. Gingerly, I lifted the lid and peered inside.

 Only then did I realise what Glambek was.

Translated by Martin Aitken

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