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The Devil and Miss Prym

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Extract

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For almost fifteen years, old Berta had spent every day sitting outside her front door. The people of Viscos knew that this was normal behaviour amongst old people: they sit dreaming of the past and of their youth; they look out at a world in which they no longer play a part and try to find something to talk to the neighbours about.

Berta, however, had a reason for being there. And that morning her waiting came to an end when she saw the stranger climbing the steep hill up to the village, heading for its one hotel. He did not look as she had so often imagined he would: his clothes were shabby, he wore his hair unfashionably long, he was unshaven.

And he was accompanied by the Devil.

'My husband's right,' she said to herself. 'If I hadn't been here, no one would have noticed.'

She was hopeless at telling people's ages and put the man's somewhere between forty and fifty. 'A youngster,' she thought, using a scale of values that only old people understand. She wondered how long he would be staying, but reached no conclusion; it might be only a short time, since all he had with him was a small rucksack. He would probably

just stay one night before moving on to a fate about which she knew nothing and cared even less.

Even so, all the years she had spent sitting by her front door waiting for his arrival had not been in vain, because they had taught her the beauty of the mountains, something she had never really noticed before, simply because she had been born in that place and had always tended to take the landscape for granted.

As expected, the stranger went into the hotel. Berta wondered if she should go and warn the priest about this undesirable visitor, but she knew he wouldn't listen to her, dismissing the matter as the kind of thing old people like to worry about.

So now she just had to wait and see what happened. It doesn't take a devil much time to bring about destruction; they are like storms, hurricanes or avalanches, which, in a few short hours, can destroy trees planted two hundred years before. Suddenly, Berta realised that the mere fact that Evil had just arrived in Viscos did not change anything: devils come and go all the time without necessarily affecting anything by their presence. They are constantly abroad in the world, some times simply to find out what's going on, at others to put some soul or other to the test. But they are fickle creatures, and there is no logic in their choice of target, being drawn merely by the pleasure of a battle worth fighting. Berta concluded that there was nothing sufficiently interesting or special about Viscos to attract the attention of

anyone for more than a day, let alone someone as important and busy as a messenger from the dark.

She tried to turn her mind to something else, but she couldn't get the image of the stranger out of her head. The sky, which had been clear and bright up until then, suddenly clouded over.

'That's normal, it always happens at this time of year,' she thought. It was simply a coincidence and had nothing to do with the stranger's arrival.

Then, in the distance, she heard a clap of thunder, followed by another three. On the one hand, this simply meant that rain was on the way; on the other, if the old superstitions of the village were to be believed, the sound could be interpreted as the voice of an angry God, protesting that mankind had grown indifferent to His presence.

'Perhaps I should do something. After all, what I was waiting for has finally happened.'

She sat for a few minutes, paying close attention to everything going on around her; the clouds had continued to gather above the village, but she heard no other sounds. As a good ex-Catholic, she put no store by traditions and superstitions, especially those of Viscos, which had their roots in the ancient Celtic civilisation that once existed in the place.

'A thunderclap is an entirely natural phenomenon. If God wanted to talk to man, he wouldn't use such roundabout methods.'

She had just thought this when she again heard a peal of thunder accompanied by a flash of lightning – a lot closer

this time. Berta got to her feet, picked up her chair and went into her house before the rain started; but this time she felt her heart contract with an indefinable fear.

'What should I do?'

Again she wished that the stranger would simply leave at once; she was too old to help herself or her village, far less assist Almighty God, who, if He needed any help, would surely have chosen someone younger. This was all just some insane dream; her husband clearly had nothing better to do than to invent ways of helping her pass the time.

But of one thing she was sure, she had seen the Devil.

In the flesh and dressed as a pilgrim.

The hotel was, at one and the same time, a shop selling local products, a restaurant serving food typical of the region, and a bar where the people of Viscos could gather to talk about what they always talked about: how the weather was doing, or how young people had no interest in the village. 'Nine months of winter, three months of hell,' they used to say, referring to the fact that each year they had only ninety days to carry out all the work in the fields, fertilising, sowing, waiting, then harvesting the crops, storing the hay and shearing the sheep.

Everyone who lived there knew they were clinging to a world whose days were numbered; even so, it was not easy for them to accept that they would be the last generation of the farmers and shepherds who had lived in those mountains for centuries. Sooner or later the machines would arrive, the livestock would be reared far from there on special food, the village itself might well be sold to a big multinational that would turn it into a ski resort.

That is what had happened to other villages in the region, but Viscos had resisted – because it owed a debt to the past, to the strong traditions of those ancestors who had once chosen to live here, and who had taught them the importance of fighting to the bitter end.

The stranger carefully read the form he was given to fill in at the hotel, deciding what he was going to put. From his accent, they would know he came from some South American country, and he decided it should be Argentina, because he really liked their football team. In the space left for his address, he wrote Colombia Street, knowing that South Americans are in the habit of paying homage to each other by naming important places after neighbouring countries. As his name, he chose that of a famous terrorist from the previous century.

In less than two hours, all the 281 inhabitants of Viscos knew that a stranger named Carlos had arrived in the village, that he had been born in Argentina and now lived in a pleasant street in Buenos Aires. That is the advantage of very small villages: without making the slightest effort, you can learn all there is to know about a person's life.

Which was precisely what the newcomer wanted.

He went up to his room and unpacked his rucksack: it contained a few clothes, a shaving kit, an extra pair of shoes, vitamins to ward off colds, a thick notebook to write in, and eleven bars of gold, each weighing two kilos. Worn out by tension, by the climb and by the weight he had been carrying, the stranger fell asleep almost at once, though not before placing a chair under the door handle, even though he knew he could count on each and every one of Viscos' 281 inhabitants.

The next morning he ate breakfast, left his dirty clothes at reception to be laundered, put the gold bars back in his rucksack, and set off for the mountain to the east of the village. On his way, he saw only one villager, an old woman sitting in front of her house, who was looking at him with great interest.

He plunged into the forest, where he waited until his hearing had become used to the noises made by the insects and birds, and by the wind rattling the leafless branches; he knew that in a place like this someone could easily be observing him without his being aware of it, so he stood there for almost an hour without doing anything.

When he felt sure that any possible observer would have lost interest and moved on without anything to report, he dug a hole close to a rocky outcrop in the shape of a Y and hid one of the bars there. Then he climbed a little higher, spent another hour as if in rapt contemplation of nature, spotted another rocky outcrop – this time in the form of an eagle – and dug another hole, in which he placed the remaining ten gold bars.

The first person he saw as he walked back to the village was a young woman sitting beside one of the many temporary rivers that formed when the ice melted high up in the mountains. She looked up from her book, acknowledged his presence, and resumed her reading; doubtless her mother had told her never to talk to strangers.

Strangers, however, when they arrive in a new place, have the right to try and make friends with people they do not

know, and so he went over to her.

'Hello,' he said. 'Very hot for the time of year.'

She nodded in agreement.

The stranger went on: 'I'd like you to come and look at something.'

She politely put down her book, held out her hand, and introduced herself.

'My name's Chantal. I work in the evenings at the bar of the hotel where you're staying, and I was surprised when you didn't come down to dinner, because a hotel doesn't make its money just from renting rooms, you know, but from everything the guests consume. You are Carlos from Argentina and you live in Colombia Street; everyone in the village knows that already, because a man arriving here outside of the hunting season is always an object of curiosity. A man in his fifties, with greying hair, and the look of someone whom has been around a bit.

'And thank you for your invitation, but I've already seen the landscape around Viscos from every possible and imaginable angle; perhaps it would be better if I showed you places you haven't seen, but I suppose you must be very busy.'

'I'm 52, my name isn't Carlos, and everything I wrote on the form at the hotel is false.'

Chantal didn't know what to say. The stranger went on:

'It's not Viscos I want to show you. It's something you've never seen before.'

She had read many stories about young women who decide to go into the forest with a stranger, only to vanish

without trace. For a moment she was afraid, but her fear was quickly replaced by a desire for adventure: after all, this man wouldn't dare do anything to her when she had just told him that everyone in the village knew all about him – even if none of the details were actually true.

'Who are you?' she asked. 'If what you say is true, surely you realise I could turn you in to the police for passing yourself off with a false identity?'

'I promise to answer all your questions, but first you have to come with me, because I really do want to show you something. It's about five minutes' walk from here.'

Chantal closed her book, took a deep breath and offered up a silent prayer, while her heart beat in fear and excitement. Then she got up and followed the stranger, convinced that this would prove to be yet another disappointing encounter, one which started out full of promise and turned into yet another dream of impossible love.

The man went over to the Y-shaped rock, indicated the recently dug earth, and suggested she uncover what lay buried there.

'I'll get my hands dirty,' protested Chantal. 'I'll get my dress dirty too.'

The man grabbed a branch, broke it and handed it to her to use as a spade. She found such behaviour distinctly odd, but decided to do as he asked.

Five minutes later, a grubby, yellowish bar lay before her.

'It looks like gold,' she said.

'It is gold. And it's mine. Now please cover it over again.'

She did as she was told. The man led her to the next hiding place. Again she began digging, and this time was astonished at the quantity of gold she saw before her.

'That's gold too. And it's also mine,' said the stranger.

Chantal was beginning to cover the gold over again with soil, when he asked her to leave the hole as it was. He sat down on one of the rocks, lit a cigarette, and stared at the horizon.

'Why did you want to show me this?' she asked.

He didn't respond.

'Who are you exactly? And what are you doing here? Why did you show me this, knowing I could go and tell everyone what's hidden here on the mountain?'

'So many questions all at once,' the stranger replied, keeping his eyes fixed on the mountains, as if oblivious to her presence. 'As for telling the others, that's precisely what I want you to do.'

'You promised me that, if I came with you, you would answer any questions I asked you.'

'In the first place, you shouldn't believe in promises. The world is full of them: promises of riches, of eternal salvation, of infinite love. Some people think they can promise anything, others accept whatever seems to guarantee better days ahead, as, I suspect, is your case. Those who make promises they don't keep end up powerless and frustrated, and exactly the same fate awaits those who believe those promises.'

He was making things too complicated; he was talking about his own life, about the night that had changed his

destiny, about the lies he had been obliged to believe because he could not accept reality. He needed, rather, to use the kind of language the young woman would understand.

Chantal, however, had understood just about everything. Like all older men, he was obsessed with the idea of sex with a younger woman. Like all human beings, he thought money could buy whatever he wanted. Like all strangers, he was sure that young women from remote villages were naïve enough to accept any proposal, real or imaginary, provided it offered a faint chance of escape.

He was not the first and would not, alas, be the last to try and seduce her in that vulgar way. What confused her was the amount of gold he was offering: she had never imagined she could be worth that much, and the thought both pleased her and filled her with a sense of panic.

'I'm too old to believe in promises,' she said, trying to gain time.

'Even though you've always believed in them and still do?'

'You're wrong. I know I live in paradise and I've read the Bible and I'm not going to make the same mistake as Eve, who wasn't contented with her lot.'

This was not, of course, true, and she had already begun to worry that the stranger might lose interest and leave. The truth was that she had spun the web, setting up their meeting in the woods by strategically positioning herself at a spot he would be sure to pass on his way back – just so as to have someone to talk to, another promise to hear, a few days in

which to dream of a possible new love and a one-way ticket out of the valley where she was born. Her heart had already been broken many times over, and yet she still believed she was destined to meet the man of her life. At first, she had let many chances slip by, thinking that the right person had not yet arrived, but now she had a sense that time was passing more quickly than she had thought, and she was prepared to leave Viscos with the first man willing to take her, even if she felt nothing for him. Doubtless, she would learn to love him – love, too, was just a question of time.

'That's precisely what I want to find out: are we living in paradise or in hell?' the man said, interrupting her thoughts.

Good, he was falling into her trap.

'In paradise. But if you live somewhere perfect for a long time, you get bored with it in the end.'

She had thrown out the first bait. She had said, though not in so many words: 'I'm free, I'm available.' His next question would be: 'Like you?'

'Like you?' the stranger asked.

She had to be careful, she mustn't seem too eager or she might scare him off.

'I don't know. Sometimes I think that and sometimes I think my destiny is to stay here and that I wouldn't know how to live far from Viscos.'

The next step: to feign indifference.

'Right, then, since you won't tell me anything about the gold you showed me, I'll just thank you for the walk and return to my river and my book.'

'Just a moment!'

The stranger had taken the bait.

'Of course I'll explain about the gold; why else would I have brought you here?'

Sex, money, power, promises. But Chantal decided to pretend that she was expecting some amazing revelation; men take the oddest satisfaction in feeling superior, without knowing that most of the time they are being utterly predictable.

'You're obviously a man with a great deal of experience, someone who could teach me a lot.'

That was it. Gently slacken the rope and then lavish a little light praise on your prey so as not to frighten him off. That was an important rule to follow.

'However, you have a dreadful habit of making long speeches about promises or about how we should behave, instead of replying to a simple question. I'd be delighted to stay if only you'd answer the questions I asked you at the start: who exactly are you? And what are you doing here?'

The stranger turned his gaze from the mountains and looked at the young woman in front of him. He had worked for many years with all kinds of people and he knew – almost for certain – what she must be thinking. She probably thought he had shown her the gold in order to impress her with his wealth, just as now she was trying to impress him with her youth and indifference.

'Who am I? Well, let's say I'm a man who, for some time now, has been searching for a particular truth. I finally discovered the theory, but I've never put it into practice.'

'What sort of truth?'

'About the nature of human beings. I discovered that confronted by temptation, we will always fall. Given the right circumstances, every human being on this earth would be willing to commit evil.'

'I think ...'

'It's not a question of what you or I think, or of what we want to believe, but of finding out if my theory is correct. You want to know who I am. Well, I'm an extremely rich and famous industrialist, who held sway over thousands of employees, was ruthless when necessary and kind when I had to be.

'I'm a man who has experienced things that most people never even dream of, and who went beyond all the usual limits in his search for both pleasure and knowledge. A man who found paradise when he thought he was a prisoner to the hell of routine and family, and who found hell when he could at last enjoy paradise and total freedom. That's who I am, a man who has been both good and evil throughout his life, perhaps the person most fitted to reply to my own question about the essence of humanity – and that's why I'm here. I know what you're going to ask next.'

Chantal felt she was losing ground. She needed to regain it rapidly.

'You think I'm going to ask: "Why did you show me the gold?" But what I really want to know is why a rich and famous industrialist would come to Viscos in search of an answer he could find in books, universities, or simply by consulting some illustrious philosopher.'

The stranger was pleased at the girl's intelligence. Good, he had chosen the right person – as ever.

'I came to Viscos because I had a plan. A long time ago, I went to see a play by a writer called Dürrenmatt, whom I'm sure you know ...'

His comment was merely intended to provoke her: obviously a young woman like her would never have heard of Dürrenmatt, and he knew that she would again try to appear indifferent, as if she knew who he was talking about.

'Go on,' said Chantal, feigning indifference.

'I'm glad to see you know his work, but let me just remind you about the particular play I mean.' He measured his words carefully so that his remarks would not sound too sarcastic, but would also make it clear that he knew she was lying. 'It's about a woman who makes her fortune and then returns to her home town with the sole intention of humiliating and destroying the man who rejected her in her youth. Her life, her marriage and her financial success have all been motivated by the desire to take revenge on her first love.

'So then I thought up my own game: I would go to some remote place, where everyone looked on life with joy, peace and compassion, and I would see if I could make the people there break a few of the Ten Commandments.'

Chantal looked away and stared at the mountains. She knew the stranger had realised that she had never heard of the author he was talking about and now she was afraid he would ask her about those ten commandments; she had never been very religious and had not the slightest idea what they were.