A COUNTRY DOCTOR

Franz Kafka



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I was in great difficulty: an urgent journey lay before me; a gravely ill man was waiting for me in a village ten miles away; a heavy blizzard filled the wide space between him and me; I had a carriage, light, with big wheels, exactly the thing for our country roads; bundled into my fur coat, my bag of instruments in my hand, I was already standing in the yard, ready for the road; but the horse was missing, the horse. My own horse had died in the night, worn out by the strain of this icy winter; my servant girl was running around the village now to borrow a horse; but it was hopeless, I knew that, and, heaped ever higher with snow, growing ever more immovable, I stood there to no purpose. The girl appeared at the gate, alone, swinging the lantern; of course—who lends out his horse now for a drive like this one? I paced the length of the yard once more; I could find no way out; distracted, tormented, I kicked at the rickety door of the pigsty that had stood unused for years. It opened and swung to and fro on its hinges. A warmth and a smell as of horses came out of it. A dim stable lantern swayed inside on a rope. A man, crouched down in the low stall, showed his open, blue-eyed face. "Shall I harness up?" he asked, crawling out on all fours. I did not know what to say and only stooped to see what else there might be in the sty. The servant girl stood beside me. "You never know what you have stored away in your own house," she said, and we both laughed. "Ho there, brother! Ho there, sister!" called the groom, and two horses, huge beasts with powerful flanks, shoved their way out one behind the other, legs tucked close against their bodies, lowering their well-shaped heads like camels, getting out through the door-hole, which they filled to the last inch, by nothing but the twisting force of their bodies. But at once they stood up-

right, long-legged, their bodies steaming thickly. "Help him," I said, and the willing girl hurried to hand the groom the harness for the carriage. Yet she had scarcely reached him when the groom takes hold of her and slams his face against hers. She cries out and flees to me; two rows of teeth are printed in red on the girl's cheek. "You brute," I scream in a fury, "do you want the whip?"—but I recollect at once that he is a stranger; that I do not know where he comes from; and that he is helping me of his own free will where everyone else has failed me. As though he knew my thoughts, he takes no offense at my threat but merely turns around toward me once, still busy with the horses. "Get in," he says then, and indeed: everything is ready. I have never yet driven with so fine a team, I notice, and I climb in cheerfully. "But I will do the driving; you do not know the way," I say. "Certainly," he says, "I'm not coming along at all, I'm staying with Rosa." "No," screams Rosa, and with a true presentiment of the inescapability of her fate she runs into the house; I hear the door chain rattle as she puts it up; I hear the lock snap shut; I see how she puts out all the lights besides, in the hall and then racing on through the rooms, to make herself impossible to find. "You are coming with me," I say to the groom, "or I give up the journey, urgent as it is. It does not enter my head to hand you the girl as the price of the ride." "Look lively!" he says; he claps his hands; the carriage is torn away like wood into a current; I can still hear the door of my house burst and splinter under the groom's assault, then my eyes and ears are filled with a roaring that presses evenly upon every one of my senses. But that too only for a moment, for, as though my patient's yard opened directly beyond my own gate, I am already there; the horses stand quietly; the snowfall has stopped; moonlight all around; the sick boy's parents come hurrying out of the house; his sister behind them; they almost lift me out of the carriage; I make nothing of their confused talk; in the sickroom the air is barely breathable; the neglected stove is smoking; I will push the window open; but first I want to see the patient. Thin, without fever, not cold, not warm, with vacant eyes, without a shirt, the boy heaves himself up under the featherbed, throws his arms around my neck, whispers in my ear: "Doctor, let me die." I look around; no one has heard it; the parents stand mutely leaning forward and await my verdict; the sister has brought a chair for my bag. I open the bag and search among my instruments; the boy keeps groping toward me out of the bed to remind me of his plea; I take up a pair of forceps, examine them in the candlelight, and lay them down again. "Yes," I think blasphemously,

"in cases like this the gods do help; they send the missing horse, they add a second because of the hurry, and to crown it all they throw in the groom as well—" Only now does Rosa come back into my mind; what am I to do, how do I save her, how do I drag her out from under that groom, ten miles away from her, with ungovernable horses in front of my carriage? These horses, which have now somehow worked their straps loose; push the windows open from outside, I do not know how; each thrusts its head in through a window and, untroubled by the family's cry of alarm, studies the patient. "I am driving straight back," I think, as though the horses were summoning me to the journey, but I let the sister, who believes the heat has stupefied me, take my fur coat from me. A glass of rum is set out for me, the old man claps me on the shoulder; the surrender of his treasure justifies this familiarity. I shake my head; inside the narrow circle of the old man's thinking I would be sick; that is the only reason I decline to drink. The mother stands by the bed and beckons me over; I obey, and while one of the horses whinnies loudly at the ceiling I lay my head on the boy's chest, and he shivers under my wet beard. What I know is confirmed: the boy is healthy, his circulation a little poor, saturated with coffee by his anxious mother, but healthy, and best driven out of bed with a shove. I am no reformer of the world, and I let him lie. I am employed by the district and do my duty to the brim, to the point where it becomes almost too much. Badly paid as I am, I am nevertheless generous and helpful toward the poor. I have still to see to Rosa, and then the boy may be right, and I too want to die. What am I doing here in this endless winter! My horse is dead, and there is no one in the village who will lend me his. I have to drag my team out of the pigsty; if they had not happened to be horses, I would have had to drive with sows. That is how it is. And I nod to the family. They know nothing of it, and if they knew they would not believe it. Writing prescriptions is easy, but coming to an understanding with people otherwise is hard. Well, my visit here would seem to be at an end; once again I have been troubled for nothing; I am used to that; with the help of my night bell the whole district tortures me; but that this time I had to give up Rosa as well, that beautiful girl who lived in my house for years, hardly noticed by me—that sacrifice is too great, and I have to arrange it somehow in my head, patching it up with subtleties, in order not to fly at this family, who could not give Rosa back to me with the best will in the world. But as I close my bag and motion for my fur coat, with the family standing together, the father sniffing over the glass of rum

in his hand, the mother—disappointed in me, no doubt; but then what do these people expect?—biting her lips through her tears, and the sister waving a heavily bloodied towel, I am somehow ready to concede that under certain circumstances the boy may after all be ill. I go over to him, he smiles up at me as though I were bringing him the strongest broth in the world—ah, now both horses are whinnying; the noise is presumably ordered from higher up, to make the examination easier—and now I find: yes, the boy is ill. On his right side, in the region of the hip, a wound has opened as big as the palm of a hand. Rose-red, in many shades, dark in the depths, growing lighter toward the edges, delicately grained, with blood collecting unevenly, open as a surface mine to the daylight. So it looks from a distance. Close up, there is a further complication. Who can look at that without whistling under his breath? Worms, as thick and as long as my little finger, rosy of themselves and spattered with blood besides, are writhing toward the light out of the inside of the wound, where they are held fast, with little white heads and many little legs. Poor boy, there is no helping you. I have discovered your great wound; you are perishing of this flower in your side. The family is happy, they see me at work; the sister tells the mother, the mother the father, the father a few guests who are coming in on tiptoe through the moonlight of the open door, balancing with outstretched arms. "Will you save me?" the boy whispers, sobbing, quite dazzled by the life in his wound. That is what the people are like in my part of the country. Always demanding the impossible of the doctor. They have lost the old faith; the parson sits at home and picks his vestments to pieces, one after another; but the doctor is supposed to accomplish everything with his delicate surgeon's hand. Well, as you please: I did not offer myself; if you use me up for holy ends, I will let that happen to me too; what better could I want, an old country doctor robbed of my servant girl! And they come, the family and the village elders, and undress me; a school choir with the teacher at its head is standing outside the house and singing an utterly simple tune to these words:

"Strip him bare, then he will heal, And if he does not heal, then kill him! He's only a doctor, he's only a doctor."

Then I am undressed and, my fingers in my beard, my head tilted, I look at the people calmly. I am entirely composed and superior to them all, and I remain so, even though it is of no help to me, for now they take me by the

head and by the feet and carry me to the bed. They lay me against the wall, on the side of the wound. Then they all go out of the room; the door is shut; the singing dies away; clouds move across the moon; the bedclothes lie warm about me; the horses' heads sway like shadows in the openings of the windows. "You know," I hear, spoken into my ear, "I have very little confidence in you. After all, you are only shaken loose from somewhere or other; you do not come on your own two feet. Instead of helping, you are crowding me on my deathbed. What I would like best is to scratch your eyes out." "True," I say, "it is a disgrace. But then I am a doctor. What am I to do? Believe me, it is not easy for me either." "And I am supposed to be satisfied with that excuse? Ah, I suppose I must be. I always have to be satisfied. I came into the world with a beautiful wound; that was all the outfitting I was given." "Young friend," I say, "your mistake is this: you have no perspective. I, who have been in sickrooms far and wide, tell you: your wound is not so bad. Made at an acute angle with two strokes of the axe. Many a man offers up his side and scarcely hears the axe in the forest, let alone has it come any nearer to him." "Is it really so, or are you deceiving me in my fever?" "It is really so; take the word of honor of a district medical officer with you to the other side." And he took it and grew still. But now it was time to think of my own rescue. The horses were still standing faithfully in their places. Clothes, fur coat, and bag were quickly snatched up together; I did not want to lose time dressing; if the horses hurried as they had on the way out, I would be springing, in a manner of speaking, out of this bed into my own. Obediently one horse drew back from the window; I threw the bundle into the carriage; the fur coat flew too far and caught on a hook by nothing but one sleeve. Good enough. I swung myself onto the horse. The straps dragging loose, one horse barely coupled to the other, the carriage straying along behind, the fur coat last of all in the snow. "Look lively!" I said, but there was nothing lively about it; slowly, like old men, we trailed through the wasteland of snow; for a long time the children's new song, mistaken as it was, rang out behind us:

"Rejoice, all you patients, The doctor has been laid in bed with you!"

Never shall I reach home at this rate; my flourishing practice is lost; a successor is robbing me, but to no purpose, for he cannot replace me; in my house the disgusting groom is running wild; Rosa is his victim; I will not think it through. Naked, exposed to the frost of this most unhappy of ages,

with an earthly carriage and unearthly horses, I drift about, an old man. My fur coat hangs from the back of the carriage, but I cannot reach it, and not one of the nimble rabble of my patients lifts a finger. Betrayed! Betrayed! Once you have answered a false ring of the night bell—it can never be made good.



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