

Changing sides

A humble house stood by the road, and a small garden lay just outside that house. The garden itself was protected from curious eyes by an orchard of several fruit trees and shrubs growing along the path – an apple tree, a pear tree, two walnut trees, and some plum trees. The path ran towards the house, but hitting the barrier of the orchard, it bypassed it and disappeared in a nearby forest.

An old rotten, wooden fence, leaning toward the ground and mended countless times, protected the garden against wild beasts. It could not, however, protect it against weeds. This occurred to a woman, stooped all the way to the ground and leaning against a hoe. She wore a bonnet, and with nobody around within miles, she didn't bother putting on anything other than a blouse and a skirt. Even her feet were bare, which was much more comfortable than shoes full of dirt and small parts of dry plants.

Distant, until then unperceivable thumping of hooves and a faint rattling, clinking and screeching of a cart began to take over the rustling leaves and the orchestra of birds. The woman, curious, yet patient, waited for the travelers to come close enough for her to be able to peer at them through gaps between the trees. As a group of four men – two on horses and two more on the cart, stopped in front of her house, the travelers turned into visitors. The men got off the horses and the cart, and three of them headed towards her. The fourth, she noticed, walked around the house.

She knew who they were. Neither the fence, nor the orchard, could protect the woman from law enforcement.

Living alone, there wasn't anyone one to call out to. Nor anywhere to run to. She carried on with her business, though slightly more eagerly, as though she was trying to pluck as many weeds as she could before the men approached.

The men on horses wore simple, peasant's clothes. So did one of the two who had arrived on the cart. The fourth man, however, wore a priest's robe. "Rose Londally," the priest called from a distance. Obviously, he didn't share the woman's patience. The woman did not react to hearing her name, although she had heard it well enough. "Rose Londally," he repeated even more loudly and importantly. "You are hereby arrested for suspected acts of blasphemy, neglect of your Christian duties and," he made a short pause, "witchery."

Yet, the woman was not moved by any of this. The two apprentices looked at the priest with a question in their eyes. With a look of nonplus, the priest stopped and proclaimed with a mincing tone, seemingly to impress her: "Abandon the confines of your garden and allow the competent agency to fulfill its duty. All resistance is vain."

The woman, as if suddenly realizing something, lifted herself up, using the hoe to help her stand up. The hoe fell out of her hands rather than being dropped. Her hands shaking.

"Samuel," the priest called into the, at first glance, empty orchard. "You can come out. All is well." When the apprentice who had served as backup, came from behind her house, he saw he had been redundant. The woman had not resisted. He was surprised to see her so calm while she was being tied up. Usually they didn't resign until *after* the *process*. Had it not been for that peculiarity, he would have, perhaps, paid her no more notice. But at that point, once his curiosity had been provoked, it was inevitable that Samuel took a more thorough look at her.

While his companions were occupied by loading the bound woman onto the cart, Samuel was, for a change, busy taking sidelong glances at her. The more he looked at her, the more he was tempted

to do so. Each glance sowed more doubt and disbelief into his heart, despite confirming his chilling hunch.

The woman did not notice his interest. All she seemed to care about was what lay at her feet. Her captors paid no attention to their companion either. None of them noticed his scrutinizing look. None, but the priest.

As soon as a stern order from the priest got the whole company moving, Samuel had to pay attention to the road. The two men on the horses rode behind the cart lest the woman try to escape.

“Samuel, keep your eyes on her while we prepare her chamber,” the priest said mockingly once they arrived into town. He had to turn away to hide his sly grin from Samuel – he couldn’t help it.

The apprentice jumped over the edge of the bench he had been sitting on and sat on the brim of the cart – opposite the woman accused of witchery. She lifted her head, which had grown at least twice as heavy during the ride, and after a brief look, her eyes quickly found a different target, for they had met Samuel’s. But then, with hesitation, the woman looked back at him and this time her eyes rested upon him. Life returned to them and they were so persistent that it was Samuel who felt the urge to look away.

“You?” she gasped. “This cannot be! What are *you* doing among them? Surely you are here to save me? I haven’t got the slightest idea how you found me, or how you managed to infiltrate their ranks, but I am thankful to you, for you are very brave! Untie me, quickly! Now’s our chance!”

The woman’s excitement trailed off when he didn’t react, let alone obey her urging. Dread reentered to her face. “Why?” she uttered in a broken voice. “After all they have done to you... And your mother... What did it take? Ten years? Is that enough to wipe it all away?”

Samuel was silent, but his expression had changed. He was no longer so cold and relentless. The events she was mentioning emerged from his memory after a long time. The persecution. Days without eating, constant fear, his mother’s comforting words that they were going to find a safe place, a few days’ rest ended by the appalling tidings – *the inquisition*. And in the end – abandonment.

“Did you...” the woman stuttered, her lips trembling.

“I did not turn her in!” Samuel spoke at last. His voice gave away that he was offended by the question. “But I should have...” he added bitterly.

“How can you say that? You were everything to her. And them? How did you forgive them? *Why* did you forgive them? I don’t understand.”

“There is nothing to forgive *them*. My mother should have asked for my forgiveness! It was all her fault – she ruined my life with her witchery – witchery, which she refused to give up after all that had happened to us.” He sounded bitter, but not entirely sure about what he was saying. “And it did not end after her death! Everywhere we had ever taken refuge, and god knows there were many of those places, I was known as the son of the burnt witch. It took me years to get rid of that mark! When my past was at last forgotten, I decided to join the effort to wipe out this plague!”

“They have changed you!” she goggled with fear. “They have infected you with their lies! Samuel, have mercy! I risked for you, back in the days... Can you not do the same for me?”

“You think that just because you knew my mother...” he uttered disdainfully.

“Wake up!” she burst out, almost weeping. “You want to punish me for my sins? Here are my sins: I stopped going to church because I could take the fallacy no longer! I worshiped God in my own way! And, of course, I brewed herbal tea!” she added ironically. “Is that enough reason for me to burn?”

“Save that for the priest,” Samuel snapped at her, but he could not bear her gaze, nor the sudden burden of guilt – he looked away. His eyes fell upon the wooden door behind him and he gasped as though someone suddenly clasped his throat. The door was open ajar and the face of the priest with a malicious grin on his face loomed in the shadow. He had been listening all along.

Samuel had already been sitting in the cell for two days when they finally led Rose Londally out of the underground. The cheers could be heard from the outside – they were waiting for her. The people who would come to her for herbs cheered the most eagerly – it was safer to hate when everyone hated. Rose emerged from darkness.

The man behind her calmly turned his back to her and locked the door – he certainly wasn't concerned about her running away. For obvious reasons, of course – she could barely walk and she stepped very carefully with her right foot – perhaps it was the Spanish boot, perhaps she no longer had any toes left on that foot. Nevertheless, as she was passing Samuel's cell, she looked at him. He stirred. But it was as though she were staring into darkness, her eyes were empty – she couldn't even recognize him anymore.