

Bums and Others

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Here are recollections of encounters with people, sometimes scary ones. These memories come from around 1932 –1944. At this time there were still bums who went from village to village, and were given food and shelter here and there. Some would return year after year and people were not afraid of them, but if some new fools showed up, it was a different story.

One of the recurring visitors was an old man called Fläski-Aapo (Pork-Abraham). During winter, he had the use of a small sledge that carried all his earthly belongings. In the summer he had his belongings in a cart. It is difficult to say what was wrong with him, but he was not stupid. He was quite odd, simple. Where he was born I do not think anyone knew, and how he just got the idea to wander along the road was a mystery.

When he came to us he always asked for food and shelter. The only condition was that he would swim, take a sauna, and that his clothes should be cleaned. Mother put the outer clothes on the hot stones of the sauna, so there would be rapid death for lice, the possible stowaways.

Fläski-Aapo was not so keen on having someone decide for him that way, but he had to give in, and perhaps he even thought well of becoming clean. He never admitted it though. Some times he was very surly and downright nasty, and other times he sang psalms and one can almost say that he preached.

Eventually he was taken into the old-age home, but it was the last thing he wanted. He was certainly desperate and very angry and he made messes everywhere. Pretty soon he died there.

Among the regular visitors were peddlers, who were even awaited. There used to be two of them. One was very swarthy, perhaps Gypsy. He came with a rack on his bike and he had a big black bundle. He never stayed overnight and I do not remember that we bought anything from him. I remember him mostly because he differed visually from the people around us.

The second, Hedbom was his name, came about two times a year. He was a nice man and a great man. He had a strong bike with big racks both rear and front, and on those he had large suitcases. At one time he would stay with us, but so it was that he heard from neighbors that there were little ones coming on, so he stopped asking to be allowed to stay overnight .

The content of the suitcases was incredibly exciting. There were fabric, haberdashery, jackets, gloves, neck-cloths -- yes, everything you can think of. It is said that when I was about three years, I was so fond of a red jacket that he had not the heart to resist. I got it. For food and lodging, he understood something of our mother. Sometimes at night he told ghost stories. It was not easy to sleep after such a night. We just waited for the rocking chair to begin to rock by itself, or that white-clad figure would reveal itself.

Then there were the unexpected and unwelcome "guests".

One early summer, around 1937, we saw a strange man come walking in the old way. He had a large black hat and some sort of cape. He talked aloud to himself. We stood in the yard and looked and we wished he would not turn aside to our place, but that was precisely what he did. My father was not home and a fear began to creep into us.

He called himself Adolf the Wise and he showed that he had a knife. It seemed he

was talking in a deranged manner. Eventually he wandered off and we were happy. We heard much later that he had returned to the mental hospital, from which he had escaped.

Another summer, there was another fool, and he was much more difficult to get rid of. He pretended to be a priest and would collect us and preach to us. He seemed not violent in any way, but he also was UNBALANCED, one could easily see that.

One winter evening a tall, unknown man came into our house and sat on a chair. The door was never locked until the night. He said nothing, he just sat there and stared. Only Mother and the kids were there. What would we do if?

Pretty soon we heard my father's footsteps on the stairs outside. He opened the door in his rapping way, threw his gloves to the floor and said, "Oh, we have an unknown visitor." Instantly the man got up and rushed out. So happy and relieved we were!

One of the neighbors told me that the same night they heard a clatter in their great hall and when he looked to see what it was, a man sneaked out.

It was always frightening to go to the barn when it was dark, for the door was never locked and someone could hide in the darkness. It was even worse to get hay in the barn, even if there was a faint light high up on the ceiling, there could be something dangerous in the shadows. We were also afraid to get firewood in the black woodshed, but usually we had someone with us. Much later, no one felt afraid about it.

One Sunday afternoon, as I sat with a few of my sisters in the summer kitchen, a stranger came in and made himself at home. It turned out that he wanted to give massages. Imagine, four young girls, massage yummy! We made it clear to him that there would be no massage, but he seemed to enjoy himself enormously even without it, or perhaps he hoped soon we would give in. Eventually, I winked at my younger sister and went over on the other side and told Mother, who lay resting. I asked if she had enough strength to come and make him go him away. She was sick and tired, but she pulled herself together, put on her most severe demeanor, stalked into the summer kitchen and told the guest to go away. He did so without grumbling. Mother really had a great deal of aplomb.

In the village Bäckesta lived a man who was completely blind but he was married and had children. He was a very talented man who did well despite his handicap. He sometimes came to us and as children we were almost afraid of him too.

When Mother was not feeling well, she hired two Finnish women, both named Aino, but they never came at the same time because then it would become competitive. This was during the war, and both of these women had children without being married. It was said that one often smuggled cigarettes in her pregnant belly. Customs officials could not to make themselves feel on her stomach, so she got away with it, and was able to continue her activities. Sometimes she was ordered by our grandmother to work with wool and as payment she received such things as sugar and potatoes.

Once a man, who lived in the same village as the women, asked Mother if she knew what kind of women she had hired. "Oh yes," said Mother, but their children also need food." The man's mouth was locked shut.

A lady called Pläkki-Elisi came to us also. Where she came from I do not know. She brought household things to sell such as simple pots and pans made of tin plate. The strange thing with her was that she talked and laughed to himself. One time I was commissioned to follow her to the outhouse. It was very dark. When she sat down, she started laughing too violently, and even though I knew she was a little strange in that regard, I was so startled that I ran into the house.

In my childhood, it was customary for neighbors to look in at any time without being invited. We would offer coffee and get the guest a cup, or sometimes he just sat (mostly it was a he) for a while and talked and then went home. It also happened that some began to

come every Sunday. There was a lady who took advantage of our hospitality. She managed to arrive around noon, and it began to be tiresome. To avoid having to talk to her all the time, we suggested to the guest that Mother needed to take a nap after lunch, and perhaps she needed to take a nap too.

Life can be lived in many ways.