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GENNADIY LOGINOV

FATAL BEAUTY



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Rumours which started from a lie and slander sometimes become true. For instance, that is so for the cases when a person of whom people think as a monster becomes one because of bullying. At the same time, the real threat may not come from someone who seems mysterious or sinister — a menace can be banal and absurd, without any mysticism.

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Painting is a blind man's profession. He paints not what he sees, but what he feels...
– Pablo Picasso

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The gift of beauty had always been a double-edged sword for Manon. It was not about natural attractiveness, the kind that people marveled at and admired. Of course, men liked beauties, which caused envy and jealousy among other ladies, but this didn't always prevent attractive women from living happy lives. But for Manon, her beauty was a real disaster. Men didn't just fall in love with her: they went mad, became delusional and delirious. After meeting her, they were unable to think of anyone else. They shouted near her house and broke windows and doors. They gave her no peace. They left their families, opened veins, shot, drowned, or hung themselves, or even threatened to kill her if she didn't reciprocate their feelings. As for the women, they unanimously hated and despised Manon, calling her a witch, a marriage wrecker, an inveterate whore and a snake in the grass.

In reality, the so-called “inveterate whore” and “witch” was religious and virgin. She didn't do anything to attract such attention. The crazy reactions of the surrounding men didn't delight the girl at all, and because of the women who were ready to peck her, like a flock of embittered hens, she was even afraid to go to church. It didn't help that the young priest himself had to fight with persistent thoughts and desires since the moment he met Manon.

In childhood, everyone considered her an adorable kid and saw little Manon as a small angel, but that little girl grew up. She became an unnatural attraction for her father and brothers, which caused her flight from home at an early age. Wandering like one leprous and cursed, she tried to hide her appearance and look as plain as possible. There was only one thing she couldn't do – disfigure herself. For her, it would be a sin and a betrayal of beauty. At the same time, Manon didn't understand what people saw in her and suspected it wasn't just a matter of appearance. But sooner or later, the most sensible men began to go crazy over her and women fell into a rage, ready to tear her apart in a lynching without trial.

Living off of random part-time jobs, she couldn't stay anywhere for long. If a girl with other principles were in her place, she could have manipulated people like puppets, squeezing all the juices to provide herself with comfort, wealth and fame. But she was herself and no one else.

Once, she arrived in the next town and managed to find a new job unexpectedly. We can't say that she immediately liked the unusual proposal or decided to accept it instantly. On the contrary, she had her doubts and, frankly speaking, fears. But there were no other options. And besides, there

were still no other volunteers, which increased her chances of being hired for service. It did, however, make her think twice whether she should do it at all.

One mysterious man lived in this town, and for most citizens, he seemed dangerous and creepy. He wasn't an unsociable recluse, like many lonely people of his age; on the contrary, you could often see him in the park feeding pigeons or strolling along the city canal. And every time, a guide dog accompanied Monsieur Desmond. The animal named Bargest was huge, like a small horse, and resembled a hellhound to the locals. This cold-blooded man lived in a gloomy old mansion on the outskirts of the city and wore old-fashioned clothes. People said that once he was an artist and, according to old-timers, he sometimes painted town landscapes in his youth. However, at the time of his youth, they were small children. And now these decrepit and half-senile greybeards quietly spent the rest of their days surrounded by grandchildren or inside the walls of hospitals. As for Monsieur Desmond, to this day, he had the image of a vigorous and healthy person in everyone's eyes. Of course, the days of his youth evidently left far behind, but it was impossible to determine the exact age of this venerable gentleman.

Tinted glasses hid an unpleasant view of blind gaze from occasional passers-by; his cane with a knob in the form of a metal gauntlet tapped along the pavement; a signet ring on the ring finger had an incomprehensible symbol; curly hair and musketeer's style moustache looked harmonious, and yet slightly unusual for these places. In some inexplicable way, the strange aristocrat recognized all the townspeople he met and greeted them by names, even if they were silent and not familiar with him. After that, many citizens tried to go away quickly, without looking back.

As he approached, people usually crossed the street or changed their route, and even the most educated of them, who rejected all kinds of speculation and superstition, believed that this strange gentleman should be avoided. Nevertheless, he sought for crowded places, visited restaurants, shops and a theatre. He took his guide dog with him even there, claiming that he couldn't do without him. And although the presence of a shaggy monster didn't please those around him, they didn't dare to object.

At the same time, if one watched Desmond at the table, he saw that Monsieur coped with dishes and cutlery by his own and didn't experience any difficulty or inconvenience. He was actively interested in the town and world news, regularly acquired new books, works of art and other objects which seemed completely useless to him at first glance, for example, a microscope or an old lamp.

In this regard, the records he bought looked more useful. As Monsieur Desmond said, he listened to them for a whole day all the time, so that at least someone's voice sounded in his empty mansion, brightening up the old man's loneliness.

The collector showed particular interest in antiques. However, everyone who had to communicate with him sometimes on business, like town officials, sellers or waiters, behaved on the verge of rudeness. They tried to end up the conversation as quickly as possible and hinted in all imaginable ways that the visitor's companion was unpleasant to them.

Multiple rumours about him circulated in the town. Most of them were hardly believable, while others seemed pretty close to the truth. For instance, according to the established opinion, his medieval ancestors were once the sovereign owners of the town and all the surrounding lands, and the old buildings had traces of the ancient family name up to this day. During the Reformation, these people were expelled from the town as adherents of papal authority, and soon, other masters settled

in the family estate. However, they didn't live there for long and died out from a new outbreak of the plague. After that, stagnation reigned around, and no one lived in the estate for years.

The place where the mansion was located had always been in bad repute among locals: they said that once there was a pagan temple here and bloody sacrifices were made. Later, by the decree of Pope Gregory the Great, a church was erected on the site of this temple. Like many churches, it was constructed on the remnants of pagan ruins. The altar wasn't built here for the sake of the church: on the contrary, this church was built for the altar. Buildings on the sites of the temples had several goals, symbolizing the triumph of the new faith over the old ways. Besides, it was possible to save money on construction and deprive the pagans of places where they could go as an alternative. They began to visit a new church due to the force of habit and gradually accustomed to new ideas. It was said that in those immemorial times when the church had been consecrated the earth had shaken and the screams of fleeing demons had sounded in the sky. However, despite the efforts of evil spirits, the church then had remained standing, but later it was destroyed by the people, who came with torches in their hands and the words of new ideas on their lips.

Over time, a descendant of the expelled nobles returned to the old place. It was rumoured that he had the fame of a renegade and a lost sheep in his kin. Having acquired the land plot, he built the mansion, which quickly gained a bad reputation. People said that the owner revived pagan rites within its walls and performed wicked rituals there, including drinking blood with eating babies and all kinds of human secretions. Servants kept running away; they lost their minds, became possessed by spirits or victims of different accidents. And once, the local madman, a harmless mute fool, unlucky for him, managed to get into the mansion without permission. After that, he was found on the street, beaten and in a fever, with a pentagram cut on his back. They said that he had gained a speech because of the incident and even shouted something in Aramaic, as one local professor later determined. The poor fellow was taken to the hospital, but, unfortunately, it was already too late for him.

Many years had passed since then, and for many years the only permanent resident of the mansion was Desmond, an extravagant collector of rarities, an erudite, an artist and a sculptor. Or, as some people believed, he might be the only known inhabitant of the mansion in which he officially lived alone.

Being the heir to a considerable fortune, he still was unpretentious in everyday life and made regular donations to charity, including contributions to the church fund. But no money could buy love and respect of his fellow citizens.

At some point, Bargest appeared in the mansion. A suspicious guest from nowhere brought him to Desmond. The stranger was unpleasant and rude and looked more like a wild beast in human clothes than an ordinary man. This shaggy character with rotten teeth temporarily attracted the attention of all the surrounding residents. All kinds of rumours and gossips began to spread; people discussed his wild appearance and reasons for his arrival, but soon, he vanished without a trace – as unexpectedly and imperceptibly as had appeared before. To the general displeasure of the locals, the terrible dog of an unknown breed remained and became an indispensable companion for his master.

Now, being in his declining years and not having an heir, Desmond, apparently, ventured upon some plan. In the announcement discovered by Manon, Monsieur Desmond regretted that his once prosperous and beautiful mansion was now in decline and desolation, while the owner was oppressed by longing and craved for confidential communication. Therefore, he invites the lady who agrees to enliven and enrich his dull routine. It was said that the guest would not need to do anything that

could somehow affect her honour and good name. She simply must live in the house of the elderly aristocrat; talk with him on various topics; read books that he was no longer able to read due to certain circumstances; help a lonely bachelor to maintain cleanliness, comfort and order to the best of her ability; accompany him on walks and visit various places, for example, a salon or theatre, and inspire him to new creative achievements. She wasn't meant to be a housekeeper or a nurse, but the muse in the last years of a fading artist. He didn't demand either passion or close friendship from her, but expected only attention and care. In return, she could count on living in his estate like a daughter with a loving father, and when the day would come, and Monsieur Desmond would complete his life's journey in the time designated by God, she would inherit all his earthly wealth. Additionally, she had to pay him the last tribute, keeping the body in the mansion and sitting close to it until she would find obvious signs of starting decomposition. Monsieur Desmond had a panic fear of being buried alive, and because of it, he even set a bell in the family crypt to make himself heard in case this would happen. He also designed his coffin so that it could be opened from the inside. Further, after ascertained the death of Monsieur Desmond, the girl had to keep his body for another three days so everyone who would like to could say farewell to him. During the wake, she had to pay attention to all the guests, make sure that his favourite records would sound all day, read his favourite book to him, and then organize memorials and mourn for at least three months.

For Manon, all these conditions looked quite creepy, at the very least. At the same time, she never was cynical or mercantile, so even the desire to find her own place wouldn't have forced the girl to serve for it in this way. But in Monsieur Desmond's message, she saw the desperate cry of a lonely soul who had neither friend nor companion, except for the guide dog. She experienced a wide scope of mixed feelings, and the most powerful of them was probably compassion. She understood and shared the pain of this unfortunate, rejected man. He even had no one to organize the funeral – most likely, an appointed executor would do it at the expense of town budget, and then the town authorities would sell his estate with all the contents due to the lack of heirs.

On the one hand, she was sincere in her compassion for the suffering blind man, and she was ready to show mercy to him without any conditions, simply out of kindness; on the other hand, she really needed a roof over her head and a source of subsistence. Therefore, she decided to give it a try and stay with Monsieur Desmond for at least some time, hoping for the gentleman's word. She also decided to turn around and leave immediately, if something would go wrong.

Ultimately, determination overpowered fear, and Manon went toward the old mansion. Locals showed her the way, but not before they got alarmed and surprised that someone voluntarily headed to this evil place. Having examined her closer, they also began to show a special interest in her, so Manon tried not to invite residents' attention and not to engage in conversations unless it was absolutely necessary and passed every street as quickly as possible. As a result, the information she had received was rather fragmentary and yet she got the general picture: the mansion was a hotbed of devilry, and the sorcerer with his pet monster lived there; at night, a light (unnecessary for the owner) was seen in the windows, and some bloodcurdling screams and strange sounds could be heard.

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