

Freedom and Death

1.

The moon rose from behind the walls. Sharp black shadows cut the square stone yard in two. Between the round cobbles sprouted spring grass. The sickly green blades reached out above the cobbles still hot from day—as if extending welcoming healing fingers to their friends.

Rannus lay high up under the ceiling by the narrow window looking out. The milky light of the full moon shone in his face. He was a thin man with a straggly red beard, wearing a grey prison uniform. He inhaled the cool air from the large stones deeply, and watched the sky grow darker and the moon rise higher, turning pink.

He had been lying here the whole evening, hidden by birch logs, with his face turned to the yard, which he could see through the window as narrow as the slit of an arrow. He had seen himself being searched for, he had listened to the curses of the principal warder and watched the backs of the warders' heads, bowed in guilt.

They had strode around and quarreled until it had grown dark. They had opened the door of the firewood store and looked for him there. He had heard them rummaging among the logs and talking about him. His heart had been pounding with fear. He had stuffed his fist into his mouth, in order not to cry out. He was afraid his heartbeat would shift the whole pile of logs.

But they had not discovered him! They slammed the door shut and locked it again. He could see them standing helplessly in the yard in the evening light: to escape from the yard, surrounded on all four sides by stone walls like a well, and exit from which was only possible through a guarded passageway, would be something of a miracle!

He had risked everything, even his very life. Today or never! By tomorrow he would no longer have been lying here, his limbs free. Just before evening, he had seen the blacksmith crossing the yard with his tools. Tomorrow he would have been in irons with his fetters riveted. And the day after, he would be on his way to Siberia.

Because the local authorities had handed him over. Oh, how his doddering old mother had poked her fingers through the bars and whispered, how she had pleaded with the local council, had run alongside the judge's horse—her ancient hair flying and her hands stretched out! But they had brushed her aside.

Rannus lay there, his fist pressed to his teeth. He wanted to get out and avenge himself on them, to a man! He wanted to shoot the whole lot of them, burn down their houses, and gallop off to Pskov with their best horses!

He had never complained about his sentence. He had committed a crime and was being punished for it—that much he understood. But now an injustice had been committed. Was there any debt left for him

to repay that justified this abuse? He had received more than his full measure! Quite enough, and more besides!

He would rather die than live forever without hope and remain in this pit they had pushed him into. He wanted to walk in the footsteps of that man whose deeds were spoken in a whisper from one generation of prisoners to the next, like memories from great epochs.

What was he compared with him! He had built a lighthouse on a high cliff. On stormy autumn nights it had cast its blood red light over the foamy waves, luring ships into its web like a spider. With a bloody sword in hand, his coal beard black fluttering in the wind, he had stood on the shore as the sea raged.

He had sat in the cell, and now in the woodshed, with an iron ring around his throat and his legs in irons. He had remained there for a long time, then he had escaped. He had broken his fetters like Samson and battered through the walls with his iron fists. Under the thin layer of limestone he had found an ancient secret tunnel. He had broken through to it and fled.

As they sat in their cell in the light of the yellow lamp, the prisoners fancied that they heard his chains jangling down in the cellar as they lay on their bunks. The autumn winds blew the ends of his long beard through the bars, and he seemed to be urging them on to great deeds there from beyond the cell, immortal for centuries, like the Wandering Jew.

And like this man, Rannus wanted to seek his fortune! The memory frightened and consoled him. He had wanted to walk in his footsteps, touch the same parts of the walls as the pirate had once done. This would have brought him—a wretched and crippled man—joy.

He watched the empty yard with feverish eyes. His thoughts raced at a crazy pace, his dreams were aflame. The moon crept higher and higher—it was as if someone were walking across the coal black night sky with a misty lantern.

As if in his sleep, Rannus counted the strokes of the clock. Then he gave a start: midnight already, and he was still here, at the start of his journey, anything but free! Was it not all the same whether you were lying on your bunk in your cell or hidden here under a pile of firewood, only to fall into their hands again the next morning?

He sat up, cautiously rolling the small logs off his body. The stack nearly reached up to the ceiling, so he couldn't stand up. He looked around him: the cellar was pitch dark. He could hardly see the faint glimmer of the birch bark of the tree outside the window. Everything was silent as the grave.

He began crawling on all fours, stopping every minute to listen. All he could hear was the way the dust fell down from the logs. Then all at once, his hands snatched at thin air. He turned around and sat on the edge of the pile, his legs dangling over the sides.

He listened again for a moment, but all was silent. Then he began to lower himself from the stack, feeling his way down with his feet. His toes touched the lower logs. He began descending, as if by a flight of stairs. The stack creaked and rocked under him.

Suddenly, he stumbled and fearfully grabbed the top of the stack. At that same moment, a log slipped out from under his feet and fell with a clatter onto the stone floor. Rannus crouched down, as if his legs had been hit, and put his hand, which had been bloodied by gripping the stack, into his mouth.

There he sat for a while, sucking his thumb, his eyes straining in the darkness. He was shaking all over with fear. He did not dare move an inch: how far might the clatter perhaps be heard! The warders would hear it through the open airing window of the corridor, and even in the guardroom they could be awakened by the noise.

He waited for a long time, motionless. But everything was still. Then he rose to his feet and began to feel his way over the piles of split logs, the ladders and planks. He moved like a poltergeist, secretly towards the door whose crosspieces he had once hacked through when he had been left alone for a while chopping wood.

He squeezed between the woodpile and the wall. His jacket scraped slightly against the plaster and the logs. He felt around the door, found the pile of sawdust, and due into it. Then his hand eased the door open, so it stood ajar. Using all his force, he pressed his bony body through the crack.

He stopped just outside the door, struck by the endless darkness and icy cold. He found the stub of a candle in his shirt pocket and lit it: he was standing at the beginning of a narrow passage, his head touching the ceiling. Directly in front of him was a brick staircase whose crumbling steps led down into the darkness like an underground river in grey waves.

2.

Holding his candle close to him, Rannus walked down the steps. His hand was trembling and his knees shaking from fear, so he found it hard to walk. The air between the moldy walls grew even chillier. After several dozen meters, the staircase came abruptly to an end and a downward sloping passage began.

Rannus walked briskly downhill, like someone being pushed from behind. He took larger strides with his injured leg than with the healthy one. Blood began to drip again from his thumb and he stuck it in his mouth. In this way he loped forward, one hand to his mouth, the other holding the candle.

After some time, the passage changed. The downward slope grew less pronounced, the muddy floor almost leveled out. The walls, plastered at first, now became more uneven. The passage now was through limestone, and no attempt had been made to smooth the walls. Here and there, sharp stones jutted out, and he had to take care not to trip up on the uneven floor.

He walked for a long time and his pace slowed down. There were bends in the passage here and there and he had to sometimes make sharp turns. He stopped now and again, looking over his shoulder, but saw nothing: two or three weak rays from the candle were reflected by the walls, slightly illuminating the bumps on the walls.

Then the passage began to open out. A few steps later, Rannus was in a space the size of a small room, and before him lay the mouths of two passages. He came to a halt in dismay: which passage should he take? Which was shorter? And where did they emerge?

He stopped a moment to think. His indecision rose, and with it his agitation. Nevertheless, he could not spend much time deciding. He chose the right-hand passage, which seemed wider, and began proceeding along it. But his previous joy at being free was now ruined.

He only managed to walk for several dozen steps, when he suddenly stumbled over a pile of stones that had fallen from the ceiling. He scrambled over it and continued on his way. But the passage grew ever more irregular. All at once it ended in a confusion of higgledy-piggledy slabs of limestone, whose jagged edges were turned towards Rannus like the teeth of a saw.

He came to a halt for a moment at this rubble, and turned sadly on his heels. It was a dead end! He should have taken the other passage! He suddenly felt his exhaustion, his shirt grew wet despite the chill of the cellar and, on reaching the room again, he sank down wearily upon the pile of stones.

He wiped the dust from his pockmarked face. He wasn't used to exerting himself and grew tired so quickly! He looked around: curved black walls, a vault from which stones stuck out like claws, and the dusty floor, over which the candle cast a weak light.

Then his eyes fell on the candle. How rapidly it had burned! There was hardly half left. And yet he had a long way to go. But he could not set off now, he wanted to rest a while before setting off again. He raised the candle to his lips and blew it out.

He was instantly enveloped by pitch blackness. He stayed where he was without stirring, without even daring to lower the hand holding the candle. In the darkness, he now felt something else he had not noticed before, namely the silence. It was a dizzying lack of sound, which was tangible, painful to his skin.

He closed his eyes and tried to picture where he was. He felt as if he had left time and space and entered an underground realm of darkness and silence. He had abruptly left everything he was familiar with, daily life and human concerns, and felt as if he had been journeying for several days in a row.

His blood throbbed in his ears and fearful thoughts entered his brain. He suddenly felt himself to be shut in by the stone walls—around, above and below. He felt the ghastly stoniness, the sense of being underground, and that there was no way out. It sank over his being, he sensed it more with his body than his mind, began to bow under its burden.

Then a searing thought crossed his brain: what if neither passage led anywhere, neither the old nor the new? What if he had been destined to lose his way here? Being forced to wander around here for days on end, then collapse out of exhaustion onto the stone floor, his tongue parched in his mouth.

For there was another tale told about the pirate: that he did not escape. That he wandered through the cellar and remains there to this day. That he wanders down secret passages, muttering to himself, trying to find a way out. His black beard has grown so long that it trails along the ground, his eyes blazing out from out of his stiffened beard like those of a cat.

Perhaps he was waiting for Rannus round the next bend, would appear to him suddenly, hideous and unearthly. Perhaps he would all of a sudden place his iron hand on his shoulder, press his stiffened beard against his face, and whisper inconceivable words in a hoarse voice with his inconceivable tongue.

An unspeakable fear filled Rannus' heart. He snatched at the candle, but his hands were trembling so that he was unable to light it for several moments. He felt as if every instant of his life and death were predetermined— a more terrible death than human reason could imagine—the eternal night of a stone cellar.

He came to his senses when the weak candle flame lit up the grey room once more. He would almost have retraced his steps, given himself up to his captors. But this seemed as horrible as his escape.

Now he chose to go down the left-hand passage. It was much lower and even shorter than the other. He could hardly walk upright. The passage took countless turns with many cavities and niches. Rannus swerved between the walls, crept along on his knees over piles of stones, supported himself on ledges of limestone, clutching his flickering candle.

He tried in vain to judge where he was. Maybe under the castle; but perhaps he was already above the city itself. If only they knew, those who were now sleeping soundly in their warm beds! He was like a coal miner deep underground, wandering beneath their flowering dreamscapes through his cavern.

The passage grew ever narrower. Rannus now had to crawl on his knees. The air had grown stuffy, as if this were only some smoke duct and not an ancient secret passage. Nauseating, dizzying, unnamable odors entered his nostrils. His shoulders were covered with a thick layer of dust and his worn-down shoes slipped on the wet limestone slabs.

And if they knew! They wouldn't feel any mercy towards him! Not one of them! They would send hunting dogs to sniff him out. Set bloodhounds on him. They would rip him apart till he was bloody, tear at his flesh in their rage, throw him with limbs tied into a stone cell, and return to their warm beds.

Their most terrifying dreams, wherein they would see endless grey labyrinths and stone spiral staircases without end in horrible towers, were nothing compared with reality. The furthest huts in the wilderness were nearer than his lonely cave, which was only a few fathoms below their pleasant dwellings.

Rannus' bad leg began to ache. This old aching of the bone woke him amidst the damp cold. Shooting pains went through his limbs and he was now crawling, having been obliged to pull his leg towards him in this cramped space. With his face screwed up in pain and a cold sweat breaking out on his forehead, he crept onwards.

And it began to become clear to him: this was how the pirate had escaped. There must be another passage, one that he had found blocked up. Then the whole of the tale about the pirate began to seem quite improbable. Had he even managed to escape? In fact, had he ever really existed? Perhaps this was all a myth, and he himself was the first poor fool to try to escape by this route!

Now he felt a sharp pain in the finger that was holding the candle; the flame had reached his fingernail. Afraid, he stood the candle on the palm of his hand; it would only burn for a few more moments. The fiery wax was running into his palm, but he felt no pain. Then the wick drooped and went out in the pool of molten wax.

Pitch blackness surrounded Rannus. He tried to crawl on, but everything now seemed so narrow that he couldn't even move his elbows. He couldn't manage to move forwards or go back. His limbs began to shake. He fell over onto the floor, his body bathed in warm sweat.

Oh, if only he could return to his cell! But he was now separated from it, in a completely dark series of passages, foul-smelling and without a breath of fresh air. He could ramble about here for days on end without reaching anywhere. He was like a mummy in a stone coffin; no he was like someone buried alive who wakes and bangs his head against the coffin lid until he loses consciousness, before true death arrives!

He lay where he was for a long while. Then he felt a breath of air, coming from the smoke vent. He thought that this might be an indication of the end of the passage. He used his last strength to crawl a few feet further. The passage widened and suddenly he saw, just beyond a small turn and through thick bars, a patch of the city dawn.

For a long time Rannus did not move. All he did was look at the light at the end of the passage without turning away his eyes. It was the sky, a waft of mist, which seemed pink in the light of the electric street lamps, a point of boundless space after the phantoms of the blackness underground!

He approached the bars and tried them with his hand. They were the thickness of a bony wrist, riveted in place. He looked out. The passage led upwards for several feet before opening onto a wall with gaps. He could scarcely make out the sentry box on the earthen rampart and the dozing guard next to it.

3.

Daybreak. In the green sky a faint mist could be seen wafting in large patches; here and there, pinks and reds were beginning to spread across the clouds. The dark green trunks of trees stood in the chilly sunrise, as if coated with the greenish mists of dawn.

The sky grew more and more flushed. All at once the sun's rays fell on the clouds, of which light wispy ones hovered like towers above the still, dark blue curve of the sea. Mist rose from them in long swathes like watery hair.

Then black columns of smoke rose from the factory chimneys into the clean air, and hooters blew, long and low, like the first heavy stroke of the bow against the double-bass of the day, tossing watery grey spirals of steam into the air.

The day was awakening once more, a new day with people, horses and wagons on all the roads, with strings of carts, trains and ships. A new day over the factories, railway stations and ports, over the blazing chimneys, the thundering rails and the blood-red cranes in the soot-filled harbors.

How Rannus had longed for this day! How long he had imagined his freedom! He had imagined himself emerging in a meadow outside the city, surrounded by dew and a frolicking herd of horses. Or on the beach, where the gentle waves rolled onto the sand between the fishing boats. Or even in the dark of the forest, with cold stars winking through the treetops.

Instead of all this, he was still on the prison grounds. In several hours he had done no more than wander around the prison cellar. And there were bars across the windows and a guard on the rampart—he was almost as much a prisoner as before. In prison, where he would have to stay and die—within sight of boundless freedom!

He sat in the mouth of the passage, took hold of one bar, and began to file another, taking advantage of the growing noise from the street. He had a small three-faceted file used to sharpen saws. But the bars

were thick and he would have to file through at least four of them. It was not going to be that easy to escape from here, and the work would take the whole day!

He filed away and at the same time watched everything happening outside. He watched the guard pacing the rampart. He knew this guard, he was number 13. He could imagine his mood from his posture. He followed him walking there and empathized with his boredom as he put his hand across his mouth and yawned.

As if the filing tired him, or he could not for some reason carry on, he sat cross-legged like a Turk at the mouth of the passage and watched life unfold before him. It was a long time since he had observed it: those people, vehicles and trees out there on the boulevard!

For him, someone used to tedium and stillness, the bustle out on the street seemed to go on for ever and was wearying to him. Weeks and months between four walls, with the same routine and the same people, had passed unnoticed. How long the hours seemed now!

He noticed the smallest things, becoming like a sleuth. He guessed at the nature of passers-by and their professions. He carried on his investigations even when they were out of sight. He attributed jobs, friends, wives and children to them. And he sat at the table that had been laid, eating lunch with them.

Then he turned his eyes to the street again. He saw large numbers of horses moving along, the color of chestnut, mouse grey and fawn. Wagoners, brewery dray horse drivers in leather aprons on carts stacked with beer barrels, and a whole string of carts, where blood red girders made an ear-splitting din.

Then he saw a peasant stop. He was wearing a grey jerkin, had burning eyes and a beard, and knee-length boots. He stopped his framed wagon in front of a shop, on whose door a shiny scythe was affixed. He knocked the dust off his clothes and entered the shop, staying a good while.

The horse scraped restlessly at the side of the road, froth coming from its mouth. What a stupid man, thought Rannus, going in there and leaving his horse unattended. Were there only so few thieves in town! But what a good horse, he then thought. The man himself was a churl, driving a wagon of manure, but the horse itself was worth a hundred rubles. Thank God Rannus understood the minds of horses!

The horse waited quietly, and the man did not emerge. Strange, thought Rannus, you can see but cannot touch. How many people are passing by, but no one touches it. It would be so easy: approach, take the reins, jump on board, and drive away. Pick the right moment or leave be—the art was in the timing.

His hands began to tremble. With one eye he looked at the guard, with the other at the countryman's horse. He was back once more stealing horses, trading them in exchange for those passing by on the street. And his heart pounded, as if he were really performing such perilous acts.

Then the countryman came out, got up on the wagon and drove away. Drove away! It had been such a good opportunity! But no one had taken advantage of it, neither he nor anyone else. Rannus grew sad and his excitement was snuffed out in an instant.

No, this was not really what he was thinking about. Each time he had left prison with the advice rather to die than to steal: but every time he had stolen again, as it was easier than dying. Now he was determined to pay back all his enemies; but when he thought about it, that too was pointless.

This was the reason, he thought to himself as if waking up, that he was neither a prisoner nor free. And he started to file away again. But his thoughts wandered hither and thither, confused and restless. His sight was broken up, as moonlight is broken up on the waves, and instead of one world, he saw several.

He saw the events on the street as if in a dream. A company of Cossacks rode slowly by, the irons of their horses jingled, the forest of grey spears swayed. Then he saw a beggar on crutches making his way over the rampart. And on the roof of the house opposite he saw a grimy man with a bundle of sooty rope, stooping again and again against the clear sky like a ghostly demon.

Then he heard a song, long-drawn-out and monotonous. The masons were singing as they placed their bricks on the top of walls. He saw how bricks were thrown from hand to hand from a yellow pile. The brick would rise as if borne on the crest of a wave, higher and higher, until it reached the hands of the master mason, who put it on the wall, adding it to the thousands of others.

It was like an ants' nest, like a hive of bees making honeycomb after honeycomb. The brick flew from hand to hand, thousands of bricks, until high walls had risen, the high ridges of roofs, by comparison to which people were tiny and ephemeral. Everything was happening in one mad rush, like the urge to travel to warmer climes, to which flocks of birds would wing their way in the autumn.

Only he was still here, behind bars, inside a rampart with a sword-wielding man on top—only he and the likes of him did not feel this urge. They were alien to the builders, to the construction workers who stacked brick upon brick, who hammered chains and built walls, in order to protect people from the likes of him.

Oh, those ants down there were merciless! They destroyed everyone that refused to build with them. Woe betides anyone that revolted against them! They would squeeze him out, just like pus was squeezed out of a good limb by exercise. They would put him in a cell, put up bars and nourish him with the points of their spears.

Rannus grew even more depressed. What had he fled from? From punishment, his sentence and Siberia? But were not his sentence and Siberia his only hope, and that of the likes of him? Because people have to be with people. If you are abandoned, you are even happy to see a prison guard.

Abandoned—thought Rannus, watching the evening sun over the rooftops. The air was gentle and blue. The rays of the sun fell like golden yarn across the sea. In the distance, church bells rang, announcing the approach of Sunday. Abandoned—a great longing welled up in Rannus.

How beautiful the world was, after all. Was this the same world he had lived in for so long? The breath of spring was everywhere. The trees were fragrant and the earth smelled different than before. Spring had opened its bounteous hands, and its gifts had become visible, even to Rannus there behind bars.

Rannus no longer wanted revenge! All he wanted was to be free, to savor all the joy that life offered. He wanted to be like those weary people, who were walking by, wearing coats and carrying their bundles. He wanted to be like these ants and bees.

Oh, to escape, to travel far away, with his ancient mother! To go far from himself and his past and start a new life. To mix with strangers. To be one of them who put brick upon brick on the walls or cast seed in the spring over the porous soil.

He had never thought any of this before. He was hungry, he was sick, and fever blew his thoughts about as if they were alien to him. They unraveled like spools of yarn above his head. For the first time, life was revealing itself in all its mysterious hues, with bells ringing and evening approaching.

He sat for a long time without moving. Endless numbers of lights appeared before him from the street lamps down below and the lamps of houses, until all the lights were reflected in the waters of the bay to the mistily twinkling stars of the heavens on the limitless horizon. It was like a cemetery of stars at Rannus' feet.

4.

Once again the horizon in the east began to redden, and the portal of the clouds opened up to the gem of the sun. A day was again awakening, a new day over the glassy windmill, whose rainbow penetrated the shower of sparks of the sun. A new day, a day of merry-go-rounds, of barrel-organs!

The church bells were ringing. Old ladies in black walked slowly over the ramparts, holding black books in their hands. Old maids from the kindergarten walked along with their troop of children: they swayed from side to side like an innocent gaggle of geese along the street, the children dressed in the white costumes of the poor. Clergymen rode in black gowns and velvet caps.

But Rannus was sitting where he had been all along. He had hoped to do a lot of filing today and finally make his escape. But now, on Sunday, filing would be perilous. He was tired and hunger gnawed at his insides, his mouth drooled and he had very little strength.

At midday music began to play on the ramparts by the blue pond. Men with round hats and gold braid stood on the round stage. Brass trumpets and brass instruments glittered in the sunshine. Drums and cymbals gave off a metallic sound.

At midday, people began to gather around the pond. Young men with high collars, canes and white summer boaters arrived. Young ladies in narrow velvet dresses and red parasols arrived as well. Town dignitaries in long black tailcoats came with their wives and children.

Along the boulevard under the trees was a ceaseless train of vehicles: red cars, well-groomed horses with carriages and caliches. In these sat officers in bright uniforms and gentlemen in top hats in the company of young ladies, buried in flowers, veils and colorful parasols.

This bustle on the ramparts buzzed, shouted, laughed and joked among the sweet waves of music and the spring-like wind. It was like a triumphal procession of spring and youth that reaped a harvest of flowers and smiles, proud and carefree, protected against worry and care.

Rannus watched all this, his eyes wide open, clutching the bars. This too was life—ah, he had forgotten it—this too was life! This multicolored carnival, this whirling roundabout—this too was the life of people. Yet he was lying here, behind bars, behind the guard by the moat with his sword, helpless, trapped!

Why did the others have to move about so well-fed, free, honored—with him lying here, his tongue parched and his innards wracked with hunger? Why did they have their own houses, horses and women—with him lying here, eternally homeless, loveless, joyless?

He turned his head aside in bitterness. It was impossible to think with an empty stomach. Proper thoughts only came with a full stomach. Everyone who had proper thoughts had their stomachs full. He too longed for such thoughts and a full stomach!

But he could not escape from his thoughts. Several thoughts sprang to mind as vividly as for someone near-ing his end. Much the way that, before death, a consumptive nose grows sharper and the patient begins to think more clearly—his nose seemingly smelling goodness, righteousness and bliss. Yet these all had a very putrid smell.

Who was he? Had he shed human blood or entered the profession of a thief with a light heart? He had been a petty, timid thief. Had he not endured more hardship after stretching out his hand to take other people's property than those with a daily wage, slaving away in the fields? What was their work compared with the hardships he had endured?

Blessed are those who are higher up in society. Blessed are the rich, the proud and the respectable. Blessed are those who do nothing, yet eat; who live from the work of others and yet are always cared for. Blessed are those who live off violence, the word of God, and stupidity!

Blessed too are those who are lowest in society. Blessed are hunchbacks and orphans. What is wrong with a beggar? He holds out his hand and no one knocks it away. Blessed is he whose eyes are poked out, his legs chopped off, whose bones are broken—he has the right to hold out his hand!

But bloody abuse is the lot of those who cannot, are unable to, defend themselves—thieves, the condemned, fallen women—those who have walked out of paradise and can never find their way back. Bloody injustice is the lot of the wicked, the fallen, the depraved!

Rannus was listening in bitter pain: gentle music floated in the blue air as if on wings. Dancing oblivion and smiling grief blew him out above the festive crowds. Rannus' ear was struck by the despairing black and searing whine of the musical instruments: life is ghastly, human life is mad!

Oh, mother, mother, you who stooped wearily over the potato furrows of the manor, your body with child, your mind dulled by shame and pain, why did you not drown yourself in the retting pit cut out of the peat, under the swathes of linen, under the burden of stones! Why did you give birth to me on the tiers of a stranger's sauna, helpless and joyless!

Shame, sin and crime—there was no forgiveness ever for shame, sin and crime! For there is a special place reserved for the non-believer and the murderer, fallen women and their offspring, the sorcerer and the thief—a hell with its fire and brimstone. The sullyng of the body, mockers and wanton people—oh, the sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons unto the third and fourth generation!

Rannus remembered his first communion and his first and last confession. That was in the prison—so long, long, ago! The Body of God sprang to mind, and the thought burned his mouth. The memory awakened his hunger, his mouth began to water. He would have eaten God only to still that hunger in his insides.

Once someone is fallen, there is no resurrection. There is no solace for him. Heaven says nothing to him. Even if he escaped there, his sin and shame from the past would stifle all his joy. He would not be able to look anyone in the eye. Everyone would wag his or her finger: Look, there goes the horse thief! What's a horse thief doing in heaven!

And Rannus wanted to flee to hell! There no one would see him, no one would notice him behind the backs of others and he would remain a shadow in a doorway. There were much greater thieves and scoundrels there, he would be among the most insignificant beings there. No one there would know his name and the Devil would step over him as he would over the tiniest maggot, without growing angry.

To whom else could he pray, if not to the Devil! He had no hope but in Evil. His belief in Good had died long ago. Have mercy on me, O Prince of Darkness! Help me, protect me from righteousness, goodness and bliss! Help your child! Protect your child!

And he lay there, his face an ashen grey, turned to the wall. He didn't move for a very long time. His mind was empty. Nothing but a brutish fear filled him. His hunger grew. He ground his teeth like an animal that chews its cud in its sleep.—Drums and trumpets resounded under the bright blue heavens!

5.

Evening fell over the city. Blue shadows slunk across the walls and houses. The sea of blackness spread. The electricity was switched on. A cloud of mist flushed like a painted lady, the trees on the boulevard looked like the silhouettes of black paper flowers.

At the edge of the black pond by a turn in the wall, the tents of the fairground could be seen. Black people were walking among them. Small lamps were lit in the tents. The lamps of the merry-go-round were lit too. They started to rotate like a fiery stove, a nest of fire, a wheel of fire—the fiery merry-go-round began to move with a roar.

Countless crowds of people were bustling within the city walls: urchins, whores and thieves, soldiers, beggars and sailors. Everything seethed and cried and boiled, and people thronged around the booths and the merry-go-round, whooping for joy, howling and jabbering, raising fumes and heat.

The crowd consisted of women with many-colored and bright red shawls round their necks. After them came the men with bagpipes, their hats on the backs of their heads, swaggering like sailors. Pickpockets, informers and scoundrels were yelling and running up and down through the crowd. Above the noise of this whole drunken mob, a barrel-organ could be heard and a clown staggered about on the steps to the show-booth.

The merry-go-round turned. Long serpentine could be seen flying through the air. Lanterns and mirrors turned. Varnished horses, cows and pigs turned, throwing hideous shadows over the thronging masses. Everything whirled, flew, everything was rushing along!

Painted ladies with large bosoms sat on the backs of pink, flesh-colored pigs. Behind them, excited men on red bulls and rearing horses ran, their arms outstretched, in the shrieking kermes of lights and mirrors.

Rannus looked on, his eyes wide, his nostrils enlarged. All this was life—he had forgotten it—this too was life! Red blotches appeared on his cheeks. His hungry eyes sought out the women on the merry-go-round as they flew along on the backs of pigs. All was a crazy whirl: fasting and feeding, hunger and satiety.

The merry-go-round whirled ever more crazily. The mirrors flashed by, showing glimpses of flushed faces in the crowd. Ever onwards! Ever crazier! And suddenly the whole whirling merry-go-round seemed to whirl up into the air, the horses after the pigs, and the whole ghastly thing seeming to turn upside down.

Rannus jumped up. He wanted to get out, enter this throng, or return to his cell! He was no longer afraid of anything. He stuck his head out through the bars and shouted. No one heard him! He gripped the bars with his bony hands and floundered like an animal in a cage. No one took any notice of him!

Boundless pain stabbed him like a piercing flame. The barrel-organ sprayed out fire, the merry-go-round sowed flames, large as sheets. The flames were over his head! His soul was being buried, buried!—He fell down, like a dead man.

He remembered:

They were running along, hunched forward, he and a grey-haired old man, across a heath strewn with junipers. Both of them had sheep thrown over their shoulders, hanging there alive with their feet tied together, their heads banging against the men's legs. In the distance the barking of the dogs and the hoarse voices of human beings could be heard.—It was a dark autumn night.

The dogs approached. Their barking could be heard coming from both sides, the people were goading them on from behind, wanting to surround them. They ran downhill into a bog. The dogs followed them, baying forlornly, and they heard something in the darkness that almost sounded like the thudding of human feet.—It began to rain.

They wandered around on the boggy ground between the rotting, puny pine trees. They jumped onto hummocks and slogged through the soggy ground, silently lugging their whimpering sheep. They heard their pursuers skirting the pitch black bog, crying out to one another as a signal.—The cold rain came down in torrents.

They stopped in the middle of the bog, shaking with fright and cold. He could hear how the old man was praying. His own young shoulders were aching. He lay down on the trembling sheep and cried along

with it like a child.—Through the monotonous patter of the rain, they could hear voices coming from the edge like those of goblins.

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He remembered:

A scorching summer's day with the sun blazing over the tents, booths and the merry-go-round, with the shafts of the carts sticking up into the air and people swarming all around. Horses were neighing, the cattle were mooing, and the sun looked like coagulated blood through a thick cloud of dust.—Then they managed to grab him.

"Thief, thief!" a shout went through the whole crowd. "We've caught a pickpocket!" And ten hands groped after him. Iron fingers held his chest and seized him by the throat, hundreds of red faces were all around, thousands of bloodshot eyes surrounded him, as far as the eye could see.—The sun blazed through the red dust.

He was pushed along, no one knew where to. He was dragged, shoved, thrown from one to the other, with dozens of hands grabbing hold of him. He was like an axle around which everyone rotated. The road led down to the circus green, further off was the stone-built inn, but they kept on moving—or, both sides of the mob ran circus clowns, their tongues hanging out of their mouths.

Then the wave of people stumbled over a heap of stones and one of them had an idea: "Smash his fingers between two rocks, so that he'll never steal again!" They pushed him down onto his knees, spread his fingers out on a large rock. The rock could be heard falling and then the crack of bones. He fell unconscious to the ground from the terrible pain.—The neighing of horses and the clear sound of a flute could be heard from afar!

*

And he remembered:

They were rolling along in a blizzard of large snow-flakes.—The heavens were grey.—He rose to his feet and lashed the horse with the ends of the reins. The carts jogged over the frozen acres. The horse's strength was ebbing away. It reared up onto its hind legs and looked back at Rannus with human eyes.—Night was falling.

They managed to corner him in a wide open space. They tied his two arms to the shafts instead of the horse and rushed over the frozen field. The wheels jumped on the bumpy earth. Many hands behind him held whips made from bull pizzles, like the hands of soldiers in a war wagon holding spears.—The snow kept falling in big, wet flakes. Night was falling.

They led him uphill. He was almost crawling on his chest, his toes pressing against the frozen hummocks. They wanted to dislocate his arms, blood seeped from under his fingernails. He could go on no longer. He fell down among the snowflakes.—Night had fallen.

"Brothers, I'm thirsty," said the lips of the dying man. "Oh, thirsty, eh?" they said, and one of them pissed onto his mitten and rubbed it over his lips.—Solitary flakes of wet snow fell in leisurely fashion from the heavens, the sky was a leaden grey. Night had fallen,— night...!

Late at night Rannus awoke. A drunk was waving his arms about by the city wall, treading the ground with his feet, talking to himself.—Infinite pain filled Rannus' breast: all is vanity! Everything is simply suffering! Even freedom is slavery!—The drunk unraveled in the moonlight like a coil of yarn—he unraveled the cobweb of the moon.

6.

An ear-splitting din filled the warm night. Cranes were winching up blood-colored girders at the building site. Granite-shattering hammers were falling with a heavy crash. Above all of this, above the scaffolding, the walls and the poles of bricks; above the vats of lime and the concrete moulds, the scorching sun rose through the fiery red of the brick dust.

Rannus was filing away in desperation. His hands worked like machine parts, but he no longer remembered anything—he had forgotten how he had gotten to where he was, and how long he had been there. An immeasurable amount of time had passed! The hunger, fever and phantasms had reached their climax.

He was by now more animal than human. He no longer wished for good or evil. All he wanted to do was live. To live—to get for himself one corner of the great tapestry that summoned one to life, to pull it towards him and lie on it, happily, eyes closed, his mouth full of bread!

Eyes glowing with fever, he stared fixedly through the red cloud in front of him: tilers were climbing up ladders with their loads, their legs muddy. Feeble little boys were treading their way up piles of lime, their heads hanging like those of weary horses. Bricklayers were dully placing brick upon brick.

Were they creators? Were they the masters of the world? No, they were machines, they were slaves, driven on by a thirst for life, urged on by hunger to climb the walls. All they wanted to do was exist, to stay alive. There was no collective effort like that which urges birds to fly to warmer climes. No creative ideal in the whole of their being.

Who knows why people need to suffer, struggle, die? Who is guiding the great building site of this world? Is there something up there that is unknown, unknowable, perhaps even non-existent? Or down here, horrible, black and maybe just as non-existent? But in the end, will they not fly, in one huge accident, into the jaws of death, while the whole edifice collapses around them?

Rannus sawed and sawed at the bars meanwhile. He used all his strength, while the noise of the building site continued. Finally, finally the fourth giant bar was filed through. Only a hair's breadth of metal kept it attached to the wall. Rannus was free, but he was unable to leave until nightfall, before

darkness fell. This waiting was the worst. He remained motionless, his stomach hideously aching with hunger.

Now and again he lost consciousness and awoke with a start, only to find himself sitting there. His brain ached like smoldering charcoal. He saw dreams and visions, fragmentary and meaningless. Russet clouds sailed above him. Bluish globes swarmed, seethed and blazed, then burst apart in hideous pain. The pith of his brain boiled and bubbled.

He woke again suddenly and was astonished at the silence around him. He didn't know how long he had been unconscious. It seemed only a moment. The laborers were at lunch. They had eaten and were now sleeping on the ramparts on their backs, or on their stomachs.

Their bodies looked like sacks in the fiery sunshine. A boundless silence hung over the sleeping herd of slaves, whose limbs seemed rooted to the ground.

Warder 13 was again standing by the cell. He had red sideburns. The sun shone on his immobile face. He was wearing a scorched-grey uniform and a large cap. He was stiff and hard, as if made out of sheet metal, despite the burning heat. He was as motionless as a monument to the emperor.

Suddenly, a beggar on crutches appeared on the rampart from somewhere nearby. He bobbed along between his supports like a great big black cricket. He sat down on the rampart, took a loaf of bread shaped like a wheel from inside his coat and began to bite into it, clutching it in both hands. His whole body seemed to be eating, along with his toothless gums.

This scene made Rannus leap into action. He no longer knew what he was doing. He was like a wild animal. He gripped the crosspiece he had been filing at with both hands and flung it aside. He then jumped down and ran, stumbling, over towards the beggar. Warder 13 looked at what seemed like a ghost, his eyes wide open; although he was watching attentively, he saw nothing.

Rannus snatched at the loaf, but the beggar was holding it tight with both hands. He looked straight at Rannus with frenzied eyes, his mouth open wide, filled with dry bread so he was unable to yell. They dropped the loaf a couple of times, and it jumped from the one to the other, as if on springs. Then Rannus picked up a brick and struck the beggar full on the crown of the head. It cracked open like an earthenware pot.

Rannus snatched the bread and ran headlong between the two piles of yellow bricks, cramming the bread into his mouth. He swallowed the bone-dry crumbs, his eyes bulging, swallowed and fell down dead—in the fiery red brick dust.