

THE GOOD HEALER

A NOVEL

By

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*To my father,
Dr. Rajko Medenica, M.D., P.H.D.*

“We physicians are not here to pity a patient. We are here to heal and improve the patient’s health. We are here to lengthen life and improve its quality. Failing to find a cure we are still here to share pain, for we do not treat the disease, we treat the person. ”

— Dr. Rajko Medenica

One

The news had quickly spread throughout the tiny village of Vieutrou. The houses were few, and no secret could be kept for long. It was one of those typical hamlets of the Swiss Alps, tucked away in thick pine forests. The village of Vieutrou was loosely laid out as a circle of small, dilapidated farms surrounding a parish church in much the same condition. What was the news?

The Duchesnes, a poor, young sharecropping couple, living in a pathetic, windowless barn, had given birth to a boy. In a village such as Vieutrou, the arrival of a little boy was a source of joy not only for the parents, but also for their employer. A son would eventually help his parents in the field, pushing heavy plows and carrying weighty loads. For the employer, the birth was a stroke of luck. The sharecroppers' productivity would be affected by the new arrival, but the baby would soon turn into a productive child who would not have to be paid.

Though the biting cold of winter winds and snow had proved of lesser intensity than in previous years, the Alps were still a forbidding place to be in the dead of winter. Cold, snow, and gusty winds further isolated small communities such as Vieutrou. Toward the end of autumn in 1411, children sitting under the venerable village oak, resting after a backbreaking day spent carrying water jugs, were interrupted in their playing by news of the birth.

“Come, come see!” Yelled a thin, young boy who was covered in mud. “Guillaume’s woman wi’ boy!”

The small boys and girls would have been overjoyed at any news breaking the monotony of their daily, uneventful lives. They therefore jumped to their feet and started running toward the Duchesne barn, all too happy to abandon the jugs. Under their small, frail feet clad in old, ripped leather shoes, dead leaves cracked and rustled. Above, in vast skies, enormous gray clouds were gathering to announce the first imminent snowstorm of the season. The clouds were slowly, but surely, blocking the warming rays that had been weakening steadily all afternoon.

“Wait! Wait for me,” yelled a scrawny boy. “Me legs no enough long!”

“Well, run faster, silly boy,” answered a young girl running in bare feet, holding her ruined shoes.

“We see who’ll get the’ first,” said the tallest and strongest boy, all too happy to show off in front of girls by shoving his way through the younger boys.

Finally, the children arrived at the dilapidated barn, and entered through the half-open door. Amazed by the scene in front of them, they could well have been an endless source of inspiration for a master painter. Dirty shoes with no laces, sometimes almost completely ripped, bodies covered in muddy rags handed down to them from long-gone brothers and sisters, eyes lost in confused gazes, a few yellow, broken teeth, hair disheveled — such were the children in front of the young couple and their son. Nevertheless, though the scene was one of misery, an atmosphere of joy pervaded the barn, perhaps because they all shared the same condition. Everyone that is, except the landlord, the only village employer. This man, despite his expensive clothes, could never have been compared to a gentleman. Clothes that would have improved one’s appearance emphasized the employer’s origin. His vast frame, his gaudy stance, and his oversized belly contributed to the uneven stretching and pulling of his clothes. However, to the villagers, the man was one they respected dearly, for he was a man of wealth, a local “bourgeois.” Because all the villagers were poor, they formed a bond.

With the falling veil of night, all was going to change. Pressed against one another, the adults and children continually whispered endearing words to the newborn wrapped in thick wool blankets. Suddenly, the adults, who had arrived after the children, made space for the happy village priest. In turn, the children moved aside, and the priest solemnly approached the newborn. The couple, though comfortably seated in straw, looked tired and miserable.

Antonella and Guillaume Duchesne had wandered the Alps for several weeks before they had found work in the village of Vieutrou. It had been a difficult adaptation to a new life for Antonella, who had never known penury, other than that of the convent she had fled from. She was now but a mere shadow of her former self. Though her beauty was still striking, and many were the young men who strained their necks in turning to gaze at her curvy silhouette, her gaze held a profound disappointment at the world's cruelty. She was not lively anymore, and fear of suffering had rendered her less daring. Guillaume missed her lovely smile, the one which caused her dimples to show and her cheeks to puff red. He felt guilty for taking her on this journey, but, of course, he had had no choice. The choice had been hers, and he could only help her as best he could. Shortly after leaving the convent, the couple had found a poor priest to marry them, paying him with some manual labor. She loved her new husband, and he was everything she had ever wished for in a man. However, freedom was definitely not as she had imagined it to be; she was not ready for the card life had dealt her.

Guillaume, the handsome young giant with long blond hair and blue eyes, slender and muscular, dressed in a heavy wool coat, now stood by his wife for the baptism. His soft eyes caressed the beautiful Antonella, herself slender with beautiful, new black hair that unfolded in long curls onto her shoulders. With her deep-blue lake-like eyes, she lovingly gazed at her newborn and then at her husband. Her plump chest rhythmically followed her breath, as she nursed her baby for the first time. The Duchesnes were visibly tired. Though they were grateful for the loving attention, they looked forward to a night alone. Her labor had lasted nearly thirty hours. The village midwife had called on two other women for help, worried about her patient's health. Throughout these long

hours, Guillaume had expected the worse possible outcomes. At times he would picture his beloved wife dying of blood loss, and at other times he would see his child stillborn. He pictured himself carrying the bodies of his wife and child, and burying them in the village cemetery. In fact, Guillaume was not a man who was used to happiness. His life had been harsh, since he started work at the age of four. A happy prospect caused him to be at a loss.

The village priest stepped in front of the small family. He was proud to be the first to hold the newborn. He stretched his scrawny arms, covered with the dirty long sleeves of his monastic robe, and asked for permission to pick up the infant. Antonella, exhausted by harsh hours of labor, nursing her son, hesitated for what seemed an eternity. She threw a concerned look toward her proud husband. He approved with a nod. The beautiful, young woman raised the baby and the priest gently wrapped him in the folds of his vast monastic robe. He motioned the adults standing next to the door to close it, blocking cold air from entering. Taking the infant out of his robe, he raised him high in the air, dropping the thick woolen blanket.

“My children, my flock, behold what has come to us! A small man is in our community. Pray for our beloved young couple, and let us celebrate the event in our good old church refectory. Brother Hughes and I will be more than happy to prepare a feast!”

“Yeah! Yeah! Let the young couple rest. We must go and help prepare the feast,” said a thin farmer, clutching his long pitchfork.

All became eager to help, looking forward to meager dishes prepared by each household. While the crowd started to disperse, the priest suddenly shouted in distress. Adults and children turned their heads to the terrified priest. Just a moment before, his eyes had been filled with tenderness, but now they were wide with fear. The young couple turned their eyes toward their religious leader, and took fright at the sight of his horrified expression. Antonella extended her arms as if to reach her son, but the terrified priest made no movement. He just gazed at the infant’s left hand, his mouth drooping in consternation.

“His hand — his left hand — it has six fingers! It is the devil’s sign, horrible events will occur among us!” The priest crossed himself. “May God take pity on us!”

Each villager crossed himself, and all turned their eyes toward the infant. Then they looked at the couple, who were frozen in fear. Antonella uttered a few words on the insignificance of the sixth finger, but she caused the priest to go into a greater panic. Now, the solidarity and unity that had characterized the scene suddenly broke apart and the priest said, with gravity, gazing at the couple reproachfully, "You, Antonella, you knew your son had six fingers; how could you hide such a monstrosity from our eyes? And you, Guillaume, you should be ashamed to shelter a child of the devil!"

"But . . .," said Antonella, looking at Guillaume with teary eyes. "It is nobody's fault, and it can always be remedied later!"

"True, we fix our child's hand later," said Guillaume in an uncertain tone.

"How dare you," yelled the outraged priest, still holding the baby in his arms. "How dare you defend this creature, this bit of devil, you who hid the devil's work from our poor, innocent eyes?"

"But . . .," said Antonella, tears running down her rosy cheeks.

"Enough! Enough!" yelled the priest, taken over by an uncontrollable fury. "Here, take the fruit of your union back, we are all going to determine your future among us immediately. Everyone, follow me to our good, old church!"

He handed the wailing newborn back to his distressed mother. Desperate to quell the baby's crying and her fear, Antonella pressed the newborn against her chest. Guillaume stood, stunned, in front of his wife and child, ready to defend them if need be. The priest opened the door into the dark night and, to everybody's surprise, snow flew into the warm barn. It was not unusual for snow to accumulate rapidly in the Alps, but nobody had given it a thought. Cold snow, ushered by a freezing wind, chilled all the villagers to their bones. Everybody left, disconcerted, alternating between staring at the couple and after the wild priest who had already left. Only Auguste Duperrain stayed, the Duchesne's employer. Desperate and sweating despite intense cold, he wiped his forehead with his expensive clothes. Without so much as a look at the poor couple, he started talking to himself. "What to do, what can I do?"

"We find a solution," said Guillaume, not so sure that they would.

“What do you mean, ‘we’?” Auguste answered with a haggard look. “Do you always think about only yourselves? And me ... who is going to work in my fields after the priest and the entire village decide to throw you out ... miserable vermin that you are?”

“We will find a solution! We will find one,” said Antonella, suddenly realizing what the employer was saying. The child echoed her fears with his unending cries.

“Oh ... poor me, poor me,” whined Auguste. “I will have to look for new sharecroppers!”

Cursing, Auguste Duperrain, stepped into the dark night. A few minutes earlier the door had been carefully closed, but now it slammed violently back and forth, pushed on by the fierce, freezing wind and snow.

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The priest, Laurent Beuchat, was considered a man of vast knowledge, “a man of letters,” according to the villagers. He had studied the Bible in a hamlet far from Vieutrou, and he had come back that Bible in hand. The book was written in Latin, a language he barely understood. Nevertheless, each Sunday he gave sermons in Latin, a language none understood. He translated his sermons in a few erudite sentences, encouraging the typical deeds expected of his flock: Prayer, abstinence, and payments to the church. Everyone in the village took him to be studied, because no one in the village owned even the shadow of a book. Father Beuchat was the ultimate decision-maker in the village. This time, as in other times of crisis, he exposed the horror of the newborn in all its lively details. The poor souls of the village let the priest decide. Laurent Beuchat pronounced his sentence immediately, lest he should already be too late: “The Duchesnes must leave at once, because this child is going to bring us bad luck. They have conspired with the devil, so we will only leave them their woolen coats, to be magnanimous in our distress! Follow me; we are going to throw this vile family out of our village!”

The little crowd immediately followed the priest and left the crumbling church, stepping into a wild tempest. In the meantime,

the Duchesnes had huddled against their fireplace, quieting their infant. Although the baby was now sleeping peacefully, the young parents had not calmed. Both hoped for a swift solution to the problem, not daring to think about what the future held. A damp chill crept between the logs that formed the walls of the barn, and Guillaume had gone through much effort to close the clambering door. Suddenly, Guillaume and Antonella heard animated voices, led by that of the priest. The latter was not only yelling, but acted as if possessed by the devil himself. *Who is the real devil here?* Guillaume asked himself.

“They are still here!” yelled Laurent Beuchat. “Throw them out now!”

“Yeah! Yeah!” All answered eagerly together. “We’ll show the wretches!”

The villagers broke into the barn and found the young couple huddled by the fire. Guillaume rose to shield his wife and son, but a large angry farmer threw a stone at his forehead. The father fell. His wife threw herself over him, crying and shielding him from further blows. A blur of movement and cacophony followed the fall. Guillaume and Antonella barely had time to cover their newborn and themselves with ragged wool coats before stepping into the frigid night storm. Once outside, the unrelenting crowd persevered in pushing the unfortunate family to the forest’s edge. There, the mob stopped and stepped back, staring indignantly at the small family. It was a strange scene. Under the twirling snow and frigid wind, one could see warmly clothed villagers on one side, and the skimpily clad wet family on the other. Had a stranger arrived, he would not have known which side was more terrified. Antonella, pressing her son against her, and Guillaume, holding them close to him, could not comprehend why the villagers had suddenly become so belligerent.

“Get going, get out of here,” said the priest, now more calm. “Let us live peacefully. Go back to the devil; he will be your host!”

“You can’t do this,” implored Guillaume, in desperation. “What kind of people are you? Are we no happy ’ere? Please no let we die in snow. Save we infant!”

“Impossible!” Laurent Beuchat answered. “My decision and that of the villagers has been taken; we cannot risk having our lives destroyed by your son and your actions!”

“Be reasonable, please,” begged Antonella, weakly.

“Leave, leave, and never come back,” said the wild priest, turning his back to the family. “Let’s get back to our warm houses, my good people; let’s abandon these diabolical creatures to their fate.”

One by one, the villagers turned around and started walking toward their homes, where warmth and food waited. The couple stood in silence for a long time, letting snow cover them like it had the multitude of pines in that deep, dark and frozen forest. Later, much later, alone at the forest edge, after gazing longingly at the lights in the windows, Guillaume and Antonella laid their eyes on each other and sadly contemplated their frozen faces. Turning to the woods, they fell through the snow at each step, and their traces quickly disappeared under a new white layer.

“Come on, my love; come with me, Antonella. We no stay here, there is nothing for we,” Guillaume said in a saddened voice. “We have to find shelter.”

“Take our child, Guillaume; I cannot stand anymore, I do not feel my legs,” said Antonella, crying.

“No, my wife, I no leave you. You and child are all I have left. Without you, I cannot!”

Antonella remained silent; she let her husband’s powerful arms lift her off the ground, and she felt herself taking flight as in a dream, leaving the cold, wet snow behind her. Walking in such deep snow was exhausting, but Guillaume was a strong man. He left the village behind him and resolutely entered the forbidding forest of pines. Soon, the trail of deep imprints was covered with fresh snow, as if the Duchesne family had never existed.

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Although Guillaume was reputed to have uncommon strength, he now was exerting more effort than he ever had. The thick snow was falling more heavily, and he had to find shelter, lest the family

freeze to death. The life Guillaume had led in the fields had been excruciatingly hard and unforgiving; he therefore had no illusions. He was a man who had low hopes, a man used to the lot life had given him, but he remembered that somewhere in the outskirts of the village laid a small logger's hut. It was constructed with large branches arranged as a ten-foot wide cone, the tips of the branches resting on one another. When he had seen it before, the structure had looked weak, but this shape had been favored for its strength and ease of construction throughout the ages. Guillaume knew that this hut would be his only hope of finding protection from the elements, unless it was already occupied by a logger caught in the storm. No houses existed outside the village for many miles, and returning to the village would be tantamount to a death sentence.

After an hour of walking, carrying his nearly unconscious wife and his son, asleep after exhausting himself from crying, Guillaume began to feel his arm muscles giving way under the weight and the cold that cut his wet clothes like a swarm of blades. On a night such as this, one could not see for more than a few feet. It would be some comfort to know that wild, hungry beasts would encounter the same predicament. Nevertheless, the young sharecropper was still alert enough to defend his small family with his large fists.

As his advance became slower, and as he began to despair, he suddenly found himself at the edge of a small clearing. To his greatest relief he saw the vague silhouette of the little hut. It had not been pure luck to find this location. While working for Auguste Duperrain, he sometimes had been assigned the task of helping loggers carry their loads back to the farm. Loggers sometimes took a detour to rest in the little hut. Naturally, as a simple helper, Guillaume had never had the joy of napping in that hut. It was evident that he would take his rest lying on the grass among the dogs. The strong young man had never uttered a word of complaint. He well knew that the pittance he received from his employer allowed him and his pregnant wife to survive in a region unforgiving to families left alone. Families living in isolated houses were rare; the dangers outweighing the benefits by far. Should such a family not fall prey to harsh winters, it would fall prey to roving bands of louts. It was living in villages such as Vieutrou

that offered the best security, the villagers uniting against any threat.

“Oh! I no believe it,” Guillaume uttered. “God be praised!”

“What is it, Guillaume? Why stop so suddenly? Do you not have any more strength?” Antonella’s voice was so tender and loving that tears started rolling on her husband’s cold cheeks.

“Honey, here is hut I speak t’ you about each time I come back with heavy logs.”

“My God, is this possible; is there someone inside?” asked the exhausted wife.

“No, Antonella, there’s no light.”

“May the Almighty hear your words, may He hear you,” she breathed heavily.

Guillaume, his tears frozen, abruptly pushed the decrepit wooden door: No one was inside. Because the snow was so deep, he had to bend over and finally fall on his knees to enter. Inside, there were no covers, no provisions, and most important of all, there were no logs with which to start a fire. Guillaume and Antonella felt fortunate nonetheless. For the couple, this little shelter was a palace, an oasis in a frozen world. Guillaume quickly pulled himself together, gently laid his wife on the hut’s dry earth, took the infant from her stiff arms, and laid him on the ground too. The little family was still in a dark and cold world, but at least the couple now had dry dirt under its numb bodies. Guillaume then immediately opened the woolen covers enveloping the infant and stuck his right ear to the little heart. It was still beating, and the covers were still mostly dry. Antonella, not feeling the cold wind biting her face, slowly came back to life and took the baby to her chest, hoping that some milk was left to save the boy.

The young man sat next to his wife, exhausted. His feet were numb and he no longer felt them. His young wife was in much the same condition, but he had saved her, and that was most important. They awoke the baby with difficulty, for it had been sleeping deeply, numbed by the cold. She untied her bodice and let the baby suckle. Antonella had been fortunate, if fortune was the right word to use. Her husband had taken some stale bread from their barn which he had wrapped in his coat. She ate it ravenously

when he gave it all to her, allowing her to produce a little milk for the baby. The scene was miserable. Guillaume, in the prime of his youth, curled up like a terrified puppy, the young woman dozing against the rough branches forming the wall, and the infant feeding with his eyes closed. Such was the scene barely illuminated by the outside.

They fell into a deep sleep, from which Guillaume awoke first. He heard a female voice singing far away, or at least he thought so. Was he hallucinating? He partly opened the flimsy door, fearing that snow would fall into the hut, and he realized the heavy snow had obstructed two thirds of the opening. Through the opening, at the top of the doorway, he could see the night sky had become lighter. Though the violent wind was still howling, it was not snowing anymore and the same wind had cleared the sky. A full moon now reigned over the mountains. Antonella awoke and saw her husband standing in front of the door, fixing the sky with a haggard gaze. At first, she thought her poor husband had lost his reason, for he was staring blankly at the mutinous skies. However, she then also heard the singing voice. She took the baby in her arms and crawled to her beloved husband.

“Do you hear it, Guillaume? Someone is there ...”

“You hear it, too? Then I no crazy? But who sing storm like this?”

“I don’t know, my love, but could this person help us?” she asked, with hope.

“You think we should leave our shelter?” he asked, not without fear.

“My love, what are we going to do in this hut? We will die of cold. Would it not be better to seek help from this person now that we have gotten some rest, and I have fed our child?”

“Yes, you right; us must leave and look for this voice. I hope it no far!”

Guillaume resolutely pushed the door open and heavy snow immediately tumbled on the dry, earthen floor. Despite the floor now covered in snow, the little family climbed through the passage. Once outside, their bodies instantly started aching, as if someone had been waiting with sharp knives. Without a word, Guillaume

lifted his wife and child. He ignored her calls to let her walk with the child, so as not to exhaust her husband completely. A new difficult march started again, both parents guided by the sound of the strange voice. This time, however, the mysterious singing had given them renewed hope. The voice moved closer and suddenly, the couple stopped. He pointed to a distant silhouette illuminated by a torch.

“Antonella, you see what me see?”

“Yes, Guillaume; a figure with a cart right in front of us. She seems to have stopped, and she does not sing anymore!”

“Ho! Please help us!” yelled Guillaume with the full force of his lungs.

A moment of silence followed. This time, Antonella added her feeble voice to that of her husband. “Wait, wait, don’t leave, we are here! Help ... help!” “Guillaume, the howling wind is probably covering our voices; let’s try to reach this person. Please, let’s try!”

Guillaume, gathering all his remaining strength, started running in the deep snow, carrying his wife and child. Unfortunately, as they reached the place they had thought the silhouette would be, they found nothing. In desperation, the poor husband noticed a large pine with beautiful, thick branches swaying in the wind. It was so large that the snow could not cover all the space below its branches, thus forming a precarious little shelter. Guillaume carried his wife and child to the tree and gently laid them on the ground for the second time that night. He realized that he would not be able to carry them much longer. A small cracking sound was heard next to them, and they felt they were being observed.

“Don’t fear we. If not want to help us, then you help our poor baby ...”

Nobody answered. They heard another branch cracking. Then Guillaume and Antonella looked at each other as if suddenly realizing something. Perhaps the sound they had been hearing was not the woman anymore, but a hungry, desperate beast waiting for the right time to attack. Without a moment to waste, Guillaume grabbed the infant and climbed the tree. On a large branch, he placed the newborn in his woolen blankets. At least there, he

thought, the wolves would not reach him. He then started descending to bring his wife high into the tree, too.

“Antonella, come quickly, we climb tree. Maybe this wolf with hunger?” he told her in a hushed anxious voice. While Guillaume was descending, the worst happened. Two scrawny wolves stood in front of the dark bushes, eyes shining like small mirrors reflecting the moon. They appeared truly weakened by famine. Yet, it was their hunger that made them more daring than usual, perhaps fearless. Guillaume, hanging from a branch with one hand and pushing himself up with one leg, stood as if frozen, constantly alternating between looking at his immobile wife leaning on the trunk, and the motionless gray wolves. Then, without warning, growling with their salivating jaws, the two wolves took a first step toward Antonella, the easiest victim to reach. Antonella did not move. Emboldened, they took a few more steps, baring their canines, but still she did not move. Probably realizing that their victim was unconscious, one of the beasts leaped in the air, aiming for Antonella’s throat.

“No! No! No!” shouted Guillaume, lunging at the beast from high above. Man and beast collided just as the wolf was about to land on Antonella. The giant man kicked the wolf in its stomach, cutting the animal’s breath. Both bodies collapsed on the ground with a thud, and Guillaume rushed toward the beast. With stunning strength, he pounded at the animal’s head and stomach with iron fists. The wolf reciprocated by biting and tearing off large pieces of Guillaume’s coat, but, after a minute of growling, shouting, pounding, the beast gave its last breath and fell into a pool of its own blood. Guillaume turned, struggling to catch his breath, but the other wolf was nowhere. Fear had given it wings.

“Oh! Antonella, Antonella,” Guillaume cried, looking at his motionless wife. “You not leave me now, you not leave me.” She did not answer. He called on his wife again, but again there was no answer. Anguished, he came to kneel in front of his wife. Her eyes were closed, she was leaning against the giant pine, frozen to death. In complete disarray, trying to cry but not able to, angry, but too sad to be angry, he laid down next to his wife, took her in his arms, and closed his eyes.

Another branch cracked, and a silhouette appeared. Guillaume opened his eyes, but he was already so weakened by the events that

he could only distinguish vague shapes and shadows. “Who is you?”

It was a woman wrapped in a thick and heavy fur coat. She carried a bloody carcass on her back, and when she knelt close to Guillaume, he realized it was the second wolf. Without a word, she lifted Antonella’s hand and felt no pulse. She sighed and let the heavy frozen arm fall into the snow. Guillaume’s heart sank, for that act confirmed what he already knew. Antonella had not survived. Feeling his strength ebbing, he grabbed the strange woman by the collar and forcefully pulled her toward him with his bloody fingers. She did not react, though she almost lost balance. In her ear, he whispered while pointing high in the tree, “This up there. My child. You save, you save ... he name Jean, Jean Duchesne. I love, you take care, you” Guillaume gave his last breath, released his iron grip on the woman’s collar, and dropped his heavy arms into the snow. As he did so, the woman adjusted her collar and noticed it was bloodied. She first thought it was the wolf on her shoulder, but then she sadly realized the man was bleeding from under his shredded coat.

Guillaume was dead, there was no doubt. The strange woman then looked into the branches of the tree and saw a small blanket move. The howling wind had covered much of the events, but now that she knew what to look for, she thought she heard a tiny squeak. With resolution, she climbed into the tree, took the child and leaped back into the snow. Throwing a last look toward the parents, whose skin had already changed color, she turned around and walked to her sturdy cart, opened thick velour curtains, and laid the infant down on plush, goose-feathered cushions. Once in her seat, she signaled her horse, a strong beast of burden, to start pulling the heavy wooden cart.