FLANDERS LITERATURE

The Raccoon

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An extract

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Part I
Love and Hate in the Heart of the Forest

Chapter 1

A Few Words About the Raccoon

The raccoon of whom we speak in this wondrous tale was small and slight for his age—either from malnutrition, or for reasons that he never seemed to get a chance to reflect on. Moreover, the raccoon had no papers and knew neither his own name, nor his father's name, nor his last name: his family and friends had perished when he was still little and had no interest in passport details, let alone passports themselves; and so the raccoon went through life small, slight of build, and nameless.

It would be a lie to say the lack of a name worried the raccoon, that it kept him up at night and ate away at him during the day: the raccoon was a serene creature; he spent much of his day outdoors, giving himself over to physical labor, long walks and naps in the bushes, which—as we all know—promote a strong psyche.

What *did* eat away at him, as is more and more often the case nowadays, was his wife.

If you were to question him as to when, and especially *why*, he'd gotten married, he would lift up his kepi with its golden cockade, smile shyly, scratch the back of his deflead head, let out a deep sigh, shrug his shoulders, and allow his glance to pass over the distant treetops—beautifully adorned for the approaching autumn—after which he would pull his railwayman's kepi a little further down over his head, pick his shovel up again, the question and you already forgotten, and continue to busy himself with the grass on his vegetable patch until well into the evening, that is, provided you didn't proceed to kick him with your kersey boot and repeat your question, thereby forcing the raccoon to smile shyly, lift his kepi with the shiny cockade, pensively scratch the back of his deflead head, survey the treetops adorned for the approaching autumn, and then, with a sigh, grab the handle of his shovel and resume the activity that had been interrupted by the forgotten question.

In short, you can kick that poor raccoon with your kersey boots until he's dead, but you won't get an answer out of him. The raccoon is an animal driven mainly by his instincts, seasoned with Pavlovian reflexes—and so he'd gotten married with no awareness of the reasons or the consequences of his action.

Butterflies in the stomach, as they say.

It had been a sunny day, and everything had seemed rosy. He'd been a lot younger then, too... Or maybe it was the other way around: it had been pouring, it was a quagmire outside, the mud had been knee-high, and so he'd gotten married, to bring some variety to his everyday life.

But those are all presumptions. Even for inveterate naturalists such as ourselves, the exact reasons for his act are unknown and uninteresting.

As he drove his shovel into the ground all the way up to the handle, doggedly ploughing up the loamy soil, forgetting everything in the world, noticing neither us nor our kersey boots, the raccoon recalled the few stories by Chekhov that he'd read when he was young, and he was forced to admit that the writer was right: yes, marriage is an institution that can be called ambivalent at best; the original passion fades, as if it never existed, and gives way to boredom and mutual resentment. How he longed to get away, to travel to some far-off place, where the lights of the big city glittered and flickered, where movies by the immortal Charlie Chaplin were shown in theaters—but his dreams were in vain; he had to stay here and dig over this loamy plot, prepare it for sowing the winter crops, and bring in the harvest: his wife ceaselessly demanded food, hurled dirty words at him and sometimes even bit him, which was more humiliating than any insult...

Of course, he could bite her back, but his magnanimity, upbringing and romantic considerations got in his way: it's not right for a male to bite a female; a male should take care of a female, defend her, even.

The raccoon spat in irritation, his spittle landing plumb on the nose of our left boot.

The raccoon planned on planting turnips the following year, but because he knew from legends and sagas how difficult it was to harvest turnips,[1] he was content to practice with carrots, radishes and cucumbers this year.

Ultimately, growing and harvesting cucumbers was easiest: they were just lying on the ground and, with his short stature, the raccoon barely even had to bend over to put them in a basket, though it became a very different story when unfamiliar hedgehogs suddenly turned up in the vegetable garden and—curled up into little balls—rudely rolled right across the beds, speared the cucumbers onto their spines and ran off, leaving a load of perforated fruit behind that quickly rotted—following which the raccoon, after a period of sadness and after consulting specialist literature, put steel nails down, sharp end up, all around the cucumbers and along the runs leading to the cucumber beds, and the hedgehogs vanished.

But even without turnips the harvest wasn't bad: and the carrots and radishes and knobbly cucumbers earned his wife's approval.

Chapter 2
Where the Raccoon Got His Nice Hat

By the way, if you would like to know where the raccoon had gotten such a nice kepi with a railwayman's cockade of pure gold, you'd better not ask the animal himself: he doesn't remember.

We, however, remember all too well, and are all too happy to briefly share these recollections with you.

The raccoon had found the kepi the previous summer on a stroll through the woods.

It was nailed to the head of a train conductor who'd been thrown out of the train by drunk pilgrims on their way to the Hajj.

The impact of the fall had crushed the conductor; the kepi, however, had not only remained intact but, for the aforementioned reasons, was still firmly attached to the dead conductor's head.

The raccoon had never seen such a beautiful kepi in all his life, and he decided there and then not to leave it behind: he understood that a non-living human had no need for a hat, not even a railwayman's cap.

He grabbed the kepi but it wouldn't come loose; it was as if it were nailed down.

And indeed, said the raccoon to himself when he took a closer look, the kepi was, in fact, attached to the conductor's head with nails.

[1] A reference to a Russian folk tale in which a farmer is unable to pull his turnip from the ground because it has grown too big and heavy. The turnip can only be harvested when the farmer gets help from all his family members, pets and finally even a little mouse.

The raccoon ran back home to get a pair of pliers, pulled the nails out of the kepi, filled up the holes with plasticine in the same shade of navy as the fabric, put the kepi on his head and continued his stroll, trembling with joy, with the polished golden cockade sending out shards of sunlight in all directions.

Oh, how all the forest creatures admired the raccoon on that sunny summer's day, and wouldn't you know, that jaunty railwayman's kepi suited him remarkably well!

As twilight fell and low wisps of pensive fog crept over the forest, and the tops of the pine trees turned golden in the velvet rays of the setting sun, an unfamiliar female came walking towards the raccoon with his new kepi. Bashful, fumbling with the shoulder straps of an old soldier's duffel bag that had once been found on the battlefield by one of her ancestors—and that had been handed down in the family ever since from mother to eldest daughter whenever the latter reached marriageable age and wanted to look her best—bashful and fumbling, this lovely female introduced herself, blushing heavily—and then, as if flinging herself off a bridge, she suggested they go on a date, that is, of course, if he wasn't already seeing someone else, because the thought of getting in the way, that is to say, driving people apart, and undermining other people's happiness...

Chapter 3

Probably It Was On This Path That the Raccoon Found His Life's Happiness

Thereupon the female, no longer able to handle the tension, burst into loud sobs, and the raccoon, who was no less baffled and bashful than she, stood in front of her, not knowing what to say, how to calm her down, what words might comfort her.

If the raccoon had been a little older at the time (which was impossible), if he'd gained some life experience by then, if he'd studied, down to the details, the difficult science of how to efficiently interact with females of his species, he probably could've come up with the right words, comforted the poor thing, and maybe cheered her up—but in those distant years the raccoon was considerably younger than he is now, he had only scant life experience, and interacting with females is something he wasn't just incapable of then but still is now, which is why he just stood there, blinking shyly, every now and then scratching himself beneath his kepi when the itching from the indefatigable fleas became simply unbearable—only to then blurt out that he was, in principle, in agreement with her suggestion that they meet up, although he was very busy at the moment, he lied, pointing at his railwayman's kepi, especially at night, that is, during sleep, after which, suddenly letting go of his bashfulness and shyness, he shook out his fur, looked around, bit off a fresh shoot from a sweet bush and proffered it to the tearful female.

Smiling through her tears, the young beauty thanked him and, full of gratitude, began to gobble up the sweet branch.

Probably it was on this very forest path—thanks to his new kepi with that inconceivable cockade—that the raccoon met his life's happiness.

Probably.

We won't contest this assumption: we aren't entirely aware of what happiness means for a raccoon, and one who is so small of stature at that. In fact, we'd go so far as to say that the raccoon himself—even with that wondrous kepi with the cockade on his head—couldn't answer this question.

Why?

Because it's too complicated a question, and a raccoon—with all due respect to the animals belonging to this family—isn't exactly the wisest creature.

All in all, the question was unusually complicated and the raccoon—still young and inexperienced—had no one he could turn to for advice because he'd grown up a complete orphan, since his parents had been eaten by wolves and the rest of his family, as we mentioned slightly earlier in this text, had all perished of something or other—and so the question remained unanswered.

But supposing the raccoon *were* to answer you, he would, in all honesty, probably spout all manner of nonsense.

With a shy smile, he would tell you about the sweet roots that he loved so much. Then he'd point his front paw in the direction of his den, where he was living at the time you came upon his path. And then, deep in thought, he would scratch beneath his kepi, where he was being eaten alive by fleas, and leisurely head off somewhere.

Why? you, being a fervent nature lover, would ask.

Well, because he wasn't married back then, he was free as a bird, and had no reason to hurry anywhere; when the raccoon blurted out to the female that he was very busy, he was just pretending, instinctively wanting to leave an indelible impression on the stranger: because he was an animal, the raccoon not only didn't work anywhere—he *couldn't* work, not even if he were to passionately yearn for a job.

Do you find that hard to believe?

Who on Earth would hire an ordinary raccoon, and one who was a staunch vegetarian at that?

For what position?

And what sort of duties would they task him with?

Maybe in the circus or the zoo...

But then again, we must note that the first of these is not so much a job as a calling. In order to work in the circus you need to have all sorts of extraordinary abilities, like fire breathing or juggling live siskins, which the raccoon couldn't do and had no wish to do, especially juggling live siskins—whereas the latter, a zoo, means captivity, a prison, even if it makes daytrippers happy to spend their Sundays and holidays watching the suffering of a caged animal that had once yearned to be famous, but had instead ended up in the nets of ill-intentioned defenders of nature who had locked the naïve creature up behind steel bars, in a kind of damp dungeon—immortalized by a great poet[2]—doomed to ignominy and eternal torment.

So that's why the raccoon had nowhere to hurry off to.

Do you find that hard to believe?

[2] A reference to a fragment from the poem 'The Prisoner' by Aleksandr Pushkin.