

An Honest Man

by Ian Colford

Twas in a forest, walking along a dirt road from one town to another, when it began to get dark. Somehow I had lost my watch, could not keep track of time. My shoes weren't the right kind for walking and my feet were beginning to get sore. I decided to find a place to rest before it became too dark to see, and I soon came across a small sheltered enclosure in which I could lie down with some comfort. I rubbed my blistered feet. It remained clear as it darkened, but it was not warm. I had to cover myself somehow or else freeze and all I had was a light jacket. "What a fool!" I thought. "What a damned fool." I sat and shivered, listening to the unintelligible sounds of night. Things rustled in the bushes nearby and I imagined eyes watching me through hot, cloudy breath. I was terrified. The glowing moon was just rising above the tops of the trees, and as I watched some clouds drift before it the sound of footsteps struck my ears. I couldn't move. I could barely breathe. My feet were numb.

Then I heard voices whispering, conspiratory. Someone was walking along the road in front of where I was lying. I could hear voices cursing, and when one of them spat the juice landed on my toe, warming it slightly. They passed on, but for some reason I sensed that they would come back; there was something familiar about the voice that swore. Even before they returned I knew what it was. I had asked two men in the tavern the easiest way to the next town. They had exchanged glances and the pudgy one with the gruff voice I had just heard told me to take the road that led me here. They told me how far I would have to go and made me think it was a busy route. One of them said that if I was unsure of the way I could ask any of the other travellers I would encounter. None of this was true, I now realized, and they were looking for me, certain that I was alone, cold, frightened; a desperate and easy prey. I had nothing of worth. They could only eat me up or kill me. Why? I couldn't imagine what they were thinking.

They came back.

I stopped shivering and listened.

"Could he have gotten all this far?" asked one.

"No, no, dammit, he must be in the woods somewhere," the gruff voice answered, and added a curse and spat.

I was warm with hate and revulsion. They began scouring the bushes along the road, looking for my body. I had to remain calm, though my nerves were jumping like sparks, and as they rustled the bushes in their search I put on and laced up my shoes. But I had to stop moving when a strange silence descended for a few seconds, and then a stone landed in the grass beside me. Almost immediately I turned my head and another one struck me just above the eye. I managed not to make a sound, but I almost passed out and for a

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few moments a soft, tranquil haze blanketed my mind. I thought once I heard excited words, "He's here. In there!" and tried to move, but nothing happened and soon there was silence.

Then I heard someone struggling in the bushes close by.

"What are you doing that for?" I heard. And, "We'll never find him now."

There was more conversation, then steps.

After sitting still for a few minutes I got abruptly to my feet. Through the dewy mist that had collected I saw the thin one standing in the road. He dropped a bunch of stones that were in his hand and lit a cigarette. I could see his face: tiny malevolent eyes, a broad stupid mouth. The other one seemed to be gone.

When he turned his back to me I took a step toward the road. He didn't hear me. Stars, I saw, wove a wreath around his head. I found a rock. It had a sharp point on one end and I held it like a knife. He picked up some more stones and tossed them idly into the bushes on the other side of the road. The noises he made covered my steps. I stood behind him. Then he stopped moving, and when he half turned, just enough to see me standing there, just enough to show me the terror on his face, I struck him with the rock on the side of the head.

He uttered a few sounds, "Uh...uh....," then slumped down on the road, dead.

Roughly I turned him over. My body tingled as I considered for an instant the moon hovering over his eyes.

I started walking down the road in the direction I had been going until I heard footsteps approaching from the opposite direction.

He yelled, "He never made it into town! He could be anywhere!" He spat.

I stood quietly in the shadows by the side of the road until he had almost reached me. Then I ran towards him. He saw me at the last second and reached into his pocket. He was beginning to draw something out when I got him with the rock in the triangle of the raw skin above his eyes.

He fell on his back with a grunt and I could see his smashed face grimace and sparkle in the moonlight. Then his hand fell out of his pocket and I reached down to pry it open to see what he was holding. I noticed then that my own hand was covered with thick blood. With my clean hand I opened his. In the palm was a watch. I thought I recognized it. It closely resembled my own watch. Yes, ... I had checked the time at the tavern; perhaps I had left it there and this man and his friend had found it.

The man was dead now.

I looked up the road and there, from behind the trees, out of the quietly retreating mist emerged the windows of houses. The soft midnight tolling of a distant church bell reached me through the cold air. I dropped the watch on the ground and strode into the town.

No doubt I was an honest man.

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