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*THE MEN WHO WISHED*

The people of Pulchraturp were not curious about the outside world. If they ever left the village, they seldom went far. Pulchraturp was easily overlooked on maps, if it appeared at all. Most of the folk who lived in Pulchraturp considered maps to be a lot of busybody nonsense, anyway. Their own horses knew the way along the roads, and as for visitors—well, what could they bring that the villagers could not fetch for themselves? The farmers of Pulchraturp had inherited their land from their fathers, and their fathers from *their* fathers, and so on, stretching back many, many generations, as was recorded in multiple hide-bound volumes stored in the village's Center Hall. If a portrait painter were somehow to have stumbled upon the village, he'd have been frustrated by the lack of variation in his subjects. The villagers were all rather stout and stubby, with features as bland and plainly wholesome as potatoes, one of their chief crops. As a matter of fact, no portrait painter had ever visited Pulchraturp.

It was a clear, bright day, and the men of the village were traveling the dusty road homewards, finished with their day of hunting. They made frequent trips into the nearby woods to shoot deer, as much for sport as for sustenance. Many trips were necessary because the deer were scarce, the men explained to their womenfolk. In truth, the men were lousy shots, ample practice notwithstanding.

The road was not a long one from woods to village, nor was it easily accessible from the main roads that lead Elsewhere. So the men were surprised to see two unknown people—a young man and a woman—approaching the crossroads on horseback. The gleaming coats of the horses set off their riders' rich attire: the young man wore a large feathered cap and a silk shirt, while the woman was draped in a red velvet cloak, her head covered with an embroidered veil. To the Pulchraturp men, they seemed like stained glass windows, come to life.

"Petrik!" one of the village men cried, for he recognized the feather-capped rider. "We never thought we'd see you again!"

This was true. Petrik had once lived in the village, but had been exiled from it. He'd had a bad habit of setting fires at night—sometimes to small piles of hay, but at other times to barns and houses. Everyone liked Petrik, because he was otherwise so genial, but they saw how dangerous he was. At the time, Petrik himself didn't know why he set the fires, but he did admit that he would probably be unable to stop himself. He agreed to leave the village.

Now Petrik greeted his old companions with a good-natured laugh. He reined his

horse to a stop, and began talking with the men, telling them his news. In his exile, Petrik had had many adventures, but he was eager to speak of his most recent one: he had won the hand of a nobleman's daughter, after rescuing her from a burning building.

Along with a wife, Petrik had acquired a gallant manner of speech. "And I would risk the fire a thousand times, I say a thousand times again for her!" he cried. He turned to his veiled companion, who was indeed the bride he had just praised. "Show yourself, my dear." As she raised her arms and lifted her veil, her cloak opened and eased back on her shoulders. Altogether, it was a movement as simple and sensational as a flash of sunlight, for she was beautiful beyond anything the village men had ever seen.

The men stared dumbly. They were fascinated by the bride's delicacy, her slender frame wrapped in shimmering fabric, her pale skin. The subtly perfumed coils of her golden hair wafted enchantment. She smiled into the middle-distance, then tilted her head towards a nosegay of tender herbs that she held with ivory-gloved fingers. Petrik barely concealed his gloating, and one of the men gained sufficient self-possession to ask if Petrik still had his problem urges for "the blazes."

"Oh, I've found other ways to relax," Petrik smiled. He patted the mane of his wife's horse—the men all got the point. They invited Petrik and his bride to return with them to the village for a visit, but Petrik said they had pressing business, and so must continue their journey.

Later, as the men traveled home, in their minds (and then, out loud, to each other) they unfavorably compared their stolid, coarse-tressed wives to Petrik's silken bride. They searched for words to capture her, to sustain her presence in their minds, but description eluded them. She was like the carefully wrought pastries served only at weddings—fragile, sweet, and freshly scented, with an aura of special occasion. She was like a young bird, seen only in the spring—pastel-hued, fine-boned, with eyes that were at once dark and bright. But like the bird, she had flown. [continued]