

Charles Lewinsky *Halfbeard*

Sample translation from

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Halfbeard

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First Chapter

In which Halfbeard comes to the village

No one can say how Halfbeard came to us; one day he was not there, and the next he was, as simple as that. Some are certain in the knowledge that he was seen for the first time on Palm Sunday, while others insist that no, it was Good Friday. Once, there was even a fist-fight over the question.

After the Lenten season, people wanted to be free of their pent-up thirst, and so Kryenbühl Martin bought two barrels of wine from a sumpter, a small one of Malvasier and a large one of Räuschling, and it was in this Räuschling, so I have heard tell, that the stranger was hidden, curled up as small as a dormouse in the daytime, when it tucks itself away in a dead tree – and then at midnight he slipped out through the bung hole and swelled back up to his full size, with a noise like a dying man's last breath. But that story was told by Rogenmoser Kari, who after his fifth cup also saw the devil rising out of Lake

Aegeri with his eyes all aflame. Others say that the stranger came down from the mountain, back when there was that little rockfall, and then lay amid the rocks for a whole year, completely unnoticed, covered by the dust as a winter grave is with snow. He came tumbling down the rockface with the stones, they say, and as if by some miracle broke not a single bone, it was only his face that was broken, the right-hand side, and that is why he looks the way he looks. None of those who swear to this saw it with their own eyes, mark you, but everyone likes to hear a good story, when the nights are long and Devils-Anneli is in another village. I myself believe he came on foot, quite ordinarily, though not straight down the broad track from Sattel. There are enough steep paths on the slopes where you cannot be seen; in these parts the smugglers are not the only ones who know that. Of course, it is no easy matter for a stranger to find such paths, but if he really is a fugitive, as they say, then he will have a nose for these things. When you have

had to run from people for long enough, you start to hide away as a matter of course, like a cat that little boys throw stones at, who will thus take a round-about route, across the rooftops or through the bushes.

Where he fled from and why, no one knows. One day he was simply here, in the village and yet not in the village, on the precise border between inside and outside. A fugitive, I think, gets a sense for borders as time goes by, and sees where they are even if no one is standing there demanding he pay a toll. I mean, any person can develop a special skill without it always having to be magic. The Iten twins, whom you only ever see together, just have to smell a pregnant cow and they can tell if it will birth a bull calf or a cow calf. Some folk call on them when their own wives are expecting; a farmer who has five children already and still no son and heir wants to know if it will be just another girl, so he can send to Aegeri for the herb woman in time. She knows how to bring children into the world, but also the

opposite. When we were little we used to run away from her, for people said she could bite you to death with the few teeth she has left, but now I think she is nothing but an ordinary woman, just one who has seen something of life.

Anyway, one day the Halfbeard appeared and, without asking anyone, found himself the right spot, a place that was not worth anyone's time to argue over. Just on the edge of the upper Klosterwald, where the ground is steep and the only folk who pass by are the nanny-goat herders or mayhap the old women gathering wood – on that spot, he pulled out ten feet of blackberry bushes and privet with his bare hands, so people say, though I do not believe it; you would have seen him bleeding like the ten thousand martyrs who fell into the thorns. Anyhow, he built himself something there, no longer than a palliase and no wider than a man with outstretched arms. We built such shelters when we were herding goats, decked with branches to keep out the rain. It did not take long to construct them, but not a one of us

would ever have thought to live in them. It seems to be enough for him, though in winter he must surely freeze like a poor sinner. He can only make a fire outside, and even then he has to take care it does not burn his hut down.

Steinemann Schorsch has his little farmstead a long way down the hill, and once, on an icy day, he had to fetch the stranger to help him, because at the very hour his wife was birthing her first baby, the cow went into labour, too. It will not have happened quite like this, but the story he told afterwards was that he found the stranger frozen stiff as a board, and had to drag him down the hill behind him like a toboggan. He leaned him against the table at home to thaw him out, next to the big soup cauldron, and it took but a little time before he was moving again and pitched in, like he was an old hand, it could not have been his first time helping at a birth. Afterwards, Steinemann said, Halfbeard knelt in front of the fire and it was not just to warm himself, for he put his hand deep into the flames and gave himself great

blisters. But I am sure it only seemed that way, and he must have had scabs on his hand afore that happened.

He's a curious bird, Halfbeard. That is what everyone calls him; nobody knows his real name. In the village, almost everyone has a nickname.

Whenever people speak of Eichenberger Meinrad, they call him "Little Eichenberger", for he has three elder sisters, all married already into other villages, and he was a late arrival, when his father had given up thinking he would ever have a son. Gisiger Hänsel, who is such a good drummer, is called Sponge, because he got into a fight and ever since has had a peculiar ear; and me they call the Pious Dwarf, the reason being that once for a few weeks I went up to Sattel for Mass every day – but that was not piety, it was because of Hasler Lisi. I liked her, but she did not like me; she had no time for little boys, she said. I suggested she wait until I turned twelve, but that she would not do, and she laughed at me. And when fat Hauenstein got her with child, I stopped going.

Anyway, Halfbeard. He is so called because his beard grows only on one side of his face; the other is covered in burn scars and black scabs, and the eye on that side has completely closed up. In the beginning some people called him Melchipar, but that did not catch on. They thought up that name because when Halfbeard looks to the left, and you can see only the bearded half of his face, he looks like Melchior on the banner embroidered with the three wise men that is carried in the procession at Epiphany. But when he turns his head the other way, and you see the beardless half with the black scabs, it is more like the Negro king Caspar. Half Melchior and half Caspar, and hence Melchipar. But the name was too complicated, and so people settled on Halfbeard. I would like to know just how such decisions are made. I also wonder what a name like this does to the person it is given to. Me, for example: since people started calling me the Pious Dwarf, I have begun to think of entering a monastery one day, not out of special piety, but because monks have a secure

income, and I do not believe the work is so very hard there, either. And when you take your vows, the abbot gives you a new name. I have never liked my Christian name. Eusebius – it was one of my father’s mad ideas. He heard the name in a sermon once and remembered it. I have a good memory, too; things like that are sometimes passed down from father to son. My elder brothers are Origenes and Polykarp, but if anyone should call them that he would get a smack in the face, especially from Poli; he likes to fight, quite unlike me. Had not Father broken his neck on the chamois hunt, he would have called a sister Perpetua, our mother says; he had already thought that one up.

Halfbeard does not give a fig what people call him, he told me that himself. You can talk with him quite normally, though some people in the village claim that half his tongue has been burned away as well and he can only babble like Fool-Werni, who has no real wit and squats down to shit in front of everyone, then claps his hands and points proudly at the turd

he made. Halfbeard is actually a very good talker, it is only that he does not like to talk, and certainly not with everyone. I got talking with him because once I was out mushrooming and happened to see him picking honeysuckle berries. I thought he meant to eat them, so I ran over and slapped them out of his hand, because they are poisonous. I considered too late that I could have used words to warn him; even if his tongue really was burned away, it would not have stopped him hearing. But he was not angry, he understood that I meant well, and even thanked me. He knew about the poison, he said, and in fact that was why he was picking honeysuckle berries: he had had trouble pissing the last few days, and they were good for that. He spoke a little oddly, not like we do in these parts, but I could understand him.

I believe he can read, too, and if that is true then he is the only one in the village who can. They teach you to read in the monastery, which would be another reason to go. You have to learn Latin as well, though, because apart from the Bible and the psalter,

as far as I know, there are no books. You only see Halfbeard at church up in Sattel on Sundays, when everyone must go, and he always stands right at the back, with the beggars and the lepers. But he seems to know the Bible, all the same. Not that he has told me, for he does not like to talk about himself – but once he gave himself away. I asked him if he minded that folk called him Halfbeard, and he laughed, this broken laugh that he always has, and said: “There are too many names and too few people for them. But you may tell people that I come from a famous family. Irad begat Mahujael, Mahujael begat Methushael, Methushael begat Lamech.” I did not understand, but I did remember, just as my father remembered the names for his children. Our mother says my memory is even better than his.

Because those names were so strange, I asked the vicar after Mass if he had ever heard them before, or if they were mere rubbish, and he could scarce believe I had remembered them all. He had read them aloud from the Bible once at a baptism, but

that was more than a year since, and if I still had them in my head after all this time, well, that was a gift, and I must give thanks to the Lord God for it. He stroked my hair, which was not to my liking, for I had lice again. Then he asked why he did not see me in church so often any more, excepting on Sundays, and I could not very well say that it was because of Hasler Lisi and the child that Hauenstein had given her. Luckily he asked no more questions; he was just chiding me and did not expect any answer at all.

I like to go and visit Halfbeard, but it is not as though we are friends. Old Eichenberger, who is already over fifty but rules his family like a youngster still, once had a dog that obeyed his every word, would fetch a stick or see off a stranger with its barking. That dog would let Eichenberger strike it and put up no fight, but when he went to stroke the animal, scratch it behind the ears and so on, then it bared its teeth. I do not know why that makes me think of Halfbeard.

Second chapter

In which Sebi shirks the digging

This evening I will get a beating, and that is normal, I think, when you have two older brothers. I just have to take care that it is Geni who catches me and not Poli. Geni is the oldest of us three and the most sensible, with him you can be sure that he will not knock a tooth out of your mouth or worse; sometimes he even winks at me while he is hitting me. In his manner, he takes after father, so our mother says; Father always used to think before he started anything. Once Geni whittled a water wheel for me, and he thought for a long time beforehand how he should do it, but then it really did turn in the stream. When Poli starts hitting you, on the other hand, why then he sees red, he even put it that way himself once, and he does not stop until the person he is beating is not moving any more, and even then he does not always stop. To the other boys in the village that makes him a hero; they want to be like

him and they do everything he says, some out of fear and others out of admiration. Gisiger Hänsel admires him most of all, though Poli is the one who gave him the sponge ear. When there is a fight, in the village or against folk from Sattel or Aegeri, Poli is always right at the front. Our mother has told us more than once: if they bring him home dead one day, he will have been lucky, because if they break his bones so badly that he cannot even hold the handle of the plough, he may as well have been given the viaticum. Then Poli just laughs, and says he does not mean to stay a ploughboy all his life and give himself a hunchback, he is going for a soldier, you can lead a lusty life there, and when he comes back to the village he will bring a sack of gold with him, and not batzen, either, but ducats. He looks up to Uncle Alisi, our mother's younger brother, who also went off soldiering and has fought in many foreign lands. When I was still very small, he once came back to the village for a few days; people still talk about it, how big and strong he was and how he scattered his

batzen like he was sowing corn. I myself can only remember him throwing me in the air and catching me again. He smelled of sweat and of brandy wine, and he made me afraid. Then he went off to the next war, and we do not know if he is living still. You never can be sure with soldiers.

Anyway, it is as certain that I will get a beating today as that winter will follow autumn. I did not go with them to the digging, though it had been made known that the whole village had to go, the men and boys, even the younger ones. Very seldom do you see one of the monastery people here, "Great men seem greatest from a distance," as they say; and we are not serfs here, but the woods belong to them. They allow us to use them, and so when they call, we have to come. When an order for woodland work comes down, you might moan and curse, but still you have to do it. In return we are allowed to graze the pigs in the woods and use the monastery oxen (which are really only there for the woodland work) to plough our own fields, that is the agreement, not written

down, but binding all the same. The monks having their woods dug over is a new thing, our mother says, it was never their custom before. They probably mean to make a pasture for cows there: these past few years cows have become as valuable as if they shat golden cowpats, and if you want more cows to sell, you need more pasture, and thus less woodland.

Digging out roots with a mattock is not for me. I think that if folk keep telling you that you are frail, then you should be allowed to behave that way; having the mockery and the hard labour as well is not fair. If I really do become a monk one day, I do not want to toil in the monastery stables, but learn to write. Only the singers have an even better life there, so I am told, but since my voice began to change, I cannot have any thought of such a thing. Geni says I am no longer a person but a crow. Though he laughs when he says these things and does not mean them cruelly.

Anyway, I wanted to visit Halfbeard again. The rain has been falling a long time now, and no matter how many branches he put over his hut, inside it will have been like wearing a cowl under a waterfall. Today has been the first day of fine, warm weather. I told my brothers I was feeling very sick to my stomach, I did not know what the cause might be, and I needed another good shit before the digging – they should go on ahead and I would catch them up. And then I walked in the opposite direction. If the whole village is working in the same place, I thought, then no one can catch you if you are somewhere else.

On the way I gathered wild strawberries, red and white, in the basket that Geni wove out of reeds. Geni can do anything.

As I came closer to his almost-hut, I could hear Halfbeard singing, a song that no one else in the village sings, with a strange melody, as if each note were wrong and only all together were they right. I did not understand the words, and Halfbeard stopped singing very quickly. But he had a nice

voice, I am sure he would be useful in the monastery. He was sitting on the ground in the sun, had made criss-crossed lines in the earth, and in the squares he had placed small stones, a lot of ordinary grey ones and a few of the coloured ones you find sometimes on the lakeshore or in a stream. There was an order to the stones, I could see that, the grey ones more in a line and the others scattered, but as I came up he quickly swept them all into a heap, as if he were making room for me to sit down. But he did it carefully: you could tell that he still needed the stones. He saw that I was beady-eyed at this and said: "Those are not stones, they are elephants and horses and soldiers and kings. A great many soldiers, which is the way of things the world over, but only two kings, and they will not rest until one of them is dead." Perhaps people are right when they say that he is a little touched in the head.

I do not know exactly what an elephant is. An animal, I think, that we do not have in these parts.

Because it seemed to me that he was more talkative today than usual, I asked him something I had long been wondering, but which no one had yet been able to explain to me: why there were two colours of wild strawberries, red and white, although they were the same plant, you could not see any difference.

Sponge, who is my friend, once claimed that the red ones were the men of the berries, and the white were the women, but I do not believe that, plants are not animals. Halfbeard asked me back: which taste better? I had to consider that. “The white,” I said, and he laughed, but it did not sound as though he was laughing at me. He told me to close my eyes, and then he put berries in my mouth one after another, and I had to guess what colour they were. But I could not taste any difference. “You only think that the white ones taste better,” he told me, “because they seem different from the others. People have been making that mistake since Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise. As soon as someone looks a little different, a different hair colour or a

bigger nose, all at once they think he must be something special, better or worse, but really we are all the same.” I wanted to argue with him, because for example Geni and Poli are nothing like each other, but you do not contradict Halfbeard, and certainly not when you are so much younger than him. With his burned noddle you cannot really see how many wrinkles he has, but he is certainly older than our mother, and she is nearly forty.

He had not eaten any of the strawberries, although I had picked them specially for him, and I asked if they were not to his liking. Oh, he said, he did like them, but he had once known someone who loved them even more, and now he had lost the taste for them, for they made him sad because he had lost this person. I thought it strange, the way he said that: you cannot lose a person as you lose a tooth, or a shoe, if you step in the marsh and then cannot pull it out again.

Then I ate the strawberries myself.

We sat there for some time without saying anything. Then he asked me if I could get hold of a shovel for him or a sturdy spade, he would only need it for a few hours. He had tried without one, but there were too many stones in the ground up here and he needed to dig a pit. I thought at first that it must be for a latrine, but he said he had no need of such a thing, the woods were big enough. It was stupid of me to ask; I have seen more than once that he does not simply stand against a bush to piss, but goes so deep into the woods that he cannot be seen. How big was this pit going to be, I asked, and he said: "Like a grave for several people."

I know a thing or two about graves and how you dig them. Old Laurenz, who has the privilegium, is bent over and has lost his strength, and so he has employed me to dig graves for him. He fills them in again himself, because there are people there then, and no one must know that he cannot do it any more, though everyone does know. No one has tattled on us yet. Laurenz gets four batzes for each

grave, and when you work for him he gives you half. Children's graves are only one batz a piece, but because children die so often, it is still worth it. The most profitable are the ones who go to the grave at the very hour of their birth; the hole is dug in a flash, and the money easily earned. It is not a pleasant job, but better than serfdom. And no one envies me the money, though there are enough young people who would do it better than I and quicker, too. Laurenz asked them first, but no one wanted the job, because they were afraid, even those who are usually brave. They say that if you hit old bones with your spade by accident, the dead will awaken and pursue the man who has disturbed their rest through his dreams, night after night, and then on the seventh new moon thereafter he will die, too. But I thought about it, and if that were true, then Laurenz certainly would not have lived to such a great age. Anyway, his father and his grandfather were gravediggers before him, the privilege passes down through his family, and none of them died young, I asked

around. I have not spent a single one of the batzes I have earned, and the bag of coins I have saved lies hidden in Starveling-Kathi's grave, because it was always said of her that she was a sorceress. I think superstition is safer than a guard dog.

Anyway, I know a thing or two about digging graves, and packing more than one person into one and the same grave is a sin and only permitted during terrible plagues, I know that from Laurenz, because otherwise of course at the resurrection the bodies would get jumbled up. And I said this to Halfbeard, and he explained to me that he does not mean to dig a grave, just a pit, and if someone falls into it and dies, that is his own business. I warned him about what happened to Nussbaumer Kaspar, who had wanted to dig a well behind his house, but had not blocked the hole off properly, and his neighbour, Legs, fell into it and broke both his legs. After that he took Nussbaumer to the chief magistrate, and the verdict was that Nussbaumer had to do all the work on Legs's farm until his legs had healed. But they

were so broken that he never could walk properly again, and Nussbaumer had to stay his manservant for the rest of his life. For that reason, he disappeared from the village one day with his entire family and has never been heard of since, and his house is close to collapse. Halfbeard surely did not want such a thing to happen to him, I said.

He told me I was a shrewd young man and should never get out of the habit of considering things. But he would like the shovel all the same. I was not to do it for charity's sake, either, he said: if I brought it to him, he would tell me a secret about how stones could be horses and elephants, and how you could play a game with them. I have always liked making up stories, and a game in which you have to imagine that a stone is really an animal interested me, and so I said yes.

I will take old Laurenz's shovel to Halfbeard, it has a strong iron blade that you can get into even the hardest ground. Which is to say: the shovel does not belong to Laurenz at all, it is part of his privilege.

But as long as there are no new deaths this day, no one will miss it, and even if Laurenz notices, he will not give me away, for it is not permitted to let another person do his work, otherwise the privilegium is forfeit. Old Laurenz has no son to inherit it: his wife – though this was an eternity ago – died in childbed, and he had to bury both mother and child himself.

Mayhap I will take the shovel to Halfbeard tomorrow, but first I must take my beating.