

FAIRER THAN THE SUN

JUOZAS GRUSAS

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The fir resounds, like a bell.

A tiny man in shirtsleeves, with thick, stumplike arms, lifts an ax above his head, and as he lowers it he springs off the ground. He bends over and tramples a clearing in the snow around him with his moccasined feet. The broad edge of the ax flashes in the air, and with each blow it bites a chunk out of the living wood, chaste as the snow. The fir trembles convulsively, the white wound spreads, like a smile.

The path is strewn with fir branches, as if for a funeral procession. The odor of fresh-cut wood mingles with that of burning yew.

Another man who is swinging a saw as if it were a sickle shouts at the man with the ax, "Look—you've chopped it to the side; may your wife chop you the same way! The fir should fall here, but now it will slide into the trees."

But the tiny man chops at the young tree's trunk with redoubled fury, and heavy drops of sweat fall to the trampled snow.

"Adam, you doll of dolls, your wife ought to fondle you like that! Just listen to me—let's grab a saw and start sawing."

But Adam goes on plucking shavings, like blossoms, until the steel edge sings.

The man with the saw approaches, kick's at the hewer's legs and shouts for the whole forest to hear, "Deaf!"

Adam. lowers his ax, wipes his brow and smiles apologetically." Perhaps I've already cut too deep."

"Nothing but trouble with a deaf stump! How often I've said..."

The two of them kneel in the snow, sawing— speechless, intense, like violinists immersed in a mysterious melody.

The fir sways and begins to bend over slowly, like a warm funeral candle. In a moment its momentum increases and the branches begin to moan and thrash, as if they were searching for something to hold on to. The tree touches the earth with a muffled sound; the trunk rebounds, like a struck snake, and a smile flits across both faces.

They gaze for a while, with a gentle awe, at the prostrate tree.

"Enough. We've felled them like stacks of grain. It's time..." And the man with the saw shows the deaf man, with his lips, that it is time to eat.

The two men fling their coats over their shoulders and stalk off silently, one after the other, through the snow.

A fire is burning and crackling, plumes of gray smoke twist and turn among the branches. There is an odor of bread and sap.

Around the flames sit fur-coated woodcutters with wmdburned cheeks. They chew on chunks of frozen meat, and, mouths full, laugh at each pointed word.

Adam shyly sidled up to the fire, glanced around to be sure he was disturbing no one, and sat down on a bed of branches. He took off his fur cap, crossed himself, and unrolled a large linen kerchief from which he took out bread and meat. The odor of the bread tickled his throat gently, and without tasting it at all, Adam mused on how unspeakably pleasant and good it was to eat. Now he took a huge bite out of the frozen meat, on which the marks of his teeth remained. He broke off a thick piece of bread, and ice glistened in its pores. He held it to the flames until the odor of toasting bread spread through the firs and birches.

The woodcutters had already eaten. Now they warmed themselves, kicked at the burned stumps, rolled "butts" and tried to prove that their tongues were all the sharper for the lunch they had eaten. They decided to talk to the deaf man, who, apart and alone, pondered, silly thoughts in a scab-covered head and a crust of black bread in his hand.

One man who was sitting close to him shouted into his ear, "What is your last name, Adam?"

Adam answered nothing.

"As if such people had last names," another man spoke up jokingly. "There are people who aren't worth a last name. 'Adam' — that's all; what more could he be?"

Adam did not hear this explanation. He only understood from the faces of those around him that the words were not kind ones. He put on his cap and prepared to go back to work.

One of the woodcutters laid his hand on Adam's shoulder and said, sweetening each word, "Adam, dear, sit down next to the fire and rest, man. Why should you work so hard?"

Adam, like a mistreated child, glowed with trust and love because of the gentle word. He sat down on a stump and gazed smilingly at the woodcutters.

"What good are you, Adam? You're only feeding someone else's children," another woodcutter shouted into his ear.

Adam bent his pock-marked face toward the ground.

"Orphans ... little ones ...," he said in a hoarse voice. "It is so hard to find work in the summer. I know how to hew out a corner, how to handle bricks. But you know, because I don't hear well, other people immediately say, 'He is a fool; he doesn't know anything.' Then nobody wants to hire me. There is no justice in the world—what can one do?"

"Why did you marry a widow? You should have chosen a young girl, and then there would have been justice."

"Why speak of it? Would anyone else have taken me? Even this one some-times tells me that I smell of pitch. I always dream that if I could earn during the winter — I need new clothes. I have only this worn-out coat. I would really like to have beautiful clothes."

The woodcutters began to laugh; they were finding the conversation amusing.

"Beautiful clothes!"

"And a hat!"

"And a white collar!"

"You didn't have to get married. Couldn't you live alone? Then you would have had new clothes and a hat and a white collar."

A pretty sleigh passed along the road through the forest. Through the trees a bay horse could be seen, stepping beautifully. The bells tinkled in the silent forest like a swift brook. The woodcutters followed the smartly dressed passengers with their eyes.

"Cold," said one of them when the bells could no longer be heard, and he hugged his coat more tightly around him.

"You're a fool, Adam, the biggest fool—" shouted a young woodcutter, as if to vent his sudden anger.

"Why?"

"A fool because you got married. Now you understand!"

Adam became thoughtful. A light wind ran through the treetops, and tiny stars of snow poured upon the flames.

"On an empty plain, on the windward side, not even a tree grows ... I often look into the thickets of the forest and think—"

"A man isn't a tree."

"But even a man seeks shelter with another."

"It isn't as cold in the winter, is it?" the woodcutters said, stifling their laughter.

"Not as cold," Adam answered.

"You can feel the warmth of a body and the beating of the heart?"

"And the heart."

"And what else?" The men laughed. "But who would want to fondle such a one as you!"

"Tell him he is as ugly as a toad."

"Should we speak that way of a man?"

"Say that he is like sodden turf."

"Listen, Adam," one of them shouted into his ear, "they say you are as ugly as a toad."

A shadow flitted across the pock-marked face.

"Don't worry, Adam; never mind them."

"Why should I be sad?" said Adam, blinking rapidly. "I know what I am; why speak of it? But the older girl — Stephanie — once told me that I am fairer than the sun. So there! When my wife began — like you now, just like you, in just the same way — Stephanie wept. When her mother left she came up to me and knelt, she kissed my feet and said that I was fairer than the sun."

"But Stephanie has been blind since her childhood."

"Then all the more, all the more—" said Adam excitedly. "'Than the sun,' she said. One only needs to understand."

"Fairer than the sun! Fairer!"

"And the moon!"

"You understand nothing, nothing," Adam said, blinking and turning red. "I live like a dog, work day and night when someone hires me. Without me, they— Why, those girls — You think their mother — You don't understand! She, Stephanie, she, a blind girl, kissed my feet. Do you understand?"

The woodcutters are silent. They feel uneasy.

They all gaze at the flames.

It is quiet and lonely in the woods. The cold spreads through the clearings and thickets, through the broad drifts and the blue sky, like silent and heavy breathing.

Adam squats by the fire, his face pale and puckered, his lips tightly clenched. With frozen gaze he peers into the blazing bonfire, and the flame becomes more scattered, changes into stars and glistens. He hears someone's silent lament, which flows with the wind, sways with the branches.

He rises and walks away from the fire through the deep snow. And now the tears, one after another, roll down his cheeks.

Once more blows echo through the forest. The axes ring, as if in a smithy. The falling firs swish and shake the earth; their echo spreads far through the forest on the green waves of the evergreens.

With each breath of the wind the forest vibrated and moaned, and in those moments the woodcutters appeared like tiny

insects in a wheatfield. Throwing back their heads, they gazed at the sky-reaching firs, then they resolutely chopped at the trees' fine trunks and smiled when one of them stretched out at their feet.

But now one denizen of the forest decided to play a trick on these armed insects. A fine and serious fir rebelled; as it fell, it guided itself into the strong arms of a neighboring birch. Now it hung in the air, branches entwined with those of its neighbor.

"You, men — over here!" the woodcutters shouted, finding themselves unable to vanquish the tree.

All laid down their axes and gathered, muttering. Adam alone paid no attention but went on stripping a thick pine.

"You're like old women," the newcomers shouted. "Can't you see you should have felled it to this side?"

"A tree is a live thing, fellows; sometimes it has to have its own way — it has to fall the opposite way to the one you chose. You don't understand trees. A devil may hide in a tree sometimes like in a man."

The woodcutters collected around the trunk and pushed it off its stump. But the fir did not dream of surrendering so easily; it merely shivered, twisted and wedged itself even tighter among the thick branches of the birch.

"Something, whether devil or angel, is hiding in those branches," the woodcutters muttered.

But there was still one way to conquer the stubborn beauty of the forest.

The men glanced over at some firs that grew nearby. They counted four in all, any one of which might, in falling itself, dislodge its disobedient sister. They chopped into one majestic fir and then began to saw. The fir trembled and began to lean. The woodcutters ran to one side and waited, shivering and with anxious gaze, until both trees should fall to the ground with mighty tumult.

The fir struck; as the top, like a sword-cleaved head, hit the snow, the trunk bounced upward like a spring. And now both trees remained suspended, in the form of a cross, between heaven and earth.

The situation was becoming more serious. The woodcutters muttered and swore. They picked another tree, even thicker, and began to cut. But this tree was too close; in falling, it touched the suspended trees before it had gained momentum. The top slid over the tangle of branches and pierced the snow. Then the trunk, now elevated in the air, began to slide down.

"Run!" the woodcutters shouted at one another.

Like frightened elk the men bounded through the snow. But again the branches caught, and this honored citizen of the forest, with tragic irony, was forced to sprawl on the battlefield with its feet in the air.

The woodcutters, furious, felled the two remaining firs, but these, too, caught in the web of trees.

They no longer cursed. Their courage and self-confidence had evaporated, now that not a single tree remained that could without danger be felled in a last attempt to unravel this green wreath.

One solution alone remained: The birch itself must be cut. But this was a truly dangerous task, since a tree bearing so much weight may break after the first blow of the ax. Yet they could not leave things as they were; they would be docked a week's wages, and might even be fined, because of these few trees.

So, stretching their necks, they all looked up at the suspended trees and waited, like geese waiting for the clouds to descend. One after another they stalked up to the birch to assure themselves that the firs were wedged in tightly. The birch's thickest branch had already been somewhat torn by the impact, it would seem, and might break at any moment, dropping its gigantic load. One woodcutter leaped back, as if he had seen a snake.

"How well does it hold?" asked those farther away.

"The branch is torn."

"Torn!"

"If we could only have one more fir; now everything would really fall!"

"One can't bring a fir."

"Then the birch must be cut; there's no other way."

"Cut it, if you want to; I won't."

"I won't cut it, either."

"You don't cut, you don't get paid. Come Saturday and your wife will scream that there is no food."

The woodcutters stamped the snow, cursed the trees, became angry with one another, swore at anything that got in their way.

Suddenly one young woodcutter shouted, as if he had found salvation: "Adam! He will cut it!"

They all looked over to where Adam, left to himself, calmly stripped his tree. Their faces lit up. Whether or not he would cut it, at least here was someone on whom they could vent their wrath.

"A stump for the birds! Here we've been laboring for an hour, and he—"

"He won't stir a feather for anyone else."

"He works day and night, but always for himself."

"He needs new clothes— Fairer than the sun— Snake!"

One of the woodcutters dragged Adam up to the group.

"Do you want to be crossed off the list of woodcutters?"

Adam gazed timidly at the men.

"But why?"

"Because you won't help us. Do you hear?"

"Now, as punishment, you will cut down that birch. If you refuse, don't bother to come to work tomorrow. Understand?" a giant of a man shouted at Adam, brandishing a hairy fist.

Adam walked up to the birch, carefully scrutinized its branches, tested the trunk with his hand, and returned to the men.

"Cut it yourselves, and don't show me your fists," said Adam, blushing.

The woodcutters' anxiety grew. Again they cursed one another. They argued and shouted loud and long. Finally they approached Adam again. This time they adopted different tactics.

"Be a man, Adam, a friend — we will repay you. Word of honor! I have two suits, and one of them is still not bad at all. Believe me, I'll give it to you, if you'll only cut that birch."

"And I will add a necktie!"

"And I a hat and a white collar. Then you'll really be fairer than the sun."

The men spoke into Adam's ear; they slapped him on the back, called him their best friend and comrade.

Adam smiled; he walked over to the birch and once again examined it carefully. On his return, he said, "It can't be left like this. It must be cut."

"Here is a man!" the woodcutters shouted.

Adam still hesitated.

"Here—take an ax, prove yourself worthy of our friendship."

"The clothes, and a hat, and a white collar".

Adam picked up his ax, walked around the birch, packed down the snow and gathered up branches that might trip him as he ran.

The men smiled and winked at one another.

"Just look at Adam! You have to know how — with a fool..."

The little man stripped off his coat, moistened his palms and raised his ax, but he lowered it again. He straightened up, and shouted, "I don't want your clothes! Just put in a good word for me, and that will be enough."

The woodcutters looked around at one another with questioning gaze. The mirth and irony fled from their faces. They looked at him there, beneath the heavy burden, and they were afraid to repeat their promise.

Adam raised the ax and struck the first blow. The birch echoed hoarsely, like a hurried bell.

The man dealt blow after blow, with as much force and determination as if he were in mortal battle with an ancient foe. The men, standing at a distance, followed the action with intensity — would the firs move? They would warn him, would shout loudly so that Adam might escape. After each blow their chests grew warmer, as if they themselves were there bending around the birch.

Adam, beneath that suspended bridge, appeared from afar as tiny as an ant. But he wielded the ax rhythmically and stubbornly, like an ecstatic sexton swinging the heart of a bell.

The cutter straightened, glanced up to be sure the firs were still wedged tightly, wiped off the sweat and swung again. The ax steadily counted off the blows, like a pendulum, flashing at times with a cold and eerie glitter. From a distance the birch's wound appeared white, like an evil smile on gnarled lips.

The firs crackled, and the men were hardly aware of it when they shouted in unison, "Run!"

The cutter did not hear. Like a woodpecker he pecked at the tree, his head swinging regularly and his whole body swaying.

The color returned to their pale faces and their hearts beat more slowly. They all felt grateful to the birch, which held death firmly upon its shoulders, and to the firs, for permitting the tiny man to play his great game.

From behind the clouds rolled the winter sun, and the snow-covered clearing glistened like white silk. The rays darted through the tangled trees and flooded the woodcutter. Suddenly he straightened up and leaped back, but still the tree did not move, and the cutter again picked up his ax.

The men wanted to speak to him — to say anything, to address him as they would a real brother, to speak to him as friends so that the ax might be lighter. They would smooth out a path for him and cover it with branches, they would carry him off on their hands once the birch swayed. But between them and the woodcutter yawned a gulf that could not be crossed even in a lifetime. Far away there, he was like a child on a battlefield playing with live grenades.

The forest, where so short a time ago had echoed the sound of falling trees, now breathed with deep calm in every branch. The rhythmical blows of the lone ax only served to accentuate this endless calm, as if marking time. Their sound was immediately smothered as soon as it reached the nearest trees, while farther off, beyond them, there was nothing but white snow, valleys, hills, fields, glades, villages — and the whole wide world.

The cutter tired; he leaned against the tree, as if on his best friend's shoulder. He pondered a while, his face touching the rough bark, and the drops of sweat rolled like tears down the birch's uneven trunk.

Here everything was alive — rest and pain, each drop of sweat, the endless wait, death silently settling, and love which heaps blossoms for the goldfinch of the forest. Everything could be seen and heard, as the heart is audible to a deaf man, a face fairer than the sun is visible to someone who is blind.

The cutter straightened up and with renewed energy dealt a blow. The birch trembled painfully, wounded in the heart. Another blow followed and another, like a clock striking the hour. The hands rose once more. The ax trembled — and fell, together with the cutter. And at that same moment the branches whistled, the frozen earth resounded, and the men could not even shout "Run!"

Between the fresh stumps lay the fallen firs, and next to them the birch — and there, covered by a green wreath, lay the woodcutter.

Now there was a clearing in the middle of the forest. Beyond it, near the road, scores of young firs rose on a hillside. In the whitest of garments, flooded by the rays of the sun, they stood, one behind another, covering the earth with blossoms. In shining waves they rose, higher and ever higher — worlds of unseen purity stretching up to the blue heavens.

