

Ile Forest

Ursula K. Le Guin

1976

“SURELY,” said the young doctor, “there are unpardonable crimes! Murder can’t go unpunished.”

The senior partner shook his head. “There are unpardonable people, perhaps; but crimes...they depend...”

“On what? To take a human life—that’s absolute. Self-defense aside, of course. The sacredness of human life—”

“Is nothing the law can judge of,” the older man said drily. “I have a murder in the family, as a matter of fact. Two murders.” And, gazing mostly at the fire, he told his story.

My first practice was up north in the Valone. I went there with my sister in 1902. Even then it was a drab place. The old estates had sold out to the beetroot plantations, and collieries spread a murk on the hills to the south and west. It was just a big, dull plain; only at the east end of it, Valone Alte, did you get any sense of being in the mountains. On the first day I drove to Valone Alte I noticed a grove of trees; the trees in the valley had all been cut down. There were birches turning gold, and a house behind them, and behind it a stand of huge old oaks, turning dim red and brown; it was October. It was beautiful. When my sister and I drove out on Sunday I went that way, and she said in her drowsy way that it was like the castle in the fairy tale, the castle of silver in a forest of gold. I had several patients in Valone Alte, and always drove that road. In winter when the leaves were down you could see the old house; in spring you could hear the cuckoos calling, and in summer the mourning-doves. I didn’t know if anyone lived there. I never asked.

The year went round; I didn’t have all the practice I’d hoped for, but Poma, my sister Pomona, was good at making ends meet, for all she looked so sleepy and serene. So we got on. One evening I came in and found a call had been left from a place called He on the Valone Alte road. I asked Minna, the housekeeper, where it was.

“Why, in Ile Forest,” she said, as if there was a forest the size of Siberia there. “Past the old mill.”

“The castle of silver,” Poma said, smiling. I set right off. I was curious. You know how it is, when you’ve built up your fancies about a place, and then suddenly are called to go into it. The old trees stood round, the windows of the house reflected the last red of the west. As I tied up my horse, a man came out to meet me.

He didn't come out of any fairy tale. He was about forty and had that hatchet face you see up north, hard as flint. He took me straight in. The house was unlit; he carried a kerosene lamp. What I could see of the rooms looked bare, empty. No carpets, nothing. The upstairs room we came to had no rug either; bed, table, a few chairs; but a roaring hot fire in the hearth. It helps to have a forest, when you need firewood.

The patient was the owner of the forest, Ileskar. Pneumonia. And he was a fighter. I was there on and off for seventy hours, and he never drew a breath in all that time that wasn't an act of pure willpower. The third night, I had a woman in labor in Mesoval, but I left her to the midwife. I was young, you know, and I said to myself that babies come into the world every day, but it's not every day a brave man leaves it. He fought; and I tried to help him. At dawn the fever went down abruptly, the way it does now with these new drugs, but it wasn't any drug; he'd fought, and won. I drove home in a kind of exaltation, in a white windy sunrise.

And I dropped in daily while he convalesced. He drew me, the place drew me. That last night, it had been one of those nights you have only when you're young—whole nights, from sunset to sunrise, when life and death are present with you, and outside the windows there's the forest, and the winter, and the dark.

I say "forest" just as Minna did, meaning that stand of a few hundred trees. It had been a forest once. It had covered all Valone Alte, and so had the Ileskar properties. For a century and a half it had all gone down and down; nothing left now but the grove, and the house, and a share in the Kravay plantations, enough to keep one Ileskar alive. And Martin, the hatchet-faced fellow, his servant technically, though they shared the work and ate together. Martin was a strange fellow, jealous, devoted to Ileskar. I felt that devotion as an actual force, not sexual, but possessive, defensive. It did not puzzle me too much. There was something about Galven Ileskar that made it seem quite natural. Natural to admire him, and to protect him.

I got his story from Minna, mostly, her mother had worked for his mother. The father had spent what was left to spend, and then died of the pleurisy. Galven went into the army at twenty; at thirty he married, retired as a captain, and came back to Ile. After about three years his wife deserted him, ran away with a man from Brailava. And about that I learned a little from Galven himself. He was grateful to me for my visits; I suppose it was plain that I wanted his friendship. He felt he should not withhold himself. I'd rambled on about Poma and myself, so he felt obliged to tell me about his marriage. "She was very weak," he said. He had a gentle, husky voice. "I took her weakness for sweetness. A mistake. But it wasn't her fault. A mistake. You know she left me, with another man."

I nodded, very embarrassed.

"I saw him whip a horse blind once," Galven said, in the same thoughtful, painful way. "Stand and whip its eyes till they were open sores. When I got there he'd just finished. He gave a big sigh of satisfaction, as if he'd just gotten up from dinner. It was his own horse. I didn't do anything. Told him to get off the place, clear out. Not enough..."

"You and your—wife are divorced, then?"

"Yes," he said, and then he looked across the room at Martin, who was building up the fire. Martin nodded, and Galven said, "Yes," again. He was only a week or so convalescent, he looked tired; it was a bit strange, but I already knew he was a strange fellow. He said, "I'm sorry. I've forgotten how to talk to civilised people."

It was really painful to have him apologising to me, and so I just went on with the first thing that came to mind about Poma and myself and old Minna and my patients, and presently I wound

up asking if I might bring Poma sometime when I came out to He. “She’s admired the place so much when we drive past.”

“It would be a great pleasure to me,” Galven said. “But you’ll let me get on my feet again, first? And it is a bit of a wolf’s den, you know...”

I was deaf. “She wouldn’t notice that,” I said. “Her own room’s like a thicket, scarves and shawls and little bottles and books and hairpins, she never puts anything away. She never gets her buttons into the right buttonholes, and she leaves everything around behind her, sort of like a ship’s wake.” I wasn’t exaggerating. Poma loved soft clothes and gauzy things, and wherever she’d been there was a veil dripping off a chair-arm, or a scarf fluttering on a rose bush, or some creamy fluffy thing dropped by the door, as if she were some sort of little animal that left bits of its fur around, the way rabbits leave white plumes on the briars in the early morning in the fields. When she’d lost a scarf and left her neck bare she’d catch up any sort of kerchief, and I’d ask her what she had on her shoulders now, the hearth-rug? and she’d smile her sweet, embarrassed, lazy smile. She was a sweet one, my little sister. I got a bit of a shock when I told her I’d take her out to He one of these days. “No,” she said, like that.

“Why not?” I was chagrined. I’d talked a lot about Ileskar, and she had seemed interested.

“He doesn’t want women and strangers around,” she said. “Let the poor fellow be.”

“Nonsense. He’s very lonely, and doesn’t know how to break out of it.”

“Then you’re just what he needs,” she said, with a smile. I insisted—I was bent on doing Galven good, you see—and finally she said, “I have queer ideas about that place, Gil. When you talk about him, I keep thinking of the forest. The old forest, I mean, the way it must have been. A great, dim place, with glades no one ever sees, and places people have known but forgotten, and wild animals roaming in it. A place you get lost in. I think I’ll stay home and tend my roses.”

I suppose I said something about “feminine illogic,” and the rest. Anyhow, I trampled on, and she gave in to me. To yield was her grace, as not to yield was Galven’s. No day had been set for our visit, and that reassured her. In fact it was a couple of months before she went to Ile.

I remember the wide, heavy, February sky hanging over the valley as we drove there. The house looked naked in that winter light among bare trees. You saw the shingles off the roof, the uncurtained windows, the weedy driveways. I had spent an uneasy night, dreaming that I was trying to track somebody, some little animal it seemed, through the woods, and never finding it.

Martin wasn’t about. Galven put up our pony and brought us into the house. He was wearing old officer’s trousers with the stripe taken off, an old coat and a coarse woollen muffler. I had never noticed, till I looked through Poma’s eyes, how poor he was. Compared with him, we were wealthy: we had our coats, our coals, our cart and pony, our little treasures and possessions. He had an empty house.

He or Martin had felled one of the oaks to feed the enormous fireplace downstairs. The chairs we sat in were from his room upstairs. We were cold, we were stiff. Galven’s good manners were frozen. I asked where Martin was. “Hunting,” Galven said, expressionless.

“Do you hunt, Mr Ileskar?” Poma asked. Her voice was easy, her face looked rosy in the firelight. Galven looked at her and thawed. “I used to go over to the marshes for duck, when my wife was alive,” he said. “There aren’t many birds left, but I liked it, wading out in the marshes as the sun came up.”

“Just the thing for a bad chest,” I said, “take it up again by all means.” All at once we were all relaxed. Galven got to telling us hunting stories that had been passed down in his family—tales of boar-hunting; there’d been no wild boar in the Valone for a hundred years. And that sent us to

the tales that old villagers like Minna could still tell you in those days; Poma was fascinated with them, and Galven told her one, a kind of crude, weird epic of avalanches and axe-armed heroes which must have come down from hut to hut, over the centuries, from the high mountains above the valley. He spoke well, in his dry, soft voice, and we listened well, there by the fire, with drafts and shadows at our back. I tried to write that tale down once, and found I could remember only fragments, all the poetry of it gone; but I heard Poma tell it to her children once, word for word as Galven told it that afternoon in Ile.

As we drove away from the place I thought I saw Martin come out of the forest towards the house, but it was too dark to be sure.

At supper Poma asked, "His wife is dead?"

"Divorced."

She poured some tea and dreamed over it awhile.

"Martin was avoiding us," I said.

"Disapproves of my coming there."

"He's a dour one all right. But you did like Galven?"

Poma nodded and presently, as if by afterthought, smiled. And soon she drifted off to her room, leaving a filmy pink scarf clinging to her chair by a thread.

After a few weeks Galven called on us. I was flattered, and startled. I had never imagined him away from He, standing like anybody else in our six-by-six parlour. He had got himself a horse, in Mesoval. He was tremendously pleased and serious, explaining to us how it was a really fine mare, but old and overriden, and how you went about "bringing back" a ruined horse. "When she's fit again, perhaps you'd like to ride her, Miss Pomona," he said, for my sister had mentioned that she loved riding. "She's very gentle."

Pomona accepted at once; she never could resist a ride—"It's my laziness," she always said, "the horse does the work, and I just sit there."

While Galven was there, Minna kept peering through the crack of the door. After he'd gone she treated us with the first inkling of respect she'd shown us yet. We'd moved up a notch in the world. I took advantage of it to ask her about the man from Brailava.

"He used to come to hunt. Mr Ileskar used to entertain, those days. Not like in his father's day, but still, there'd be ladies and gentlemen come. That one come for the hunting. They say he beat his horse blind and then had an awful quarrel with Mr Ileskar about it and was sent off. But he come back, I guess, and made a fool of Mr Ileskar after all."

So it was true about the horse. I hadn't been sure. Galven did not lie, but I had a notion that in his loneliness he had not kept a firm hold on the varieties, the distinctions, of truth. I don't know what gave me that impression, other than his having said once or twice that his wife was dead; and she was, for him, if not for others. At any rate Minna's grin displeased me—her silly respect for Ileskar as "a gentleman," and disrespect for him as a man. I said so. She shrugged her wide shoulders. "Well, doctor, then tell me why he didn't up and follow 'em? Why'd he let the fellow just walk off with his wife?"

She had a point there.

"She wasn't worth his chasing after," I said. Minna shrugged again, and no wonder. By her code, and Galven's, that was not how pride worked.

In fact it was inconceivable that he had simply given in. I had seen him fight a worse enemy than an adulterer...Had Martin somehow interfered? Martin was a strong Christian; he had a different code. But strong as he might be he could not have held Galven back from anything

Galven willed to do. It was all very curious, and I brooded over it at odd moments all that spring. It was the *passiveness* of Galven's behavior that I simply could not fit in to the proud, direct, intransigent man I thought I knew. Some step was missing.

I took Poma out several times to ride at Ile that spring; the winter had left her a bit run down, and I prescribed the exercise. That gave Galven great pleasure. It was a long time since he'd felt himself of use to another human being. Come June he got a second horse, when his money from the Kravay plantations came in; it was called Martin's horse, and Martin rode it when he went to Mesoval, but Galven rode it when Poma came to ride the old black mare. They were a funny pair, Galven every inch the cavalryman on the big raw-boned roan, Poma lazy and smiling, sidesaddle on the fat old mare. All summer he'd ride down on Sunday afternoon leading the mare, pick up Poma, and they'd ride out all afternoon. She came in bright-eyed from these rides, wind-flushed, and I laid it to the outdoor exercise—oh, there's no fool like a young doctor!

There came an evening of August, the evening of a hot day. I'd been on an obstetrics call, five hours, premature twins, stillborn, and I came home about six and lay down in my room. I was worn out. The stillbirth, the sickly heavy heat, the sky grey with coalsmoke over the flat, dull plain, it all pulled me down. Lying there I heard horses' hooves on the road, soft on the dust, and after a while I heard Galven's and Pomona's voices. They were in the little rose plot under my window. She was saying, "I don't know, Galven."

"You cannot come there," he said.

If she answered, I could not hear her.

"When the roof leaks there," he said, "it leaks. We nail old shingles over the hole. It takes money to roof a house like that. I have no money. I have no profession. I was brought up not to have a profession. My kind of people have land, not money. I don't have land. I have an empty house. And it's where I live, it's what I am, Pomona. I can't leave it. But you can't live there. There is nothing there. Nothing."

"There's yourself," she said, or I think that's what she said; she spoke very low.

"It comes to the same thing."

"Why?"

There was a long pause. "I don't know," he said. "I started out all right. It was coming back, maybe. Bringing her back to that house. I tried it, I tried to give He to her. It is what I am. But it wasn't any good, it isn't any good, it's no use, Pomona!" That was said in anguish, and she answered only with his name. After that I couldn't hear what they said, only the murmur of their voices, unnerved and tender. Even in the shame of listening it was a wonderful thing to hear, that tenderness. And still I was afraid, I felt the sickness, the weariness I had felt that afternoon bringing the dead to birth. It was impossible that my sister should love Galven Ileskar. It wasn't that he was poor, it wasn't that he chose to live in a half-ruined house at the end of nowhere; that was his heritage, that was his right. Singular men lead singular lives. And Poma had the right to choose all that, if she loved him. It wasn't that that made it impossible. It was the missing step. It was something more profoundly lacking, lacking in Galven. There was a gap, a forgotten place, a break in his humanity. He was not quite my brother, as I had thought all men were. He was a stranger, from a different land.

That night I kept looking at Poma; she was a beautiful girl, as soft as sunlight. I damned myself for not ever having looked at her, for not having been a decent brother to her, taking her somewhere, anywhere, into company, where she'd have found a dozen men ready to love her and marry her. Instead, I had taken her to Ile.

"I've been thinking," I said next morning at breakfast. "I'm fed up with this place. I'm ready to try Brailava." I thought I was being subtle, till I saw the terror in her eyes.

"Are you?" she said weakly.

"All we'll ever do here is scrape by. It's not fair to you, Poma. I'm writing Cohen to ask him to look out for a partnership for me in the city."

"Shouldn't you wait a while longer?"

"Not here. It gets us nowhere."

She nodded, and left me as soon as she could. She didn't leave a scarf or handkerchief behind, not a trace. She hid in her room all day. I had only a couple of calls to make. God, that was a long day!

I was watering the roses after supper, and she came to me there, where she and Galven had talked the night before. "Gil," she said, "I want to talk with you."

"Your skirt's caught on the rose bush."

"Unhook me, I can't reach it."

I broke the thorn and freed her.

"I'm in love with Galven," she said.

"Oh I see," said I.

"We talked it over. He feels we can't marry; he's too poor. I wanted you to know about it, though. So you'd understand why I don't want to leave the Valone."

I was wordless, or rather words strangled me. Finally I got some out—"You mean you want to stay here, even though—?"

"Yes. At least I can see him."

She was awake, my sleeping beauty. He had waked her; he had given her what she lacked, and what few men could have given her: the sense of peril, which is the root of love. Now she needed what she had always had and never needed, her serenity, her strength. I stared at her and finally said, "You mean to live with him?"

She turned white, dead white. "I would if he asked me," she said. "Do you think he'd do that?" She was furious, and I was floored. I stood there with the watering can and apologised—"Poma, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—But what are you going to *do*?"

"I don't know," she said, still angry.

"You mean you just intend to go on living here, and he there, and—" She already had me at the point of telling her to marry him. I got angry in my turn. "All right," I said, "I'll go speak to him."

"What about?" she said, defensive of him at once.

"About what he intends to do! If he wants to marry you, surely he can find some kind of work?"

"He has tried," she said. "He wasn't brought up to work. And he has been ill, you know."

Her dignity, her vulnerable dignity, went to my heart. "Oh Poma, I know that! And you know that I respect him, that I love him; he was my friend first, wasn't he? But the illness—what kind of illness?—There are times I don't think I've ever really known him at all—" I could not say any more, for she did not understand me. She was blind to the dark places in the forest, or they were all bright to her. She feared for him; but she did not fear him at all.

And so I rode off that evening to Ile.

Galven was not there. Martin said he had taken out the mare to exercise her. Martin was cleaning a harness in the stable by lanternlight and moonlight, and I talked with him there while I waited for Galven to come back. Moonlight enlarged the woods of Ile; the birches and the house

looked silver, the oaks were a wall of black. Martin came to the stable door with me for a smoke. I looked at his face in the moonlight, and I thought I could trust him, if only he'd trust me.

"Martin, I want to ask you something. I have good reason for asking it."

He sucked at his pipe, and waited.

"Do you consider Galven to be sane?"

He was silent; sucked at his pipe; grinned a little. "Sane?" he said. "I'm not one to judge. I chose to live here too."

"Listen, Martin, you know that I'm his friend. But he and my sister, they're in love, they talk of marrying. I'm the only one to look after her. I want to know more about—" I hesitated and finally said, "About his first marriage."

Martin was looking out into the yard, his light eyes full of moonlight. "No need to stir that up, doctor. But you ought to take your sister away."

"Why?"

No answer.

"I have a right to know."

"Look at him!" Martin broke out, fierce, turning on me. "Look at him! You know him well enough, though you'll never know what he was, what he should have been. What's done is done, there's no mending it, let him be. What would she do, here, when he went into his black mood? I've lived day after day in this house with him when he never spoke a word, and there was nothing you could do for him, nothing. Is that for a young girl to live with? He's not fit to live with people. He's not sane, if you want Take her away from here!"

It was not wholly jealousy, but it was not logic, either, that led his argument. Galven had argued against himself in the same way last night. I was sure Galven had had no "black mood" since he had known Poma. The blackness lay further behind.

"Did he divorce his wife, Martin?"

"She's dead."

"You know that for a fact?"

Martin nodded.

"All right; if she's dead, that story's closed. All I can do is speak to him."

"You won't do that!"

It wasn't either question or threat so much as it was terror, real terror in his voice. I was clinging to common sense by now desperately, clutching at the straw. "Somebody's got to face reality," I said angrily. "If they marry they've got to have something to live on—"

"To live on, to live on, that's not what it's about! He can't marry anybody. Get her out of here!"

"Why?"

"All right, you asked if he was sane, I'll answer you. No. No, he isn't sane. He's done something he doesn't know about, he doesn't remember, if she comes here it will happen again, how do I know it won't happen again!"

I felt very dizzy, there in the night wind under the high dark and silver of the trees. I finally said in a whisper, "His wife?"

No answer.

"For the love of God, Martin!"

"All right," the man whispered. "Listen. He came on them in the woods. There, back in the oaks." He pointed to the great trees standing somber under moonlight. "He'd been out hunting. It was the day after he'd sent off the man from Brailava, told him get out and never come back.

And she was in a rage with him for it, they'd quarrelled half the night, and he went off to the marshes before dawn. He came back early and he found them there, he took a shortcut through the woods, he found them there in broad daylight in the forest And he shot her point-blank and clubbed the man with his rifle, beat his brains out. I heard the shot, so close to the house, I came out and found them. I took him home. There were a couple of other men staying here, I sent them away, I told them she'd run off. That night he tried to kill himself, I had to watch him, I had to tie him up." Martin's voice shook and broke again and again. "For weeks he never said a word, he was like a dumb animal, I had to lock him in. And it wore off but it would come back on him, I had to watch him night and day. It wasn't her, it wasn't that he'd come on them that way like dogs in heat, it was that he'd killed them, that's what broke him. He came out of it, he began to act like himself again, but only when he'd forgotten that He forgot it. He doesn't remember it. He doesn't know it. I told him the same story, they'd run off, gone abroad, and he believed it. He believes it now. Now, now will you bring your sister here?"

All I could say at first was, "Martin, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Then, pulling myself together, "They—what did you do?"

"They're where they died. Do you want to dig them up and make sure?" he said in a cracked, savage voice. "There in the forest. Go ahead, here, here's the manure shovel, it's what I dug a hole for them with. You're a doctor, you won't believe Galven could do that to a man, there wasn't anything left of the head but—but—" Martin put his face into his hands suddenly and rocked back and forth, crouching down on his heels, crouching and rocking and sobbing.

I said what I could to him, but all he could say to me was, "If I could just forget it, the way he has!"

When he began to get himself under control again, I left, not waiting for Galven. Not waiting, I say—I was running from him. I wanted to be out from under the shadow of those trees. I kept the pony at a trot all the way home, glad of the empty road and the wash of moonlight over the wide valley. And I came into our house out of breath and shaking; and found Galven Ileskar standing there, by the fire, alone.

"Where's my sister?" I yelled, and he stared in bewilderment. "Upstairs," he stammered, and I went up the stairs four at a time. There she was in her room, sitting on her bed, among all the pretty odds and ends and bits and tatters that she never put away. She had been crying. "Gil!" she said, with the same bewildered look. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing—I don't know," and I backed out, leaving her scared to death, poor girl. But she waited up there while I came back down to Galven; that's what they'd arranged, the custom of the times, you know, the men were to talk the matter over.

He said the same thing: "What's wrong, Gil?" And what was I to say? There he stood, tense and gallant, with his clear eyes, my friend, ready to tell me he loved my sister and had found some kind of job and would stand by her all his life, and was I supposed to say, "Yes, there's something wrong, Galven Ileskar," and tell him what it was? Oh, there was something wrong, all right, but it was a deeper wrong, and an older one, than any he had done. Was I to give in to it?

"Galven," I said, "Poma's spoken to me. I don't know what to say. I can't forbid you to marry, but I can't—I can't—" And I stuck; I couldn't speak; Martin's tears blinded me.

"Nothing could make me hurt her," he said very quietly, as if making a promise. I don't know whether he understood me; I don't know whether, as Martin believed, he did not know what he had done. In a way it did not matter. The pain and the guilt of it were in him, then and always. That he knew, knew from end to end, and endured without complaint.

Well, that wasn't quite the end of it. It should have been, but what he could endure, I couldn't, and finally, against every impulse of mercy, I told Poma what Martin had told me. I couldn't let her walk into the forest undefended. She listened to me, and as I spoke I knew I'd lost her. She believed me, all right. God help her, I think she knew before I told her!—not the facts, but the truth. But my telling her forced her to take sides. And she did. She said she'd stay with Ileskar. They were married in October.

The doctor cleared his throat, and gazed a long time at the fire, not noticing his junior partner's impatience.

"Well?" the young man burst out at last like a firecracker—"What happened?"

"What happened? Why, nothing much happened. They lived on at He. Galven had got himself a job as an overseer for Kravay; after a couple of years he did pretty well at it. They had a son and a daughter. Galven died when he was fifty; pneumonia again, his heart couldn't take it. My sister's still at He. I haven't seen her for a couple of years, I hope to spend Christmas there...Oh, but the reason I told you all this. You said there are unpardonable crimes. And I agree that murder ought to be one. And yet, among all men, it was the murderer whom I loved, who turned out in fact to be my brother... Do you see what I mean?"

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