

Dent-de-Lion - opowiadanie Danuty Borchardt

It was small wonder that Joergen grew so pale-green and tall. He was like a plant low on chlorophyll and straining towards sunlight. He lived in the regions of eternal summer sun, but its rays were sparse and of little consequence to Joergen's needs. The few that touched his head with some effectiveness lightened his hair to the color of straw, but they reached to the level of the organ that was his heart only rarely.

The sound of birds that never ceased in the everlasting summer day was becoming an annoyance to Joergen. He saw the birds sitting on the branches singing, but one by one they would keel over and fall exhausted to the ground, their tired refrain trailing behind them. He felt bound to pick them up and carry them to their sleeping quarters. Next morning their renewed twittering and jumping around him, as he was watering his mother's garden, filled him with tedium.

"Your brow is pale," my son, "your heart is not warm," his mother said one day, "a trip South might do you good."

Even the silvery tinkling song of the skylark, more exquisite than the flute, was irritating him and sounded falsetto.

"I'll go South, mother, but not too far South, where the sun might hit me directly overhead," he told her, 'and maybe even pierce the organ that is my heart,' he thought to himself. He was a cool fellow and knew where his welfare lay.

One morning he breakfasted on gruel to lubricate his joints for the journey, and set out towards sunrays that would touch him at an angle more acute than obtuse.

Staying on sunlit paths and well out of the shadow of the woods, Joergen began to warm up. The pale-green of his brow receded to the roots of his hair and down to his toes, giving way to a rosy hue. He cheerfully stepped over one latitude after another, and since he was a tall fellow, he did not need to raise his feet too high.

Somewhere along latitude forty two he began to feel just right, and he decided to go no farther South.

One day, Joergen, the lanky, stretched out youth, met Jubo who was short and squat. The actual day was truly forgotten, but not the consequences.

Jubo always carried a pick-axe over his hunched shoulders. He was well-meaning but ignorant, except in the ways of the earth. He lived close to its undulations and was familiar with what were secrets to others, hidden under its surface. He knew them because of what came through the crevices, some of which he had made himself with his pick-axe. He knew of the slithering movement of the earthworm, and with a slow gaze he would follow its drill-like motion into the ground. He knew of the scurrying ways of the chipmunk as it darted between the rocks. He would follow it with his quick, black eyes until his ear could no longer hear its sharp chirping.

Jubo spent his youth eradicating dandelions. He lived in a land where they had become a ubiquitous and pestiferous weed. He did not know these words, but if he did, he could not have expressed it more strongly. He found out that the plant's root could pierce the ground as much as a foot deep, straight down, and that his using his pick-axe was the only sure way of getting rid of the weed.

In the course of his work Jubo developed feelings

towards the dandelion: he hated it and loved it, and he held it in awe. He hated its strength and pervasiveness, he loved its beauty when he saw little children blow on the light pappus of delicate white hairs and watch the fruit float off in the air on the waves of their wishes. He had heard of the Russian dandelion, with its root half an inch in diameter and, in Russia, a commercial source of rubber. That, and its name Kok-saghyz, filled Jubo with awe.

But, as duty called, and putting his feelings aside, Jubo would heave his pick-axe high over his head and let it come down into the ground near the dandelion with a force that reverberated through the entire meadow. With the soil so loosened he would hold the plant by its dentate leaves and triumphantly pull it out. He had only known such pleasure at other times, when he would seize a mop of hair of the woman he loved and hated, and hear her scream and beg him to let go.

That particular day Joergen was pacing East and West along his chosen latitude. He met Jubo in a field of dandelions.

"Hail," said Joergen, "what a wonderful field of salad and potherbs."

"It's all a weed," Jubo replied.

"What do you mean 'a weed'?"

"A weed is an unwanted plant, in my way of thinking."

"An unwanted plant?" repeated Joergen, experiencing for the first time on his journey and far away from his motherland, a touch of warmth in the region of his belly.

He remembered the taste, though slightly bitter, of the salad that his mother used to make, and the wafting aroma as she stirred the hot brew of dandelion leaves.

She was a nature-conscious woman who taught him respect for the milkweed and for any other plant that yields milk as its juice. She was also an educated woman.

"The dandelion," she once told him, "bears its name from dent-de-lion, French for lion's tooth... not to be confused, my son," she added glancing just above his mid-riff where his cool heart lay, "with Coeur de Lion, the name of a brave and warm-hearted English king."

Joergen looked at the tooth-like lobes of the dandelion leaves and remembered his mother's words.

"Yes, an unwanted plant," Jubo said again, as he lifted his pick-axe in the usual manner to show Joergen his skill at removing it.

As Joergen made a move to stop Jubo, the angle of the pick-axe shifted, and instead of falling next to it, the point of the pick pierced the center of the plant. The two men stood stunned and silent as they watched the dandelion, bleeding.

'Not to be confused, my son, with Coeur de Lion...'

Joergen heard his mother's words as the warmth from his belly shifted to the organ that was his heart.

Just then he heard the song of the skylark high above the meadow, and he knew that it was the most beautiful song he had ever heard.

He was ready to return home.

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