

FLASH FICTION

Two Horsemen

by Peter Gon?ar



"Promenade zu zweit" by Brigitte Thonhauser-Merk

There lay a valley between two ridges, covered with thick but withered grass. The distance between the ridges was quite large, clearly not less than a couple of kilometres. And the valley was surprisingly flat. It seemed that there was not a single hillock on it, not a single knoll — as if all the striving upwards had been taken over by the mountains around. The valley led from afar, from somewhere over the horizon, and yet, surprisingly, its width remained the same throughout this length. All this left the feeling of it as of a huge road laid out for giants. And if the wind suddenly blew into the valley from the mountains, then it simply rushed along, far away, beyond the horizon, unable to stop.

Two horsemen rode through the valley. Their horses were deep black. They moved in the very middle of the valley, next to each other. They moved unhurriedly — the horses shifted their legs slowly, humbly walking forward. One rider was dressed all in white. The other all in red.

From the way they held themselves in the saddles, one could tell that they had been on the road for a long time. They talked intermittently, but the time between their remarks was very, very long, as if the whole process of conversation had been slowed down. One spoke, and only a few minutes later the other answered.

“It would be good to pass the valley before the sun sets,” said the rider in white.

“Yes,” replied the rider in red, looking up at the sky. “We still have a couple of hours.”

They looked ahead and tried, each, to estimate exactly how much more they still had to go, and maybe they should speed up, but they thought so only briefly, just as of an unrealistic possibility, because they knew that excessive haste could kill their horses, and then they would obviously not make it in time for sunset.

“Look, do you see the smoke over there, in the distance?” The rider in white pointed forward to the right, in the direction of the ridge, which was closer to him.

“Yes, apparently right beyond the first rises,” the rider in red replied in such a way that one could immediately tell by the reserved tone of his speech, by the still expression on his face, that he knew what he was talking about, and that there was more to the phrase than the immediate meaning, something you understand not by the words, but by the message. “Think for yourself. The decision is yours.”

For some more time they rode in complete silence. All that was heard was the whistle of the wind pushing them forward towards their destination.

Probably half an hour passed like this, when suddenly two eagles flew forward from behind their backs. One was bigger, with large and strong wings. The second was clearly younger,

but already knew all about the ways of flight. They flew as if together, but also as if separately: there was some distance between them, but they were the only living creatures in the valley besides the riders.

They flew slightly ahead like that, and then the younger eagle changed its course and flew to the right, in the direction of the ridge, from behind which the smoke continued to be seen. The one that was older and larger was still flying forward. The distance between them was increasing. The rider in white was watching them while his companion simply stared ahead. Then the rider in white said:

“It has been a great honour for me to travel this long way with you. And I am grateful for everything that I have learned from you, for everything you have taught me. And every past day, from the beginning of our journey, I will remember with a smile on my face and warmth in my heart. But yet, my clothes are still as white as snow, which these mountains have not seen for a long time. And there, where our path leads us to... they look at how stained you are. And I'm ready.”

The rider in red looked at the one he had been protecting and teaching for many days, months and years. He looked with the knowledge that, in fact, where they were going, at the entrance everyone takes off their clothes and walks on naked. He looked with the thought that no words would change his disciple's mind. And he said in the end: “I wish you luck.”

The rider in white nodded to him and went after the eagle to where the smoke was coming from.