

The Dowry

The bloom of the autumn countryside in far-off Moravia did not seem stupendous to Fanous. Great maple trees, like fountains, gushed with the most intoxicatingly gold leaves. Others, russet-colored, when the sun struck their smooth sides, shone like metallic coins. But a peasant like Fanous could not be expected to have any sort of big emotion about colors. His wedding was approaching, for one thing. And he spent a great deal of his time thinking about Ruza, though he was often secretly ashamed of these frequent visitations of her image, her scarlet cheeks, her buxom bosom, her kind, rough brown hands. He was ashamed of thinking these things because he thought he should be. Marriage, he tried to make himself believe, should be the most natural thing and life should go on like the rolling of the days. So he had observed his friends and their experiences with matrimony. Fanous had no idea that he should feel that life was divinely settled. And yet, within his mind it was all different.

The night before his wedding he was sitting on the cool ground sharpening a knife. The moon was out. Petal-like it floated in and about the clouds. Sometimes the blade of the knife sparkled wanly and Fanous would lean on his elbow and hold it from him to catch the glimmer. He felt he must do something unnecessary tonight and that is why he had the knife. The bustle in the cottage unnerved him. His mother and two other women from neighboring farms were helping prepare the wedding feast. The ceremony was to take place there. For it had long before been decided by the mother of Fanous that the house where Ruza lived was much too small and unimpressive for a wedding. Besides, Fanous and his bride were going to live in his mother's cottage and she thought they might as well begin now. The bride was not consulted. She simply accepted the plans gratefully. The extra annex to the two-roomed house had formerly served them as a sort of shed, but it was now swept out and converted into the bridal chamber. They were lucky, said old Anca, to have that.

The women were baking something peculiar. Fanous could not recognize the smell that floated out. Their voices distracted his thoughts. There were boisterous laughs, the kind that come from ignorant old women who feel important. One of them began to sing in a most unpleasant, watery voice: *Ja mam holku! Ja mam holku!* which means, "I have a girl! Oh, I have a girl!" And it made Fanous wonder why he hated them tonight. He wished that they could forget the talk about his wedding. But he wished the impossible. They discussed the looks of the bride and grew excited over the fact that she was said to possess two pairs of white cotton gloves! It might mean that she was frivolous and such a girl would not do for Fanous, who was quiet and hard-working.

The truth was that Ruza and her family had lived in the vicinity less than four months and it was this fact that made the sudden, approaching marriage almost a gamble. The mother of Fanous, however, had no doubts. She did not usually advocate marriage on such slight acquaintance, especially when her friends were involved, but in this case she was obsessed with the idea that the sooner the couple were married the better it would be for all concerned in it. It made the women wonder what the reason might be; perhaps a child. But they never hinted at their thoughts to the mother of Fanous; they knew she was very quick tempered. She said she had no reason for feeling this. Consequently, the women felt it their duty to give her all the necessary warnings about sudden marriages. They enjoyed the warnings greatly. They formed such a novel topic for conversation!

Old Anca greatly feared the results of the match, mostly for the reason that she thought the bride's dowry was not sufficiently great for such a man as Fanous. (Of course, she merely wished to flatter the mother and to have an argument.)

"Well, ANca, she's bringing three geese and two feather beds and she would have brought more if we had made her. She ain't stingy!"

“Maybe she ain’t stingy, but maybe they haven’t any more to bring to Fanous. I hear too many tales about these new farmers --- it ain’t always easy to know. She’s lucky you’re easy with her.”

“Easy! I can be mean if I want to. And if I took a turn to be she’d sit up quick. There anren’t no two wats about it when I say a thing and I guess she’ll learn that. I tell Fanous he’s got to be out and out with her and not soft like a liver. I ain’t like that. He ought to look at me!”

Fanous closed the knife and put it into his pocket without betraying the slightest emotion. The truth is, he was tired. He would have liked to stretch out on the grass and to sleep there all night, far away from those women. But, instead, he rose to his feet and softly crept into the annex, into the shed and bridal chamber. Fanous stood in the room, which was full of the brightest moonrays now, and felt his wat to the bed. Puffed out richly, the feather bed lay cold as a stone. It was striped, red and white, and Fanous could almost see the colors in the dark. Moving to the other side of the room he found a candle on the table. He lit it and stood with it in his hand and looked about the room as if he had never seen it before. Tomorrow he would come here with his bride, to this little room with the crude old furniture. The table was bare except for an illustrated newspaper a month old which was spread over it like a cover. There was no stove in the room. In the winter they would have to open the door to the kitchen and let the warmth steal in. Everything was clean, but there was a musty smell in the room, the smell of barns and old clothers. Fanous sat in the room for a long time thinking. And there was an indescribable sorrow in his heart. He did not know it was because his life was sordid and he loved this girl who was to be his wife.

The next day it rained. It was the day of the wedding. Everyone was sorry about the weather because it would be hard to crowd about in the house. Nevertheless, there was a steady downpour.

Brilliant colored aprons floated about the stuffy kitchen. Things were happening that should not have been. For one thing, the mother of Fanous was angry at the rain and angry at Fanous that he should have chosen such a day. Foods on the stove were cooking too quickly and Ruza had not yet arrived. She was to be here at ten and it was already ten forty-five. What a bride! What a day! What an unhappy crowd of people waiting in muddy shoes, pushing one another and sneezing and getting in one another’s way. There was a kind of squalidness about the whole affair.

Suddenly someone shouted:

“Ruza! Ruzenka is here!”

There was a general scuffle and Ruza swept into the house, dripping wet, her arms full of bundles. Fanous suddenly became very nervous as he approached her in front of all these noisy people. He felt as if Ruza were a complete stranger. Odd, he had never felt that before. He did not touch her or take her hand but merely led the way into the bedroom where she deposited her bundles.

“My mother is coming,” panted Ruza, “and she has the other things.” She began to smooth her wet hair which hung straight around her face.

“What things?” asked Fanous, just to be saying something.

“The feather beds. Fanous...” She dropped her hands from her head a moment and acted as if she wished to ask him something, but he did not notice and by that time the room was full of women.

“Ruza, let us help you take you clothes off, to dry them before the wedding.” And they began feeling her clothes and patting her as if she were a stuffed doll. Fanous escaped.

Ruza’s mother rushed into the room breathless and her loaded arms were relieved of their mammoth burden. She pushed her way to her daughter.

“Ruza, tell these women to go. We cannot have everybody in this room.”

The women threw back their heads. It was unnecessary for Ruza to speak. They flocked out, disdainfully.

When the two were alone the mother opened the monstrous bag, which seemed so pliable and soft, and pulled out a feather bed, which she proceeded to spank to restore its fluffiness. Comparing it to the one lying on the bed, now already crushed with the sudden loads it had received, she shook and puffed it again. All this time Ruza was looking on with a peculiar expression of worry in her eyes.

“Maminko!” she whispered. “If we only had it!”

“Hush child. That is nothing, nothing! They will never see. Besides, I don’t remember deciding there were to be two of them.”

Ruza seemed to freeze.

“But, Maminko, they were the ones who decided, not we. And now, if they should see!” She seemed utterly terror-stricken.

“They will never know until it is all over with and then I can tell them that if they have patience I shall soon have one made. They can wait. And if not, they are fools!”

“Maminko!”

“Look here, Ruza, there is only one thing to...”

But a knock was heard on the door, a short sharp knock, and before they could answer, the mother of Fanous sailed in. She was flushed from the cooking, and nervous. Her eyes flew about the room as if she had expected it to be entirely changed. When she stepped up to the bed Ruza grasped her mother by the hand, but her mother threw her off roughly and walked up to the other woman.

“Yes, we are here at last. You have been waiting, but the rain...”

The mother of Fanous did not hear. She was fingering the blue feather ebed that had just been spread out. She was near-sighted; so she leaned over, her eyes roving from one corner to the other as if she saw an insect there and was chasing it about with her looks.

“The rain, you know...” continued the other woman.

“This cloth never wears. It is poor, poor! Is the other made of the same?”

The other one is--no---yes, well...” She looked at Ruza helplessly, and suddenly, in a louder voice than she had expected to use, she said:

“There *is* no other one!”

There was a long silence. Ruza felt herself being stared at, though she had not the courage to look. The room was cold and her heart felt cold and big, beating away like a large piece of ice in her bosom. And then she heard a hard voice speaking.

“So this is the way you think you can gat my Fanous, eh! You com the wedding with half you dowry and expect to get a man like Fanous. My God! Are you crazy! We ain’t no fools!” She took Ruza by the shoulders for one moment “It’s true what I been hearing about you! Poor---so poor you ain’t got but one feather bed to bring you husband when all he asks of you is two and a couple of old geese! And you expect us to take you in our arms, with you one feather bed and all! Ugh! Som would spit on people like you!”

There was a loud wail. Ruza burst into uncontrollable tears and threw herself into the arms of her mother who was panting with anger. They had not noticed that the room had filled with people. They had not noticed that Fanous stood behind them all, pale as a ghost.

He wanted to speak. He wanted to stop his mother, to stop that horrible wail of Ruza’s. But he was ashamed. He was ashamed and afraid. He wanted to be far away. Something had come over him that almost made him want to die. And there they were, all standing in that little shed-like room, eaten with anger and tears and ugliness and broken hearts. Fanous saw that it was all over. There was nothing to be done. Life had suddenly become despicable. He seemed to know it would be like this. Ugliness.

Fanous realized ha was a peasant.

And the next thing he knew was that he was gazing out of the window, watching Ruza and her mother struggle on through the rain dragging the blue feather bed after them. It was spattered with mud.