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Protector

'Cuba' —Malginro Serenasi (1889)

He bent his body over the field, working fast in the hope of finishing it as soon as possible. Behind him followed a little boy of only ten years old, gathering up sweet potatoes into several piles. The earth in the field was dry and hard. The air was chilling, but he was dripping with sweat.

"We've already got a lot?"

The boy gazed at these piles, counting in his mind, and answered:

"About half a bag."

"Let's pack them up. We get to leave now. In a short while the moon will come out."

The boy opened the bag for the man to put the food into it. For fear of being caught unexpectedly, he from time to time looked over at every corner of the vast plantation, keeping a watch as far as the main road two hundred meters away.

More than a half of the bag was full. He tied up the bag with a palm tree belt, stuck his knife in the belt securely, tightened his belt, and was about to carry the bag on his shoulder.

Gnawed by hunger, the boy was biting a small turnip.

“Throw this away. When we get to the town, you can eat bread.”

The boy did what he was told to. He knew his wish will come true: these sweet potatoes will be sold to the grocery store in Hongdu, where he will get more than one bread and a large cake. ~~About one month ago~~ Since his father lost his job about one month ago, they had been living like this for three days. When they stole bananas, the plantation watcher never caught them. Even if they were caught, when together with his father, even in darkness, he would not feel any fear. But when alone by himself, he would shiver in fear.

The man dragged the bag to a stone hedge, placed it on the hedge, and bent over to carry the bag over his shoulders. After he was done, the boy was filled with admiration and pride: his father is so strong! . . .

They walked across a grazing field, ~~to get on a narrow path~~ Between rising slopes on both sides, they walked on a narrow path that was like a dried-up river. They walked in quiet steps. The father breathed heavily under the heavy weight, and the child followed him along the uneven dirt road.

A rooster crowed, then another one joined him, and later more roosters joined the chorus. . . . Everything in the plantation was waken up from sound sleep by the alarming and shrill noise and began to tremble:—it was two o’clock, the moon would rise up soon—the

thief thought for a while, and decided that they should not stop to rest until they were close to the town, where he believed they would be out of danger.

“Hurry up!” he said to the child.

They came to a sharp turn, so sharp that as if they reached the end of the road.

High above the road, as a signpost nearby, there was a tree of broad canopy.

Suddenly, a man jumped out to stand in front of them.

“Stop!” A harsh voice commanded.

Both father and son stopped. The father immediately realized this was the keeper of the plantation where he just did the stealing.

The keeper pointed his rifle at him:

“Thief... now I got you!”

He threw the bag to the ground, and wanted to run away; but the keeper warned him:

“Don’t move, or I’ll kill you!” Meanwhile he raised his rifle.

Between the threatening keeper and the captive, ashamed, humiliated and pathetic because he was caught up by the keeper, face to face, there was a moment of silence. The child clung tightly to his father’s leg, looking for cover. Yet he was more curious than frightened. He never doubted that he might lose his bread and cake because of this encounter.

“Thief, bastard... I’ve been searching for you for days.”

Enormously humiliated, the wretch felt his blood boil and burn inside him, almost driving him crazy.

He reached for the knife inserted behind his belt.

“Don’t move! Raise your hands!”

Coerced by danger, he could not help but surrender and raise his arms. Then the keeper approached him, took his knife away and ordered:

“Look up, move forward! Don’t you dare to run away!”

Struck by shame and hatred, the wretch dragged his steps. Walking with him was the astounded child. Behind them was the rhythmic clack of the keeper’s shoes.

They walked for about seven or eight minutes in scary silence. Dim and yellow lamp lights of the town could be seen from afar. The culprit suddenly stopped, as if he was nailed down on the ground.

“Sir—” he started, but did not turn his head around—“I am not going to the prison in the town. If you like, you can just kill me... I am not going there like this.”

The keeper has to stop, almost bumped on the criminal.

The criminal’s attitude puzzled him for a moment; then he thought it was a trick to soften him, so he stiffened up and replied:

“Why not go there? ... I believe you’d better go.”

"No, I am not!"

Then a fearsome pause, a short one that foreboded a tragedy. The criminal turned around and looked boldly at his captor. The child stared with his eyes wide open, as if he could not make out what was going on. ... The keeper

heaved a sign and raised his arms. But he did not shoot. He lowered it again.

"Go away! ... Go away!" He bellowed. "I don't want commit a crazy crime."

As if to escape from the danger of his anger, he turned around and left along the way they just came almost in running steps. Soon, his quick steps disappeared in the darkness.

The wretched sweet potato thief slumped upon the grass beside the road, buried the face in his hands, and made a deep sigh. The child pressed tightly against him, as if trying to seek warmth to fight back coldness of dawn.

"Dad, shall we leave?"

The man was awakened with a start.

"Yes, let's leave."

But he didn't make any movement to leave. The child stroked his father's face gently.

"Dad...", ~~XXXX~~ *When the father turned his head around,*

a beam of moonlight shone through the tree branches upon his face: his eyes moistened with tears.

“My child, oh, my child!...” He held him tightly in his arms, overwhelmed by his emotion, and a fit uncontrollable sob cut short his words.

The child circled his thin arms around the father’s neck. His tender cheek pressed against the man’s coarse cheek tightly, and whispered into his ears:

“Don’t cry, my dear father. When I grow up I’ll protect you. ... Just look at that time no one will dare to hurt you!”