

Vagabonds

Johann Oldcastle

**A tale of four similar
differences**

Vagabonds

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Fidel

Adelmo Dellascio

Lienhard



Olivier Seydoux

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Chapter 1

THE SECRET OF THE MOUNTAINS

Alvarez thrust his ice axe viciously into the steep wall of ice that sloped upwards and away from him into the blazing blue sky of the Swiss summer. He didn't care to think about the feet of ice that curved beneath him in the black valley, dwarfed by the towering mountains on which his life precariously hung, only of what was above and ahead, in front. After all, he didn't really want to slip and fall backwards into the abyss below. It was a bit like his life in many ways - he wanted to move forward, to forget the past, the black hole he had dug behind him, and into which he could easily slip at any time. It would kill him, just like those evil, black

rocks hundreds of feet below him in the Göschenen Valley. He shrugged and carelessly hammered a pin in, testing it by pulling back and forth to make sure it was secure. From time to time he wondered why he bothered to do it. After all, if he slipped and fell, his life would soon be over and he cared less about his life than he did about the pins, that was for sure. That's why he had taken up climbing anyway in the beginning, to escape the curse of his life, to forget his existence for a moment by risking his being on the most dangerous mountain faces of Switzerland, without thinking about anything. It was there that he could forget everything else except every next step and concentrate only on the present, not the future or, evil of evils, the past. With a violent flick of his crampon, he fought his way upwards, one step at a time, swinging dangerously on until he crossed the upper edge of the violently steep ice cliff and stumbled over the top with a shout of victory. A little above him was the summit of the

Sustenhorn, although Alvarez didn't pronounce it correctly. Why would he want to do that? He had no use for German, except for the rare occasions when he wanted to speak with someone who only knew that language, but most of the time he never spoke to anyone. Only now did Alvarez look down. He looked out over the valley, still dark with the shadows of the morning, seeming darker still from his perch on the shining ice that shone fiercely in the blinding rays, in comparison with the dark green surrounding the Göscheneralpsee, a black hole at the bottom of the valley, it seemed. Alvarez stared clammily at all this, his late self-confidence gone. He could almost have let go of his precarious perch and floated away, down, down, down into his past, his sins, the valley, and ended his useless life at once. But he shrugged his shoulders despite the desire. He would climb the Eiger's Nordwand first, he decided, he would win the race to conquer the infamous deadly wall. He would risk his life since it was worth less than

any other life in the world, and if he survived, something no one else had managed until now, as soon as he reached the top, he would gently sail through the valley to his end. It would make a story for radio operators - he laughed bitterly - and make a horror story for Grindelwald hotel owners to tell their guests. It would be exceptional for Swiss tourism, say this war ever ended. Shrugging again, Alvarez gathered his gear and began trudging along the ridge down the ordinary trail down the valley. It was the part he hated the most, the return journey. Just trudging along the trail gave him too much time to think, the thing which he hated doing most of all things in the world. This time, however, he noticed a shadow approaching him along the top of the ridge, near the edge that fell away less abruptly here. He recognized the shadow as a dog, a great St. Bernard, of the type used by mountain shepherds to save their sheep and also to rescue people if need arose. The dog was ragged and dirty and bore all the signs of an abandoned creature that had no home. It

stopped a few meters away from him, looking at him suspiciously, just at the edge of the cliff.

‘Poor beast,’ Alvarez grumbled, ‘Just like me, crazy and sick of the past. I tell you what, I’ll do you a favour, dog.’

And with these words, he took out his ice axe and threw it at the dog. It barked wildly, but it was too late as it slipped and disappeared over the edge of the cliff.

‘I wish I had someone to do that to me,’ Alvarez grumbled and trudged steadily away down the ridge.

*

Olivier watched Renard miserably as the bitter old man slammed the butcher's knives on the table.

‘And why do you think I did?’ he asked angrily, ‘Or am I a butcher for nothing? You bet I know what I’m doing.’

‘But sir,’ the customer protested desperately in German, ‘who will go to the mountains to rescue the dead and dying if you don’t?’

‘The dead and dying?’ grumbled Renard, ‘I don’t care for them. We French-speaking Protestants know that the Bible tells us to let the dead bury their own dead. I don’t know what your Bibles say, but I don’t care about looking for stupid tourists trapped in glaciers any more than I care about the ragged creature you speak of. And I’ve never gone searching the passes and cliffs like you make out.’

‘In any case, you behave in a very unchristian way, unless that is how all Protestants in the canton of Vaud behave,’ the customer replied, ‘and despite having lived here for as many years as you, you have obviously not been influenced by Catholic morality.’

‘God helps those who help themselves,’ Renard growled, ‘and I will help myself to everything I can. As for a hungry creature like the one you speak of, it only gets in my way,

and to keep it is the last thing that can be called helping oneself. In fact, it has been missing for four years and, as far as I know, it is dead. On top of that, I now have my brother-in-law's son on my hands, as greedy a boy as they come. I have enough money going out in the filling of that gaping 12-year-old mouth.'

'But the cur was seen alive, Renard,' insisted the customer, 'and everyone knows that no other dog has ever equalled him in intelligence, in finding his way among the mountains. Erich Überdermond has been missing for two days on the Piz Badus now, a young climber in his twenties, very promising too, with a good chance of being the first up the Nordwand of the Eiger. I know it, because he is the friend of my cousin's niece.'

Renard turned abruptly, his long butcher knife unsheathed and glittering.

'Get out!' he ordered, 'I won't do anything of the sort. These climbers can take care of

themselves. And if you don't have anything useful to say, Herr Krähenbühl, you can leave.'

'I tell you what, Mr. Dufaux,' said Herr Krähenbühl maliciously: 'I will forget you and your dog. But you and your nephew I will not forget. Where is the boy when all the others are in school? In fact, I believe he is there for less than one percent of the school year. You don't look after him any more than his alcoholic father did. Can you explain that?'

Renard turned abruptly and pushed his face into Krähenbühl's.

'Herr Krähenbühl, I will explain all that to you when you explain to me why your own son, two years younger than this Olivier, never goes to school, but spends all his days with the sheep, banned by you from returning home? And when you can explain to me that it was not you who abused your wife to the point that she had to flee to Andermatt and has never been seen since.

And when you can tell me where all this fits into your so-called Catholic morality,' Renard laughed: 'Explain all this and more!'

Herr Krähenbühl was quick to get out of the front door of the butcher's shop when he was accused with such good grounds. Renard immediately cracked around to face Olivier who was still in the corner.

'Why are you eavesdropping?' he grumbled as he sharpened his knife with the evil grate of metal against metal, 'Run away and amuse yourself. You are annoying the customers.'

'What dog was he talking about?' asked Olivier as he came out of his corner and stood on the other side of the counter to see Renard's expert sharpening better, 'Why did you chase it away?'

'Why are you asking?' grumbled Renard, 'You came here almost four years ago, just after I chased the wretched animal away. People wanted me to look for the missing climbers all the time, the dog was so clever,

but I didn't care a jot about it and even less about the climbers. Besides, your mother was dead and your father a drunkard, so I had no choice but to take you in. Since I had to have you, and I hated the dog, well I got rid of the dog. That saved me a lot of time and money.'

'What did you do to it?' asked Olivier.

'Do? Let it go. It was quite happy to do it,' Renard shrugged, 'After biting me in revenge, it ran away and never came back. Now, go on with you, I haven't got the whole day to answer your silly questions.'

Olivier hurried out, letting the heavy wooden door slam behind him. The small village of Göschenen, nestled between the high snow-capped peaks of the southernmost part of the canton of Uri, was not his home. He came from the French Swiss Alps, from a small village called Vuites near Château-d'Oex. Here in Uri, people spoke German, and they were not far from either the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino or the Romansh canton of Graubünden. This was part of the reason why

Olivier had no friends at all in the whole village. Instead of going to school as he should have, he wandered most of the day in the mountains, to his favourite haunts, far away from everyone.

At the bottom of the Göscheneralp valley, high on the mountainside above the valley floor, and right next to a small plunge pool where a waterfall crashed over the dark stones into a small clear pool of almost neon waters, and in the shadow of a large rock, was a small partly ruined refuge. Olivier had made it his secret hideout where he could spend hours completely alone, swimming in the cool waters of the pool, picking berries on the slopes of the mountain and tracking the footprints of sheep, deer, chamois and marmots. It was this small refuge that he always went to when he felt hurt or alone, which was often the case. He swam for a long time that day before sitting on the warm rocks in the late July sun to dry off. He thought of the dog Renard had chased away, and that it was no surprise he was known as

‘the fox.’ At any rate, he was no kinder to Olivier himself than he was obliged to be, and he would gladly have chased him away, as he had done with his rescue dog. Thinking about this he became a little angry and went back to the hanging valley that rose to the foot of the eastern face of the Sustenhorn. It was a huge mountain, its great rocky slopes covered with ice and snow, even at this time of year, rising majestically from the valley to the blazing blue of the midsummer sky. One thing Olivier was never able to understand was why people risked their lives to climb such faces, especially when almost all of them died in the process or were seriously injured or hurt. Again and again, there were stories of climbing accidents, even though there were fewer climbers now that there was another big war in Europe, and that Swiss climbers were mostly drafted in case of an invasion. He spent the whole day wandering beneath the east face, exploring the nooks and crannies that fascinated his young mind, and he was just thinking about turning around

and going home when he saw a strange brown shadow lying among the rocks and ice beneath the cliff. Curiously, Olivier approached. He could make out the shape of a tail, four legs, and a softly hanging head. It was the shape of a dog.



Chapter 2

WHO IS WHO?

Olivier had never had much experience of doctoring, and he wondered what he should do as he looked at the wounded form of the great St. Bernard dog, whose form lay panting at his feet. It looked at him with suspicious eyes and growled at first, but as he got close and began to carefully stroke its long hair, it stopped and lay back pathetically. It looked at him with big, benevolent eyes as he spoke softly in French.

‘How can I get such a big dog down to Göschenen?’ he wondered aloud, ‘and what would I do with it then? I haven’t got a clue about doctoring, you see,’ he explained to the dog.

‘*Francese?*’ a voice asked behind him. Olivier jumped and looked around to see a boy about the same age as him, standing on top of a rock with his hands in his pockets, looking at Olivier and the dog.

‘Yes, Swiss French,’ replied Olivier, who was not about to take the trouble to speak Italian, although he could speak it fluently; if this boy wanted to talk to him, he could jolly well speak French. The other boy understood but was in no hurry to change language either.

‘*Sembra che il tuo cane sia in cattive condizioni,*’ he said, ‘Luckily for you, I’m the son of a doctor. Let me take a look at the creature.’

Olivier made room for him to kneel next to the dog but refused to switch to Italian.

‘It looks as if he fell,’ replied Olivier, ‘do you think anything is broken?’

‘Obviously,’ the boy replied, still in Italian, ‘You’re pretty stubborn. Where do you come from to speak French?’

‘From near Château-d'Oex, but I live here,’ replied Olivier, still in French, ‘I’m Olivier Seydoux. Where do you come from to speak Italian?’

‘Lavizzara in Ticino,’ the boy replied, ‘I live here too, with my mother who has family in the village. My father died a long time ago. Adelmo’s the name. Come on, if you take his head, I can take the other end, and we can take him to your house.’

‘He’s big enough,’ Olivier said doubtfully, ‘Are you sure we can do it?’

‘How far away is your house?’ asked Adelmo, ‘Very far?’

‘No, we can take him down to the refuge,’ Olivier replied, ‘It’s my place, although I sleep at my uncle’s. The refuge is only a mile away.’

‘*Va bene*, we can try,’ replied Adelmo, ‘I’m thirteen and I’m strong enough.’

Olivier wasn’t so sure, but there was nothing else to do so he took the head of the St.

Bernard carefully, speaking in a soothing tone all the time. Adelmo took the other end and together they lifted him up.

‘He’s heavy,’ Adelmo confessed, but he wasn’t about to give in, and together they staggered down the rocky slope toward the refuge in the valley. Every once in a while, they had to stop and carefully lower it to the ground to rest their muscles. The refuge still seemed very far away.

‘How about I call you Gaston,’ Olivier suggested to the St. Bernard. He moaned pitifully but seemed to agree.

‘Isn’t it yours, then?’ asked Adelmo, ‘you can’t run away with somebody’s dog, you know, little Frenchman.’

‘Don’t be foolish, it belonged to my uncle Renard,’ replied Olivier, ‘until he threw it out. Besides, I’m neither little nor French. I am just as Swiss as you, if not more.’

Adelmo shrugged his shoulders: 'You are stubborn,' he said, 'You refuse to speak Italian.'

'Well, and why judge me when you refuse to speak French?' asked Olivier, 'We can both understand each other, so we might as well go on as we are.'

So they both continued to descend towards the refuge. It took them a good part of the afternoon to get Gaston there, where Adelmo could finally start carving a splint and fixing the bone. It was a difficult job, and rather painful for Gaston, who took it rather well considering the fact that he had been mistreated in the past, but he seemed to trust Olivier and Adelmo.

'I think I have as much right to the dog as you do,' Adelmo suggested after finishing, 'We could share it.'

'It was Uncle Renard's,' Olivier replied, 'so I bet I'm entitled to the whole dog. But because

you helped me, I'll let you share it - only a quarter of the ownership, though.'

Adelmo was satisfied with this and the two boys waited until he was asleep before wondering about going home. It was quite dark outside by now, and neither of them wanted to leave Gaston alone in the shelter.

'We could stay,' suggested Olivier, 'Uncle Renard will be as glad not to see me.'

'So much the better,' Adelmo agreed, 'I'm not particularly wanted at home either.'

So they settled down to spend the night. Only a few minutes had passed before there was a strange rustling at the door, which woke the two boys and made their hair stand on end. After a few seconds, a small, insignificant figure walked through the door and stopped abruptly with a gasp.

'Who is it?' asked Adelmo in Italian.

There was another gasp, and the figure made as if to run away, but Adelmo reached out and grabbed him by the arm. Olivier lit a match,

which lit up the wide eyes of a ten-year-old boy.

‘What are you doing in my refuge?’ he asked.

‘Your refuge?’ asked Olivier, puzzled, ‘It’s my refuge.’

‘You’ve never been here,’ the boy replied, in French with a German accent, freeing himself with a twist from Adelmo’s grip.

‘Not at night,’ replied Olivier.

‘Anyway, what did you want?’ asked Adelmo in Italian, ‘we never said that little Germans were welcome in our refuge.’

The boy stepped back a few paces from him.

‘It’s my refuge,’ he replied persistently but timidly, this time in Italian with a German accent, ‘I never invited quarrelling Italians and Frenchmen in either.’

‘I’m not, I’m Swiss,’ Olivier replied, ‘But you’re welcome if you come here every night.’

‘What language shall I speak?’ he asked in German, ‘you both persist in speaking opposite languages.’

‘Speak French,’ Olivier replied.

‘Speak Italian,’ Adelmo put in.

‘No way,’ the boy contradicted, ‘I’ll speak German.’

So it was settled.

‘Now we shall decide who the refuge belongs to,’ Adelmo suggested, ‘I say we should share it by thirds.’

‘We never said you could have a part,’ Olivier argued, ‘It was my argument with the German boy, but seeing as you helped cure Gaston, you can have a quarter of the property. The other three-quarters will be mine, the German’s, and Gaston’s.’

‘I’m not German,’ said the other boy, ‘I’m Swiss.’

‘Tell us what to call you then,’ Adelmo grumbled.

‘I’m Lienhard, a shepherd’s assistant from Göschenalp,’ Lienhard replied, ‘I live here all year round. My father lives in the valley, and he leaves the sheep to his shepherd with me to help.’

‘You are the son of Herr Krähenbühl?’ asked Olivier.

‘*Das isch wohr,*’ replied Lienhard, ‘but it’s not like I care about parental relations either.’

So there was a mutual feeling and respect created in the shelter. Night covered the Alps with darkness, the stars shone from a cloudless sky and the fresh, cool smells of a July night wafted through the small refuge where three Swiss boys of different cultures and a Great St. Bernard dog slept peacefully until the pink shadow of dawn was painted in crystal quality against the navy blue of the dawn sky behind the enormous foothills and dangerous walls of the Alps. Olivier woke up first, looking around his shelter to make sure everything was in order. Gaston was awake

too; the glassy look had disappeared entirely from his eyes. He lovingly licked Olivier's hand.

‘Good old Gaston,’ said Olivier, kindly, ‘once your bone is healed, you can run and walk through the Alps like before.’

He took the small aluminium water bottle he used and went down outside the refuge to the plunge pool to fill it with the crystal clear, cool waters that flowed by on their way to the valley floor. He drank deeply and breathed even more deeply of the fresh, cold morning air. Dew covered the grass in the deep shadows of the mountains, but the white icy peaks of Fleckistock, Sustenhorn, Hoch Horefellistock, Mittagstock and the other surrounding mountains shone in the golden light of the morning sun. Olivier returned to the refuge and found that Adelmo and Lienhard had both woken up.

‘What are we going to eat for breakfast?’ asked Adelmo, ‘I have nothing left from yesterday's lunch.’

‘Ich han nüt,’ Lienhard agreed, ‘nothing at all.’

‘Well, even if I have nothing, I can run to my uncle’s butcher shop and get some,’ Olivier suggested, ‘and I think the same could be said of Lienhard. You, Adelmo?’

‘I don’t think we all need to get some,’ Adelmo said, ‘If only one of us goes to get breakfast, lunch and dinner for all three of us, then we shouldn’t have any problems.’

‘I’ll go,’ Olivier volunteered and gave Gaston a goodbye pat. Bounding, he ran down the rocky path that descended into the Göschenen valley. It was a good half hour’s walk, but he took it so fast that he was there in half the time it usually took. It was fun, he thought, to have at least one friend in the mountains, and he had no intention of staying longer than necessary at the butcher’s shop. He slipped into the back and filled his bag with bread, cheese, meat, and whatever else he thought they would need, then rushed through the shop. There were no

customers and Renard was sitting there, sharpening his knife with a cruel and determined grate. The moment when he laid his eyes on Olivier, he sprang to his feet.

‘Where have you been to-night, young man?’ he asked, the grating of the knife continuing.

Olivier looked at him.

‘You care,’ he replied, ‘What did you want me for?’

Renard shrugged his shoulders, and the ludicrous grate of the knife became sporadic and less determined.

‘I was wondering,’ he murmured, ‘if you know that Signora Pellascio's son did not come home to-night either? She came in last evening to ask me to catch that cursed dog again so I could go looking for him. And she cares less about her son than she cares about her pig. I don't care if you never come back either, because you know very well that it takes a lot of my money to feed your ever-gaping mouth. And I don't think Signora

Pellascio really cares about Adelmo. If she did, he'd be in school like you and he and Lienhard Krähenbühl should all be.'

Olivier looked at him without saying a word. Suddenly Renard dropped the knife, seized Olivier by the shoulder, dragged him to the back of the shop, and threw him through the door of the pantry.

'You're an idiot to think you can get away with it so lightly,' Renard growled, 'You have ruined my reputation by your disappearance. You can stay there until you promise me you'll never do it again!'

With that, the fox locked the door, leaving Olivier in the dark.



Chapter 3

THREE AGAINST ONE

Adelmo and Lienhard waited several hours in the cave before deciding to call a council on what might have happened to Olivier.

‘He wouldn't have stayed like that without a good reason,’ Adelmo said, ‘I bet he was caught by his evil uncle. He's a very bad man, they call him the fox, which is actually his real name, in French, too.’

‘Maybe he's locked up somewhere,’ Lienhard suggested, ‘we could go down and have a look.’

‘That's what we're going to have to do,’ Adelmo agreed, ‘*Eccoci qui*, we can't go all day without eating.’

So they set off on the way to Göschenen, leaving Gaston in the cave, sleeping soundly.

‘He’ll be fine,’ Adelmo said, ‘Nobody comes here anyway.’

They stopped at the chalet where Lienhard worked and gathered some of the tools he thought would be most useful – a rope, a pickaxe, an axe, a large knife, and a pair of sheep shears. Looking like two miners descending into a shaft, they rushed down the path that plunged into the valley. Göschenen had woken up and the various people were nonchalantly passing by them to go about their business, glancing over their shoulders at the two boys who went hurrying towards the butcher's shop. Other children went by on the way to school with their leather bags full of books on their shoulders, but neither Lienhard nor Adelmo had been to school for a few years. Outside the butcher's shop, a man with similar equipment passed by, his face browned by the sun like theirs, but red like that of an ex-drunkard, his sunken eyes expressing despair and his brows furrowed as he walked, crampons, ice axes, and pins rattling together as they swung

behind his back. He stopped when he saw them, turned around and looked at their equipment. They turned around too and looked with the same interest at his, which was clearly that of a mountaineer.

‘Are you going climbing somewhere?’ the man asked bitterly in French, in an almost sarcastic voice.

‘No, sir,’ replied Adelmo, ‘something much more pressing.’

‘Death?’ the man asked, ‘Nothing is more pressing than that.’

‘Oh?’ asked Adelmo, ‘if you say so.’

The man shrugged and continued along the street while Adelmo and Lienhard ducked into the alley that separated the bakery from the butcher's shop. Adelmo, who was the tallest, looked in at the window. He could see customers at the counter, with Renard slicing meat, weighing and packing it, packaging sausages, sharpening his knife, and insulting ill-mannered customers.

‘He's busy,’ Adelmo told the younger boy, ‘So this is our chance.’

He laughed as he turned away from the scene, ‘If there was another butcher in town, no one would go to Renard's,’ he said, ‘Especially since he's French.’

Lienhard agreed. ‘But it wouldn't be better with an Italian butcher either,’ he added.

Adelmo didn't have time to argue. At the next window he looked through. It was dark except for the light that filtered through this window because the others had their shutters closed. There was a table where Renard did his butchering. Hams hung from the rafters, and a sausage mixture stood in a bowl. There, beyond all this, scrupulously clean, was the door of the pantry.

‘I bet he's in that pantry,’ Adelmo said, ‘Come on Lienhard, give me your knife.’

Lienhard handed him the huge knife in its metal scabbard. Adelmo pushed the end into the space between the windows and with a

twist and a lot of wheedling, pushed them open.

'*Divertiti*,' Adelmo motioned for Lienhard to come to the window, 'Come on.'

'Me?' asked Lienhard, 'Why not you, Italian?'

'I'm Swiss, not Italian,' Adelmo corrected him, 'Go on, *piccolo*, you're smaller than me and that means that you can get through the opening more easily.'

Lienhard timidly tried to climb onto the high ledge, but Adelmo pushed him and he tumbled through to the ground on the other side. Adelmo ducked and hid silently behind the window, but there was not a sound to be heard. Cautiously, he stood up to look out the window again and saw Lienhard at the pantry door, sliding his skeleton key around in the lock. Adelmo rushed to the other window to check on the fox's progress. He was still busy, in the process of serving the last customer, the parish priest, and he could hear from the angry tone of the voices that

they were busy discussing religion, the priest waving his finger and the butcher waving his knife dangerously close to the clergyman's face. Laughing under his breath, Adelmo hurried back to see that Lienhard had opened the door and that Olivier was coming out. But at that moment, the front door of the butcher's shop opened and there was the sound of the priest being ejected into the street.

‘Hurry up!’ Adelmo insisted, ‘He’ll be here any minute!’

Olivier gave Lienhard a push to get him through the window and he rolled out with another crash to the ground underneath. Olivier gave the window a spring, landed on the sill, and began to squeeze through. At that moment the door of the shop opened. Adelmo seized Olivier's arms and pulled. There was a scream as Renard saw what was happening, but Olivier tumbled hastily through and then they were running, running for their lives up the street and up

the valley before Renard could even work out what had happened. Screaming and roaring with rage, the fox shook his fist and danced up and down as he looked first to the north and then to the south, up and down the road. He was surprised by the voice of the priest whom he had just thrown so rudely out of the front door of his butcher's shop.

‘That's where your Christian behaviour leads you, Herr Krähenbühl and Signora Pellascio,’ he said, shaking his head, ‘I don't expect him to come back anytime soon, but if he needs a roof over his head, I'm always there to help the needy and oppressed in the same way that Jesus did.’

‘You Catholics think you are the only true people in the world,’ Renard grumbled, ceasing his ridiculous dance and carefully smoothing his butcher's apron, ‘but in reality, it is only the Reformed Church that is right. I care nothing about the kid. All he can do is gorge himself on what I put in his mouth. This is where doing your duty leads

you, but I have done my duty, and if he does not want to have my Calvinistic generosity, so be it. I don't go out of my way to waste my money on ungrateful boys.'

'I admit that most Roman Catholics are wrong,' the priest agreed, 'because they have the same idea as most Calvinists, that they can get salvation by being kind and so on, or by doing their duty. However, my recommendation as the spiritual leader of this parish for you, Protestant or not, is that if Jesus forgave His enemies, that is, us, we can certainly forgive our nephews and children for having a healthy appetite.'

'I don't understand a word of what you're saying,' Renard said, 'I just hope Olivier doesn't come back.'

The priest sighed, 'I doubt that your wish will not be granted,' he said, 'but one day you will regret it.'

‘That is his father's business,’ the butcher grumbled and walked inside, slamming the door violently behind him.

In the meantime, the three boys were back at the refuge, where they found Gaston feeling much better, looking very kind and happy to see them. As soon as an animal realizes that you mean well, it becomes friendly. It is showing that you are that is difficult, especially if they have had a bad experience of humans.

‘I'll never go back to Göschenen,’ Olivier said, ‘I wanted to escape before, but now if I go back, he will just lock me in.’

Adelmo sat down, chewing a blade of grass. ‘Neither will I,’ he said, quietly for once, ‘my mother cares less for me than for her pig. She said it herself, not only to me, but to the whole village as well.’

Lienhard was silent. ‘Shall we swim in the pool?’ he suggested. As they tore off their

shirts, Olivier noticed that Lienhard's back was covered in scars.

‘Look, whose been beating you, Lienhard?’ he asked, ‘Was it your father?’

‘*Ja,*’ the boy agreed, ‘and so does his shepherd. I have one friend in Göschenen, the priest, but I don't dare go to his house because my father will come and catch me if I do.’

There was a sympathetic silence as the three felt for each other. Then they plunged one by one into the cold waters of the stream and let the torrents wash away the past.



Chapter 4

THE WANDERER

Renard slammed the sausages onto the counter in front of Herr Krähenbühl and looked at him through his narrow eyes as the Swiss German wrung his hands and walked up and down with desperate gestures.

‘We’re all in this together,’ he and Signora Pellascio had said to each other after their three boys disappeared. They had made a pact between them never to help their three children or let them into their homes, but rather to do everything in their power to make life difficult for them. Now, however, three weeks later, the annoying old man was back, and Renard was tired of him and his whims.

‘The dog is what we need, the dog,’ he repeated for the hundredth time that

morning, 'We have to find the friend of my cousin's nephew. He has been missing for more than three weeks, somewhere on Piz Badus, on the other side of Andermatt, near the border with Graubünden. Erich Überdermond was the name, a promising climber. We've got to give him a decent burial, you know, it is unbelievable that he is still alive after all these days.'

'I'm sure,' Renard grumbled, 'as I said before, the Calvinist Bible says that the dead should bury their own dead and not call the living to do it.'

'And if you were dead, monsieur Protestant?' asked Herr Krähenbühl annoyed, 'who would bury you?'

'If I were dead, you would,' Renard smiled horribly, 'and since you are already practically dead, that would be allowed.'

'The Virgin Mary will kill us all,' complained Herr Krähenbühl, 'Have we been her servants for nothing just because we have not