WINTER'S TALES

by

ISAK DINESEN

WINTER'S TALES

Books by Baroness Karen Blixen
('Isak Dinesen')

SEVEN GOTHIC TALES

OUT OF AFRICA

THE ANGELIC AVENGERS

LAST TALES

WINTER'S TALES

BY

ISAK DINESEN

PUTNAM
42 GREAT RUSSELL STREET
LONDON

First published December 1942
Reprinted 1944, 1945, 1949
Reprinted 1958

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY ROBERT MACLEHOSE AND CO. LTD
THE UNIVERSITY PRESS, GLASGOW

CONTENTS

THE SAILOR-BOY'S TALE

THE barque 'Charlotte' was on her way from Marseilles to Athens, in grey weather, on a high sea, after three days' heavy gale. A small sailor-boy, named Simon, stood on the wet, swinging deck, held on to a shroud, and looked up towards the drifting clouds, and to the upper topgallant yard of the main-mast.

A bird, that had sought refuge upon the mast, had got her feet entangled in some loose tackle-yarn of the halliard, and, high up there, struggled to get free. The boy on the deck could see her wings flapping and her head turning from side to side.

Through his own experience of life, he had come to the conviction that in this world everyone must look after himself, and expect no help from others. But the mute, deadly fight kept him fascinated for more than an hour. He wondered what kind of bird it would be. These last days a number of birds had come to settle in the barque's rigging: swallows, quails, and a pair of peregrine falcons; he believed that this bird was a peregrine falcon. He remembered how, many years ago, in his own country and near his home, he had once seen a peregrine falcon quite close, sitting on a stone and flying straight up from it. Perhaps this was the same bird. He thought: 'That bird is like me. Then she was there, and now she is here.'

At that a fellow feeling rose in him, a sense of common tragedy; he stood looking at the bird with his heart in his mouth. There were none of the sailors about to make fun of him; he began to think out how he might go up by the shrouds to help the falcon out. He brushed his hair back and pulled up his sleeves, gave the deck round him a great glance, and climbed up. He had to stop a couple of times in the swaying rigging.

It was indeed, he found when he got to the top of the mast, a peregrine falcon; as his head was on a level with hers, she gave up her struggle, and looked at him with a pair of angry, desperate yellow eyes. He had to take hold of her with one hand while he got his knife out and cut off the tackle-yarn. He was scared as he looked down, but at the same time he felt that he had been ordered up by nobody, but that this was his own venture, and this gave him a proud, steadying sensation, as if the sea and the sky, the ship, the bird and himself were all one. Just as he had freed the falcon, she hacked him in the thumb, so that the blood ran, and he nearly let her go. He grew angry with her, and gave her a clout on the head, then he put her inside his jacket, and climbed down again.

When he reached the deck, the mate and the cook were standing there, looking up; they roared to him to ask what he had had to do on the mast. He was so tired that the tears were in his eyes; he took the falcon out and showed her to them, and she kept still within his hands. They laughed and walked off. Simon set the falcon down, stood back and watched her; after a while he reflected that she might not be able to get up from the slippery deck, so he caught her once more, walked away with her and placed her upon a bolt of canvas. A little after, she began to trim her feathers, made two or three sharp jerks forward, and then suddenly flew off. The boy could follow her flight above the troughs of the grey sea; he thought: 'There flies my falcon.'

When the 'Charlotte' came home, Simon signed on board another ship, and two years later he was a light hand on the schooner 'Hebe' lying at Bodo, high up on the coast of Norway, to buy herrings.

To the great herring markets of Bodo, ships came together from all corners of the world; here were Swedish, Finnish and Russian boats, a forest of masts, and on shore a turbulent, irregular display of life, with many languages

spoken, and mighty fights. On the shore, booths had been set up, and the Lapps, small yellow people, noiseless in their movements, with watchful eyes, whom Simon had never seen before, came down to sell bead-embroidered leather-goods. It was April, the sky and the sea were so clear that it was difficult to get the eyes up against them,—salt, infinitely wide, and filled with bird shrieks, as if someone were incessantly whetting invisible knives on all sides, high up in Heaven.

Simon was amazed at the lightness of these April evenings. He knew no geography, and did not assign it to the latitude, but he took it as a sign of an unwonted good-will in the Universe, a favour. Simon had been small for his age all his life, but this last winter he had grown, and had become strong of limb. That good luck, he felt, must spring from the very same source as the sweetness of the weather, from a new benevolence in the world. He had been in need of such encouragement, for he was timid by nature; now he asked for no more. The rest he felt to be his own affair. He went about slowly and proudly.

One evening he was ashore with land-leave, and walked up to the booth of a small Russian trader, a Jew who sold gold watches. All the sailors knew that his watches were made from bad metal, and would not go, still they bought them, and paraded them about. Simon looked at these watches for a long time, but did not buy. The old Jew had divers goods in his shop, and amongst others a case of oranges. Simon had tasted oranges on his journeys; he bought one and took it with him. He meant to go up on a hill, from where he could see the sea, and suck it there.

As he walked on, and had got to the outskirts of the place, he saw a little girl in a blue frock, standing at the other side of a fence and looking at him. She was thirteen or fourteen years old, as slim as an eel, but with a round, clear, freckled face, and a pair of long plaits. The two looked at one another.

'Who are you looking out for?' Simon asked, to say something. The girl's face broke into an ecstatic, presumptuous smile.

'For the man I am going to marry, of course,' she said.

Something in her countenance made the boy confident and happy, he grinned a little at her. 'That will perhaps be me,' he said.

'Ha, ha,' said the girl, 'he is a few years older than you, I can tell you.'

'Why,' said Simon, 'you are not grown up yourself.'

The little girl shook her head solemnly. 'Nay,' she said, 'but when I grow up I will be exceedingly beautiful, and wear brown shoes with heels, and a hat.'

'Will you have an orange?' asked Simon, who could give her none of the things she had named.

She looked at the orange and at him.

'They are very good to eat,' said he.

'Why do you not eat it yourself, then?' she asked.

'I have eaten so many already,' said he, 'when I was in Athens. Here I had to pay a mark for it.'

'What is your name?' asked she.

'My name is Simon,' said he, 'what is yours?'

'Nora,' said the girl, 'what do you want for your orange now, Simon?'

When he heard his name in her mouth, Simon grew bold. 'Will you give me a kiss for the orange?' he asked.

Nora looked at him gravely for a moment. 'Yes,' she said, 'I should not mind giving you a kiss.'

He grew as warm as if he had been running quickly; when she stretched out her hand for the orange he took hold of it. At that moment somebody in the house called out for her.

'That is my father,' said she, and tried to give him back the orange, but he would not take it. 'Then come again tomorrow,' she said quickly, 'then I will give you a kiss.'

At that she slipped off; he stood and looked after her, and a little later went back to his ship.

Simon was not in the habit of making plans for the future, and now he did not know whether he would be going back to her or not.

The following evening he had to stay on board, as the other sailors were going on shore, and he did not mind that either. He meant to sit on the deck with the ship's dog, Balthasar, and to practise upon a concertina that he had purchased some time ago. The pale evening was all round him, the sky was faintly roseate, the sea was quite calm, like milk and water, only in the wake of the boats going inshore it broke into streaks of vivid indigo. Simon sat and played; after a while his own music began to speak to him so strongly that he stopped, got up and looked upwards. Then he saw that the full moon was sitting high on the sky.

The sky was so light that she hardly seemed needed there, it was as if she had turned up by a caprice of her own, she was round, demure and presumptuous. At that he knew that he must go ashore whatever it was to cost him. But he did not know how to get away since the others had taken the yawl with them. He stood on the deck for a long time, a small lonely figure of a sailor-boy on a boat, when he caught sight of a yawl coming in from a ship farther out, and hailed her. He found that it was the Russian crew from a boat named 'Anna', going ashore. When he could make himself understood to them, they took him with them; they first asked him for money for his fare, then, laughing, gave it back to him. He thought: 'These people will be believing that I am going into town, wenching,'—and then he felt, with some pride, that they were right, although at the same time they were infinitely wrong, and knew nothing about anything.

When they came ashore, they invited him to come in and drink in their company, and he would not refuse because

they had helped him. One of the Russians was a giant, as big as a bear, he told Simon that his name was Ivan. He got drunk at once, and then fell upon the boy with a bear-like affection, pawed him, smiled and laughed into his face, made him a present of a gold watch-chain, and kissed him on both cheeks. At that, Simon reflected that he also ought to give Nora a present when they met again, and as soon as he could get away from the Russians, he walked up to a booth that he knew of, and bought a small blue silk handkerchief, the same colour as her eyes.

It was Saturday evening, and there were many people amongst the houses, they came in long rows, some of them singing, all keen to have some fun in the night. Simon, in the midst of this rich, bawling life under the clear moon, felt his head light with the flight from the ship and the strong drinks; he crammed the handkerchief in his pocket, it was silk, which he had never touched before, a present for his girl.

He could not remember the path up to Nora's house, lost his way, and came back to where he had started. Then he grew deadly afraid that he should be too late, and began to run. In a small passage between two wooden huts, he ran straight into a big man, and found that it was Ivan once more. The Russian folded his arms round him and held him. 'Good. Good,' he cried in high glee, 'I have found you, my little chicken. I have looked for you everywhere, and poor Ivan has wept because he lost his friend.'

'Let me go, Ivan,' cried Simon.

'Oho,' said Ivan, 'I shall go with you and get you what you want. My heart and my money are all yours, all yours, I have been seventeen years old myself, a little lamb of God, and I want to be so again tonight.'

'Let me go,' cried Simon, 'I am in a hurry.'

Ivan held him so that it hurt, and patted him with his other hand. 'I feel it, I feel it,' he said, 'now trust to me, my

little friend. Nothing shall part you and me. I hear the others coming, we will have such a night together as you will remember when you are an old grandpapa.'

Suddenly he crushed the boy to him, like a bear that carries off a sheep. The odious sensation of male bodily warmth, and the bulk of a man close to him, made the lean boy mad. He thought of Nora waiting, like a slender ship in the dim air, and of himself, here, in the hot embrace of a hairy animal. He struck Ivan with all his might.

'I shall kill you, Ivan,' he cried out, 'if you do not let me go.'

'Oh, you will be thankful to me later on,' said Ivan and began to sing.

Simon fumbled in his pocket for his knife, and got it opened. He could not lift his hand, but he drove the knife, furiously, in under the big man's arm. Almost immediately he felt the blood spouting out, and running down in his sleeve.

Ivan stopped short in the song, let go his hold of the boy and gave two long, deep grunts; the next second he tumbled down on his knees. 'Poor Ivan, poor Ivan' he groaned. He fell straight on his face.

At that moment Simon heard the other sailors coming along, singing, in the by-street.

He stood still for a minute, wiped his knife, and watched the blood spread into a dark pool underneath the big body; then he ran. As he stopped for a second to choose his way, he heard the sailors behind him scream out, over their dead comrade. He thought: 'I must get down to the sea, where I can wash my hands.' But at the same time, he ran the other way. After a little while, he found himself on the path that he had walked on the day before, and it seemed as familiar to him, as if he had walked it many hundred times in his life.

He slackened his pace to look round, and suddenly saw Nora standing on the other side of the fence; she was quite close to him when he caught sight of her in the moonlight.

Wavering and out of breath, he sank down on his knees; for a moment he could not speak.

The little girl looked down at him. 'Good evening, Simon,' she said in her small coy voice, 'I have waited for you a long time,' and after a moment she added: 'I have eaten your orange.'

'Oh, Nora,' cried the boy. 'I have killed a man.'

She stared at him, but did not move. 'Why did you kill a man?' she asked after a moment.

'To get here,' said Simon, 'because he tried to stop me. But he was my friend.' Slowly he got on to his feet. 'He loved me!' the boy cried out, and at that burst into tears.

'Yes,' said she slowly and thoughtfully. 'Yes, because you must be here in time.'

'Can you hide me?' he asked, 'for they are after me.'

'Nay,' said Nora, 'I cannot hide you. For my father is the parson here at Bodo, and he would be sure to hand you over to them, if he knew that you had killed a man.'

'Then,' said Simon, 'give me something to wipe my hands on.'

'What is the matter with your hands?' she asked and took a little step forward.

He stretched out his hands to her.

'Is that your own blood?' she asked.

'No,' said he, 'it is his.'

She took the step back again.

'Do you hate me now?' he asked.

'No, I do not hate you,' said she. 'But do put your hands behind your back.'

As he did so she came up close to him, at the other side of the fence, and clasped her arms round his neck. She pressed her young face to his, and kissed him tenderly. He felt her face, cool as the moonlight, upon his own, and when she released him, his head swam, and he did not know if the kiss had lasted a second or an hour.

Nora stood up straight, her eyes wide open. 'Now,' she said slowly and proudly, 'I promise you that I will never marry anybody, as long as I live.'

The boy kept standing with his hands at his back, as if she had tied them there.

'And now,' she said, 'you must run, for they are coming.'

They looked at one another. 'Do not forget Nora,' said she.

He turned and ran.

He leapt over a fence, and when he was down amongst the houses, he walked. He did not know at all where to go. As he came to a house, from where music and noise streamed out, he slowly went through the door. The room was full of people, they were dancing in there. A lamp hung from the ceiling, and shone down on them, the air was thick and brown with the dust rising from the floor. There were some women in the room, but many of the men danced with each other, and gravely or laughingly stamped the floor. A moment after Simon had come in, the crowd withdrew to the walls to clear the floor for two sailors, who were showing a dance from their own country.

Simon thought: 'Now, very soon, the men from the boat will come round to look for their comrade's murderer, and from my hands they will know that I have done it.'

These five minutes during which he stood by the wall of the dancing room, in the midst of the gay, sweating dancers, were of great significance to the boy. He, himself, felt it, as if during this time he grew up, and became like other people. He did not entreat his destiny, nor complain. Here he was, he had killed a man, and had kissed a girl, he did not demand any more from life, nor did life now demand more from him. He was Simon, a man like the men round him, and going to die, as all men are going to die.

He only became aware of what was going on outside him, when he saw that a woman had come in, and was stand-

ing in the midst of the cleared floor, looking round her. She was a short, broad, old woman, in the clothes of the Lapps, and she took her stand with such majesty and fierceness as if she owned the whole place. It was obvious that most of the people knew her, and were a little afraid of her, although a few laughed: the din of the dancing room stopped when she spoke.

'Where is my son?' she asked in a high shrill voice, like a bird's.

The next moment her eyes fell on Simon himself, and she steered through the crowd, which opened up before her, stretched out her old skinny, dark hand, and took him by the elbow. 'Come home with me now,' she said, 'you need not dance here tonight. You may be dancing a high enough dance soon.'

Simon drew back, for he thought that she was drunk. But as she looked him straight in the face with her yellow eyes, it seemed to him that he had met her before, and that he might do well in listening to her.

The old woman pulled him with her across the floor, and he followed her without a word.

'Do not birch your boy too badly, Sunniva,' one of the men in the room cried to her. 'He has done no harm, he only wanted to look at the dance.'

At the same moment, as they came out through the door, there was an alarm in the street, a flock of people came running down it, and one of them, as he turned into the house, knocked against Simon, looked at him and the old woman, and ran on.

While the two walked along the street, the old woman lifted up her skirt, and put the hem of it into the boy's hand. 'Wipe your hand on my skirt,' she said. They had not gone far before they came to a small wooden house, and stopped, the door to it was so low that they must bend to get through it. As the Lapp woman went in before Simon, still holding