

Stefan aus dem Siepen

The Rope

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In the early morning grey, Bernhardt got dressed. Rising early was in his blood, and today he was up even earlier than usual because the imminent harvest was making him restless. As he buttoned up his vest, he glanced out of the window towards where the rope lay. He held his breath in surprise: in the dim light, dark figures loomed out against the backdrop of the forest, six or seven men by the looks of it; almost half the village. But what would they be doing there so early?

As Bernhardt walked outside, a fresh, almost cool breeze wafted towards him, confusing him. Stringy streaks of cloud were making their way across the sky; they weren't right for the harvesting month either, they looked like unseasonable harbingers of autumn. It seemed as though even the leaves on the trees had lost their saturated green overnight, as if there was a fine yellow tone mixed in, a hint of mellowness, over-ripeness in the foliage – but no, it couldn't be; the early light was just making the colours appear different.

The farmers were standing around the rope, their faces gruff with the earliness of the hour.

Morning, called Bernhardt as he approached them. I already saw the rope yesterday evening. Do you know who it belongs to?

No-one answered him, they were all staring at the floor or into the distance, and only one of them mumbled something. It was incomprehensible and didn't sound in the least bit friendly. For the first time, Bernhardt was able to see the rope clearly: it extended seven or eight feet over the meadow to the edge of the forest, then disappeared between the trunks in the thicket. He bent over, looked at the rope with his expert farmer's eye, ran the tips of his fingers along it. Then, spontaneously, he entwined it around his hand, took a step back and gave it a sharp tug. It rose up out of the grass and waved in the air, forming a crooked line towards the wood. It quivered and swayed, but without yielding – it must have been tied down in the undergrowth.

Bernhardt threw a glance at the others, trying to look cheerful and lively – Maybe the children are playing a prank on us? he said. Well, it seems they've succeeded. Eight men who have nothing better to do than stare at a rope first thing in the morning!

The farmers buried their hands in their pockets, still not saying a word. Bernhardt crossly made a dismissive gesture and walked over towards the trees. His head bowed, he pushed a branch aside and made his way in amongst the tree trunks. The darkness swallowed him up; the sunlight, which had only just started to cloak the tips of the trees with a hesitant glimmer, didn't penetrate this deep. As far as he could tell, the rope extended into the forest in a straight line. With one arm stretched out in front of him and the other shielding his eyes, he worked his way forward from tree to tree, damp twigs brushing over his face and thorny bushes tearing at his trouser legs as he passed. After every few steps, he stopped and peered ahead into the thicket, trying to see if the rope was tied up somewhere, and then carried on, mumbling and shaking his head. With every metre, the feeling grew that he was making a fool of himself: He had never been in the forest so early, and on an empty stomach too. And certainly not to follow a rope! The others were sure to be laughing about him already; clearly he had decided to take on the role of the village clown.

As his eyes began to adjust to the dim light, he was able to see the rope on the pine needle saturated floor with ever increasing clarity, see how it gently meandered between the tree trunks. How far had he already

come? Fifty, sixty feet? A twig suddenly hit him in the face and the sharp pain made him cry out. He leant his shoulder against a tree trunk and the air ejected from him with a moan. Cautiously, he touched his cheek: the skin under his eye felt wet, he must have grazed it. He craned his head back, breathing in through his wide open mouth as if he had a tiring path behind him from which he needed to take a rest. Then he expelled a snorting laugh, which took on an eerie sound in the early morning stillness of the forest, almost as if it wasn't him laughing but someone else. Then he turned back.

As he walked back out over the meadow, he was met by the same picture as before, except three more farmers had joined them, and a young woman too, who wore nothing but her nightshirt and a shawl thrown around her, as if, in order not to miss the commotion, she had sprung head over heels out of bed. There was a bare-footed girl with blonde braids too, holding a cat in her arms, and an old man with a smoking pipe in his toothless mouth. They all looked over towards him, curious and silent.

The rope is long! You can take my word for it! I went quite a way, but I didn't find the end.

The farmers stared fixedly at the streak of blood which stretched diagonally across his cheek, from his eyelid downwards. Bernhardt smacked himself on the chest with the flat of his hand, trying to shake off the drops of dew which covered his vest like a translucent overall.

That's enough, he said, in a tone of intensifying rage. I have more important things to do than hang around in the forest all day! What's all this about for God's sake? This stupid rope is just stealing my time, and yours too!

He paced quickly off through the middle of the group.

After much to-ing and fro-ing, the men of the village decided to follow the rope into the forest and find out where it was coming from. Even Rauk, the teacher who moved around from village to village, decided to join them.]

7.

Just keep going!

The men set off quickly, one marching behind the other in a loosely structured convoy. The forest soon began to get lighter, and the pine trees that grew all around the village gradually gave way to beeches, with trunks that rose up like pale silver columns. There was a light breeze which quickly warmed; glistening light swooped down through the treetops and sprinkled the ground with dancing specks. Rauk set his dogs free and they thundered off into the distance as if possessed by some powerful force, their tongues waving out of their mouths like red bunting, jumping up over each others' backs and necks at full pelt, constantly in danger of crashing into the trees.

The farmers were content. They searched further and further into the thicket of darkness and light, unable to get enough of the rope, which at times shimmered visibly in the sun, and at others disappeared amongst the rotten brown tones of the foliage. The end of it was nowhere to be seen, it ran further and further, stretching out like a sinister thread through the labyrinth of wooden columns. The longer the men walked, the stronger its effect on them became; each of them was penetrated by the intense, heart-racing sensation of

experiencing something which had never before existed in the history of the village, something which lay beyond all comprehension.

Shortly before midday, the men paused for a rest. They stretched their limbs, reaching up into the leaves, pulled their provisions out of their bags and squirted water or beer into their mouths from leather pouches. In the course of the morning, a dry warmth had spread out across the forest. There was no trace now of the freshness of the day before, of the strange streaks of clouds in the sky. Sweating and dozing, they all looked up into the blue through the roof of leaves. The rope lay next to them in the foliage, as if it were part of their group and taking a rest along with them.

After a while, Bernhardt stood up. He positioned himself between the men and spoke, with a trace of embarrassment, like someone who has something important on their mind but is too shy to make a fuss:

So, men; we've been at it for half a day already. It's about time we thought about turning around, don't you think?

Hardly anyone stirred; almost all of them were lost in their sleepy thoughts. Michael was sitting against a tree, devouring a long smoked sausage; he gave Bernhardt an ill-humoured look, as if he felt his mealtime had been disturbed. Rauk was busy throwing chunks of meat into the wide-open gullet of the slavering aggressor standing before him, its legs spread wide, and he didn't seem to hear a word.

We've walked for long enough now, said Bernhardt into the silence, don't you think? Let's turn around, otherwise we'll never get back to the village in time.

The men exchanged stolen, uneasy glances. Someone murmured something incomprehensible, most likely a curse, and the others dedicated their attention to their food with displays of great urgency. It was clear that no-one felt like heading back yet, they were all full of energy, and the desire for adventure – for the unknown – which had brought them here was still far from being sated.

Someone called out:

Oh, don't overreact, Bernhardt. It's still early – only just midday. We can go a little further!

Exactly! We're not in that much of a hurry! We haven't even gone that far yet!

Michael put his fingers in his mouth to pick scraps of meat out of his back teeth. Then, in a tone that implied he had something substantial to add that no-one had yet thought of, he said: Exactly, it's still early, let's carry on. We're not in that much of a hurry!

Rauk fastened the now empty bag of meat chunks to his belt and picked his bow and arrow up from the ground, as if he was preparing to march on. He nodded vigorously in Michael's direction, not just by way of agreement, but also to denounce the matter as settled now that Micheal had expressed himself so cleverly and exhaustively. Then he turned to Bernhardt:

It's a good thing you reminded us of the time. You're right, we shouldn't stay sitting here any longer; the sun is already high, so it's best we set off right away! The earlier we find out what's going on with this rope, the

earlier we can go back to the village.

Bernhardt made a weak gesture, realising that his words had fallen on deaf ears. One after another, the farmers stood up and began to talk over one another. Thor towered up over Rauk and, with an impassioned whimper, put his paws on his shoulders as if pleading that the men should march on. The first were already pulling their bags on, no-one was hanging around.

The forest floor was no longer as flat as it had been that morning, but was interspersed with gentle elevations which followed one another in a peacefully serene rhythm, a play of rising and falling lines. Pale blue flowers, beautiful latecomers of the retreating summer, grew lushly between the trees, spreading out like little pools. The rope ran on and on, stretching out around the hillocks in winding arcs, or climbing, straight and purposeful, away from them. With every step the men took, they were following the puzzle that had brought them out here, and with every step, the solution to that puzzle slipped further away. The time passed quickly and no-one paid attention to it, so strong was the compulsion to go further and further. Even Bernhardt stayed silent.

By late afternoon, when the silver of the beech trees began to be tarnished by darkness, the men became tired, feeling the price they had to pay for a day of strenuous hiking. In a spacious hollow alongside a flowing stream, they stopped and set up camp for the night. A fire of dried twigs was ignited, and all of them brought out the provisions left over from the midday meal, as well as mushrooms and nuts that they had picked and stowed away in their bags along the way; they had everything they needed to make themselves comfortable, to let the day fade away in well-earned silent contemplation.

They all looked up, perturbed, as Bernhardt positioned himself in the middle of the group and raised his hand to request their attention.

We have now marched all day long, men. What happened to our agreement to be home again by the afternoon? We broke it, and our women are waiting for us in vain.

The farmers stayed silent, staring reluctantly at the floor. Raimund, who was in the process of starting a fire, a heavy branch in his hands which he was about to break into pieces over his thigh, exposed the yellow rows of his teeth with a hiss.

We have to make our way back tomorrow morning, Bernhardt continued, it's high time! By the time we make it back to the village another day will have passed. An entire day!

We know, for God's sake! You don't need to tell us that! Raimund called back at him, snapping the branch with a furious movement and holding the two ends in his fat fists like weapons. Leave us be! We know how far it is back to the village!

Bernhardt managed to meet his gaze calmly.

Why are you snarling at me like that? Think of our women and children. They'll be very worried about us. Perhaps they're holding counsel under the oak this very minute, or standing at the edge of the forest waiting for us. How are they supposed to understand the fact that we're still not back with them?

Give it a rest, Bernhardt! Michael called out, interrupting him. What do you want us to say? Yes, it's true, we agreed to be back in the village by the afternoon. That's all well and good, but sometimes things turn out differently to how we expect!

Exactly! cried another. It comes as it comes! And besides, you're still here, Bernhardt! Or am I mistaken? Why didn't you turn around and go back?'

Bernhardt averted his gaze.

Yes...That's true....even I carried on this far...but now I'm telling you that enough is enough! We have to turn back! The harvest is waiting – we can't put it off any longer. With every day that passes it gets more dangerous, the weather could turn tomorrow!

His words made an impression on the farmers, to a certain extent at least. Although somewhat aloof, Bernhardt was regarded in the village as a sensible man, one who only got drunk one or two times in the course of the year at most, and whose opinion was worth listening to. He was only voicing what the men had already told themselves: the fields had passed through their minds again and again, and it cut them to the quick to leave their wives in uncertainty.

But at the same time, he also roused their resistance. The hike had stirred something within them; just the mere thought of the rope made them reluctant to break off this great adventure, to set off home without having accomplished anything. They were also too proud and stubborn to listen to warnings from one of their kind, someone who didn't have the right to consider himself more intelligent than them: Who did Bernhardt think he was?

Bernhardt, I think we can put off turning back for a little while longer.

This time, it was Rauk who had spoken. He was sat on the upper edge of the hollow, a fair distance away from the others, and had crossed his legs in such a way that his club foot was concealed. He looked up with a cold smile.

The weather was magnificent today, don't you think? A warm and sunny day, not one single cloud in the sky; summer – from the looks of things – has come back! So that's why I'm of the opinion, Bernhardt, that we don't need to worry too much about the harvest. If we carry on a little further tomorrow, who knows: just one or two hours, and then make our way back, there will be plenty of time.

He articulated his words clearly, in a sonorous tone, interlacing them here and there with gestures that had a touch of firmness, even of clandestine violence, and using his hands very demonstrably.

You reminded us, Bernhardt, that we made an 'agreement'. Yes, we certainly did, and agreements should be kept to, sure...but please bear this in mind: when we decided yesterday to make our way back by the afternoon, we couldn't yet have known how deeply – how strangely and mysteriously deeply – the rope would lead us into the forest. Nor could we have suspected that the weather would improve again, that the summer would once again bless us with warm and beautiful days. So let's be honest – we made a mistake! The agreement was wrong! And if it was wrong, why should we keep to it?

Finally, let me say a word about our wives and children, Bernhardt. I don't think the situation here is all that bad. If you think about it properly, those waiting for us at home have no reason to worry. Our group is composed of over a dozen men, and each of us is carrying a bow and arrow – there's virtually nothing that could pose a danger to us! And so the women, of this I'm sure, won't be afraid; on the contrary they'll tell each other that there must be a good reason for us not having come back yet. Once we tell them what happened, they will realise that we acted appropriately – that we had no other choice but to go further and further...

He stretched his weedy upper body and arms up in a gesture which, without meaning anything in particular, was incredibly expressive. The setting sun, shining down through the branches, covered his figure in a pink-orange shimmer, lending it a dignified and respect-inspiring air that it didn't possess in normal light.

Men! We are on the brink of solving a great mystery. Each one of us senses that there's a deep, wonderful explanation to this rope. We sensed it this morning when we set off, and now it has become a certainty. Who wouldn't be gripped by a mystery like this? And who wouldn't feel the urge to get to the bottom of it? To turn around now, to make our way back to the village with empty hands, that would be foolish. Let's carry on tomorrow morning – just a little further, until the mystery is solved!

While Rauk was speaking to them, the builders had tilted their heads to the side, and most of them also had their mouths slightly open – some not just slightly. They were simultaneously gripped and confused by his eloquence: there were a few things they hadn't understood at all, and yet they were sure that, overall, he could only be right. They continued to stare at him expectantly, even though they knew he wouldn't say another word.

Micheal was the first to rouse himself.

So, men! You heard! he called, bracing his hands on his sides with somewhat insincere enthusiasm. Let us now decide what to do!

He took two steps up to the edge of the hollow, positioning himself between Rauk and the others.

I ask you: Who is in favour of going back to the village first thing tomorrow morning?

Bernhardt, who had sat down on a rock in the deepest point of the hollow, raised his hand. Another farmer uttered a soft snort, cleared his throat to give himself courage and did the same. A third moved his arm slowly and hesitantly, looking left and right out of the corner of his eyes to find out what the others would do, and then pushed his hands into his trouser pockets.

Aha. So. Two men! Michael spoke surely and loudly again, and the first trace of a triumphant grin began to twitch around his lips.

What about the others? Do you want to carry on tomorrow morning? Just a little bit further? To the end of the rope?

They did.



English translation by Jamie Searle