

The Girl on the Black Horse

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For Sydir Tverdokhlib

I

He got used to being alone.

The thought came more than once: to end up in a desert and see no people. He didn't complain about them, but he preferred not to see them. He could neither love them nor hate them.

When he realized that everything life offers is easily obtained, that became enough for him, and he left behind the hustle and bustle of life. So how would he now fill the boredom?

He immersed himself in eternal truths, where he found poetry and oblivion, but from time-to-time memories would awaken, diverting him from his path and darkening his world.

"Too much heart has remained in me, and it binds me to people's paths," he said then.

Year after year passed in this manner.

One afternoon he lay in his office, dissipating in boredom.

He saw nothing in the past and knew nothing of the future; in all these years, from when he was a small child until today, he was the only one in this world. He crossed his hands atop his head and searched his thoughts.

"My parents did not want me, they feared my arrival into this world, people got by without me, what am I to do with myself?"

Despair gnawed at him, like a slowly growing ulcer, and then, suddenly, a secret marvel flew in from a faraway country. He lifted his head, looked at the window, listened carefully, and went pale. The entire city had gone quiet, and a gold and red light was hovering above him. He got up and quietly went up to the window. Death had swept all life from the street, a corpse stood in one window, looking down past the curtain with glass eyes. In time, a chilling fear slowly flew in from the end of the street, deadening the silence, and behind it grumbled the stomping of horse hoofs. As the sound of horse hoofs flew in from around the corner, there appeared a girl on a black horse. She slowly rode closer and closer. Darian looked through the window, she turned into his entryway, he dragged himself over to the sofa and plopped down on it.

Slow footsteps on the stairs, the door opened, and a pale female figure

entered his office and sat down next to him.

"How are you?"

He shrugged his shoulders silently.

They went out into the park.

She walked slowly, bent over and looking at the ground.

"Have you already heard," she whispered, "that I don't have much time left?"

"Yes, I've heard...but I can't tell the difference between life and death, and besides, you can't die."

She smiled bitterly and waved her hand.

They sat down among the trees because she had become very tired. She started coughing, rubbed her eyes and gathered her strength. He gazed at the sun's rays on the withered leaves as they sparkled, changed colors, and faded away.

"I've come—forgive me for speaking on such familiar terms—I've come to ask you for the greatest thing I could ever have in my life."

He looked at her sadness and could barely mouth a reply: "Tell me, I'll do anything for you. I'll give up my soul for you, just tell me—you know me."

She listened to his voice, listened to his heart, it reminded her of their past love, she wished with all her might to once again enter his soul.

Pensively she asked: "Are you still sad? Why are you always sad? So sad that after our death your sadness will cloak seven generations?"

He remained silent.

"You are still so despondent! Today I see you as no one else in the world does. And I see how I've hurt you and how I destroyed your soul and mine!"

She began dropping to his feet, but he did not allow it.

"If I could give you even a sliver of cheer..."

"Tell me, what did you want to ask me?"

She gathered what was left of her strength and soul.

"I want you, the last in this world, the only one still alive in the whole dead world, to bid me farewell."

He pulled her toward him, but she pushed him away in sick despair.

"Don't touch me—I have death in me."

He started babbling on excitedly, like a child.

"I am not afraid of anything, it's all the same to me—I don't want to, I can't, I won't live without you! Come back to me, my most brilliant muse, tell me how to save you—I am ready to destroy..."

"I cannot resist your will—I feel better at your breast, I will be with you forever, only don't forget to bid me farewell..."

She fainted in his arms.

"I swear to you—I will visit you and bid you farewell."

He lifted her up and helped her get onto the horse. He took off his hat, and with a bitter smile she said, "I see that you are quite bald already..."

"Ah yes, I'm bald, my dear, a baldy, ha ha ... yet I can't tell the difference between life and death..."

Muffled stamping echoed in the dead street as the girl disappeared into the dusk. Darian stood, smiled, and repeated his last words.

II

She lay on the veranda in an open casket, all white, like a lily on a black carpet. Garlands of wild grapes hung from the veranda, far in the corner a light on a tripod flashed, an evening deep in thought spread through the surrounding world.

Darian pressed his lips to her face lightly so as not to awaken her.

The leaves rustled in the park, her face came to life, he heard a very light whisper, as if in his soul.

"I didn't die, but I don't have the strength to lift myself or to open my eyes. Don't touch me, don't awaken death—I like it this way. I can feel you next to me, and I gaze at you through this dreamy mist, which people have understood to be death. My fate predicted this. Your strength will support me for a few more minutes. You opened love for me with your first kiss—do you remember, long ago? Now close it with your final one."

He kissed her and whispered: "My poor dear..."

His whisper flowed with a heartfelt sparkle, like the vibration of an angelic string when a breath of evening light caresses it.

"Forgive me, forgive me for everything," she whispered, "I am unworthy, and I've shattered your happiness..."

"Oh, my poor dear..."

"You were my guest, and I had nothing to offer you—just look at what I have..."

"Oh, my poor dear, my poor dear..."

"You gave me your heart, and I am taking it with me to that other world, but I have nothing to leave behind for you. I leave you, as my legacy, the magic of creativity, and it will last through your whole, lonely, sad life in this world. And the filth of my life will be washed away—I will once again be your pure angel, your guiding muse."

"You will gaze at eternal truths, the invisible world, infernal torment and heavenly magnificence, and you will look at them as you look at the sun, because I took your heart..."

"And life on earth—my, my, how unfortunate it is, like those leaves that, in withering, whisper a prayer about life's eternal, meaningless bustle."

She opened her eyes and, a minute later, barely uttered: "My horse..."

* * *

Darian ran ahead.

A drunken soldier was dragging his sword, like a bird drags its broken wing, an old invalid begged on the street corner and, when no one paid attention to him, took off his medals, trampled them in the mud and staggered away, his crutches pounding on the breast of the earth. Two figures fought in the shadows, and one dragged the other into the darkness. A woman's shriek threw knives into the dusk.

"Where is my husband? Give me back my husband!"

A deformed monstrosity with bulging eyeballs sat on a trashcan, gnawing bones and giving off muffled, hysterical laughter.

A time had arrived that goes unnoticed by humans.

Statues climbed down off of their pedestals and stumbled over to the wine tavern, in the old cemetery monks rose up, knocked the stone off the graves of nuns, and crawled down to them in search of debauchery.

The time hidden from people's attention had arrived.

Darian ran ahead.

Sparks spilled out behind him.

Translated by Mark Andryczyk

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