

## DOG'S LIFE

by E. Bilgen

I was hitchhiking from Stockholm down to Malmö an early fall day. Back then one of the many unwritten rules of hitchhiking was to start hitchhiking outside the city where the highway began. So I had to travel quite a bit before I placed myself at the beginning of the highway. I had a small shoulder bag and dressed properly as if I was going to a business meeting. I even wore a tie. Those were the golden years of 1950's when young people could travel in Europe by hitchhiking from one corner to another without any trouble and being helped by many. I remember once in Denmark the kids on the roadside asked my autograph while I was passing through a town. It was a respectful way of life.

Not before long, a small Volvo stopped on the left. At that time in Sweden they drove on the left side. I ran to the car and asked the driver if he was going in the direction of Malmö. He said come in. The driver was a medium built young man in his thirties. He explained to me, not without some difficulty due to the language barrier, that he was returning to his home town about 200 kilometers south of Stockholm, on the highway to Malmö. He was coming from an animal hospital where he and his wife had brought his dog the night before. It had apparently fallen sick the previous evening. They had consulted the veterinarian in town. He couldn't help them, though he suggested to take the animal to Stockholm. They had driven right away to Stockholm where they both spent the night. She stayed behind with the dog at the hospital and he was returning home early morning for work. Then he asked me how we treated the dogs down in the south.

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I remembered the time when I took a job helping the physician in the town where I spent my childhood. It was a small town, an agricultural center, and the only work available for

the kids was in the fields to tend the fruit gardens, to irrigate the vegetable gardens and other activities before harvest time. During the summer months when school was out all we, the town's kids, could do was to play in the streets. We didn't have much opportunity to work and keep busy. But that summer was different. I decided to work, so I asked my father to find a job. One day on our way home we met the town's physician near his office. The doctor was a young man who had just graduated from medical school. His predecessor had been elected to the National Parliament and had left town though his name was still on the glass door. My father asked him if he needed an assistant during that summer. He said he did and I started the next day.

From the street, the front of the building was essentially one large window at the center of which a door. Inside, the office itself was one medium size room with bare stone walls and a hardwood floor. A simple curtain divided the room into an office in front and an examination room behind it. The office was furnished with an old desk and few wooden chairs while the latter had an examination table, a chair and a small supply cabinet.

My job was to do everything he needed in his office: receptionist, nurse, bell boy, and cleaning man. During lunch time he used to go home and have a nap as everybody else and returned at about 4 p.m. I had to tend the office and have patients, if any, wait for his return. The best part of my job was to accompany him on his visits to patients out of town. He had a BMW motorcycle, the best in town, and used it to reach small villages for house calls.

During summer months most of the town's people worked in the fields so the office was never very busy. One day during his lunch break, two peasants, a man and a woman, came in. I asked them about their problem. She had stomach cramps. It wasn't urgent and I asked them to wait until the doctor returned. For an urgent case, based on my discretion, I had to go and call him from home. While they were waiting, a well dressed, middle aged man walked in. I didn't know who he was. He was acting as if he owned the place. He said he was the doctor, the previous owner of the office with his name still on the door. He started right away to ask the peasants questions and to examine the woman. After a couple of minutes, he handed the man a prescription and demanded payment. The peasant

thanked him several times and handed him three folded banknotes. I was mad and sorry to lose a patient but I couldn't interfere. Later when I told the young doctor about it, he didn't say anything and didn't appear bothered. I thought he was a man of integrity.

One hot afternoon just before supper time, we were both in the office; he was busy at his desk with some last minute business, and I was looking out the large window. A taxi pulled up and a young man hurriedly climbed out and rushed into the office. He told the doctor that his father was very sick at their house and asked him to come right away. The taxi took us to their house, a fifteen minute drive. We arrived at an olive grove not too far from town. It was a single story mud brick house. The driver parked the car under the olive trees and we went in. Inside, it was cool and sombre. A peasant woman greeted us at the door. We passed the entrance hall and went through a door to a bed room where a man was laying in a mat on the floor. He seemed asleep or unconscious. The doctor examined him carefully and then he turned to the young man with a grim face. He said he couldn't do anything and that they should take him to the city hospital immediately about 50 kilometers away. He suggested they use the same taxi we came in. The young man stood there silent and pensive. He wanted to pay the doctor first and asked him how much. The doctor told him he wouldn't charge anything for this visit and repeated his suggestion. Then the young man asked the taxi driver how much it would cost. Upon hearing the estimate, he fell silent for a while and then murmured that he didn't have that much money. At that moment, we left them there to talk and went out to the entrance hall. A couple of minutes later, the driver came out to take us back to town. Apparently they couldn't reach an agreement.

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It would have been too difficult to tell my host the whole story; we spoke different languages and came from different worlds. I murmured "*vita del cane*."