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## THE IDLER

### A SHORT STORY

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They all called him an idler, though he, like other men, had a home and sometimes a job. He was comparatively still pretty young, and one might say, even handsome; someone had said he had even studied somewhat. Nevertheless, he was an idler. And he could not think of any way to elude that name, although he loved to think, to ponder. He would sit down near his broken down little house (that the village council had ten times condemned to be razed) and would watch people in the near-by marketplace haggle over a few pennies that seemed to him terribly unnecessary, and he would attempt to divine whether he was such a „bum" simply because he did not need money. In no way could he understand why he necessarily had to dress well and have money in order not to be a bum. And he had also heard that some philosopher had written many books while sitting in a barrel.

The idler would look at his wooden shoes, at his socks that stuck out of those shoes, at his extremely shiny pants, at his short, coarse cloth jacket, and he would wonder whether clothes change the heart. For he wasn't naked, and to be poorly dressed is certainly no evil. Sometimes he would go lie down in a field; he'd watch as an insect would climb up a long piece of grass, or a wagtail with its long legs would leap in search of something. The sun would beat up the idler's back, and he would roll over on his other side.

"So you say you're sunning yourself, eh, John?" one of his acquaintances would say.

"Yes, I am. And why shouldn't I sun myself if there is a lot of sun and a lot of time?"

"You're lazy if you have so much time. Work calls."

"I can work or not work: for I do no wrong to any soul by not working."

"But you could earn some money; you could get some clothes and begin looking like a person."

"Like a person/ you say? It seems to me that I already look like a person. And I really don't think the birds would sing more sweetly, or the sun would shine more brightly, if I were to dress better. Moreover, it's good to live like this."

"But you're in rags and often hungry!"

"Therefore I am free. I need no watch, I have no job in which I must quarrel or nag, nor must I try to trick a friend in the market. Here one watches the flowers bloom, one listens to the birds singing, one suns oneself and wonders about something — for instance, why the sky is blue?"

"Ah, you're always singing the same old song," the acquaintance would say in parting, and would thank God that he's smart and clothed, and that he holds some sort of place in life. And he would be happy that he doesn't occupy the lowest position on this earth — for that position belonged to the idler.

"They all say the same thing," the idler would remark as he'd watch the other man leave. "They have a lot of money and many worries. They each want to live better than the other. They all think about the future, but not one of them thinks about the past. For isn't the past now the same for all of us? Whether you scattered money or ran about to gather it in, whether you were a laborer or a scientist, a king or a farmer: now it's all only the past, and today it's not any bit better for you that sometime ten years ago you wore an expensive suit, lived in a fine house — or in a dilapidated shack."

The idler would observe the sun and the fog, and he would listen to the churchbells toll, but he could not understand why they called him a bum simply because he tried to be free from money. "You bum!" kids would shout as they'd race past him on their way home from school. First laughter would come over him, and then anger, that even the young are taught to constrain their lives with meaningless trivia.

Later on, everything took a very bad turn for the worse. Foreign soldiers came, read speeches, hung flags up, photographed his shack (then knocked it down without building a new one) and told stories about great freedom and a fabulous life.

"Now you'll be able to be a big shot," some of his neighbors told him.

"And why should I be a big shot? The sun will not shine the more for that, nor will birds sing more prettily, nor will summer be warmer, nor will the years be better. For isn't it good to live without a clock, without being in service to anything, without money?"

Then other soldiers marched in and began destroying all that the first soldiers had overlooked. Now it would sometimes be that the idler could not lie in the sun or wade through the white snow in his big wooden shoes just whenever he fancied.

But one time someone said to him, "It's all very easy for you, John, you being a derelict bum. You have nothing and so have nothing to lose."

"I have more than all of you put together, for I am free from wealth," he would answer while happily remarking to himself, "Well, at least this once they're jealous of me. They should have become jealous of me long ago, for I understand life in a different way than they do. I can give up everything that burdens the shoulders and the heart; that tears at the pockets. I once had a house. Now I don't even have that. But of that I'm glad, for while I had one house, now I have the whole world. And so I live, without a wish to be something great. Never will I be the first — and never will I fall, for I never climb up high. I'll never scramble for a place or for some money — but I'll never escape the name of tramp, or idler, or bum."

As the idler had foreseen, someone called him those names again. They called him those names at a time when it should have been clear to everyone that we would all soon become bums, idlers, vagrants.

"Even an idler has a heart, and many that aren't idlers have money where their hearts should be," the idler replied angrily, but at once becoming sorry for his words. "Please forgive me for getting mad. After all, the entire world can't live as I do. Maybe I really am a bum."

Then the first soldiers started to push the second soldiers out. These resisted and forced everyone to resist. Late one morning the idler, lying amid a clump of raspberry bushes, saw gray-faced and gray-uniformed soldiers herding one of the idler's neighbors into a truck containing many men of various ages and attires, all of whom were silent as death. The neighbor's wife caught hold of a soldier's hand and that of her husband.

"No, I need workers. Give me another in your place, and I'll let your husband go," spoke the soldier in an unclear tongue.

But the idler understood, and, emerging from the bushes, said, "I'll go in his stead."

"The bum!" cried the neighbor's wife. "Oh — it's you, John!" She corrected herself hurriedly. "I'll be grateful for the rest of my life."

"You can take a bag of clothes and food," observed the soldier.

"I don't have anything," answered the idler, stepping up into the truck with his heavy wooden shoes.

"We should at least give him some shoes," said the neighbor while quickly putting distance between himself and the truck.

"Well — we might still need them ourselves; we don't know how we'll have to live; maybe we'll still have to flee," the wife replied, recovering as if back from the grave.

And it's good that they didn't burden the idler with this and that, for he — more than ever — had no need of anything. As they drove to work, airplanes attacked the column of motor vehicles and destroyed the trucks and the people.

Later someone related that he had seen the idler lying on his back along a ditch by the side of a road, sweating in the sun, with his arms flung out wide as if wanting to say,

"How good it is to live and die when one's hands are empty."

Translated by A. T. K.