

*The Worker in Sandalwood*

Marjorie Pickthall

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# THE WORKER IN SANDAL WOOD

*By Marjorie Pickthall*



EDITOR'S NOTE.—This story, "The Worker in Sandal Wood," was originally published by the Atlantic Monthly Company, Boston, holders of the copyright in the United States. It is now republished by request of many readers. Miss Pickthall is English by birth, but has spent many years in Canada, and is now a resident of that "bit of England in the West," Victoria, B.C.

**I** like to think of this as a true story, but you who read may please yourselves, siding either with the curé, who says Hyacinthe dreamed it all, and did the carving himself in his sleep, or with Madame. I am sure that Hyacinthe thinks it true, and so does Madame, but then she has the cabinet, with the little birds and the lilies carved at the corners. Monsieur le curé shrugs his patient shoulders; but then he is tainted with the infidelities of cities, good man, having been three times to Montreal, and once in an electric car to Sainte Anne. He and Madame still talk it over whenever they meet, though it happened so many years ago, and each leaves the other forever unconvinced. Meanwhile the dust gathers in the infinite fine lines of

the little birds' feathers, and softens the lily stamens where Madame's duster may not go; and the wood, ageing, takes on a golden gleam as of immemorial sunsets; that pale red wood, heavy with the scent of the ancient East, the wood that Hyacinthe loved.

It was the only wood of that kind which had ever been seen in Terminaison. Pierre L'Oreillard brought it into the workshop one morning, a small heavy bundle wrapped in sacking, and then in burlap, and then in fine soft cloths. He laid it on a pile of shavings, and unwrapped it carefully; and a dim sweetness filled the dark shed and hung heavily in the thin winter sunbeams.

Pierre L'Oreillard rubbed the wood respectfully with his knobby fingers. "It is sandal-wood," he explained to Hyacinthe, pride of knowledge making him expansive, "a most precious wood that grows in warm countries, thou great goblin. Smell it, imbecile. It is sweeter than cedar. It is to make a cabinet for the old Madame at the big house. Thy great hands shall smooth the wood, nigaud, and I—I, Pierre the cabinet-maker shall render it beautiful." Then he went out, locking the door behind him.

When he was gone Hyacinthe laid down his plane, blew on his stiff fingers, and shambled slowly over to the wood. He was a great clumsy boy of fourteen, dark-faced, very slow of speech, dull-eyed, and uncared for. He was clumsy because it is impossible to move gracefully when you are growing very big and fast on quite insufficient food; he was dull-eyed because all eyes met his unlovingly; uncared for, because none knew the beauty of his soul. But his heavy young hands could carve simple things like flowers and birds and beasts, to perfection, as the curé pointed out. Simon has a tobacco-jar, carved with pine-cones and squirrels, and the curé has a pipe whose bowl is the bloom of a moccasin-flower, that I have seen. But it is all very long ago. And facts, in those lonely villages, easily become transfigured, touched upon their gray with a golden gleam.

"Thy hands shall smooth the wood, nigaud, and I shall render it beautiful," said Pierre L'Oreillard, and went off to drink brandy at the Cinq Châteaux.

Hyacinthe knew that the making of the cabinet would fall to him, as most of the other work did. He also touched the strange sweet wood, and at last laid his cheek against it, while the fragrance caught his breath. "How it is beautiful!" said Hyacinthe, and for a moment his eyes glowed and he was happy. Then the light passed, and with bent head he shuffled back to his bench through a foam of white shavings curling almost to his knees.

“Madame perhaps will want the cabinet next week, for that is Christmas,” said Hyacinthe, and fell to work harder than ever, though it was so cold in the shed that his breath hung like a little silver cloud and the steel stung his hands. There was a tiny window to the right, through which, when it was clear of frost, one looked on Terminaison; and that was cheerful and made one whistle. But to the left, through the chink of the ill-fitting door, there was nothing but the forest, and the road dying away in it and the trees moving heavily under the snow. Yet from there came all Hyacinthe’s dumb dreams and slow reluctant fancies, which he sometimes found himself able to tell,—in wood, not in words.

Brandy was good at the Cinq Châteaux, and Pierre L’Oreillard gave Hyacinthe plenty of directions, but no further help with the cabinet.

“That is to be finished for Madame on the festival, gros escargot,” said he, cuffing Hyacinthe’s ears furiously; “finished, and with a prettiness about the corners, hearest thou, ourson? I suffer from a delicacy of the constitution and a little feebleness in the legs on these days, so that I cannot handle the tools. I must leave this work to thee, gâcheur. See it is done properly. And stand up and touch a hand to thy cap when I address thee, orvet, great slow-worm.”

“Yes, monsieur,” said Hyacinthe wearily.

**I**t is hard, when you do all the work, to be cuffed into the bargain; and fourteen is not very old. He went to work on the cabinet with slow, exquisite skill; but on the eve of Noel he was still at work, and the cabinet unfinished. It meant a thrashing from Pierre if the morrow came and found it still unfinished, and Pierre’s thrashings were cruel. But it was growing into a thing of perfection under his slow hands, and Hyacinthe would not hurry over it.

“Then work on it all night, and show it to me all completed in the morning, or thy bones shall mourn thine idleness,” said Pierre with a flicker of his little eyes. And he shut Hyacinthe into the workshop with a smoky lamp, his tools, and the sandal-wood cabinet.

It was nothing unusual. The boy had often been left before to finish a piece of work overnight while Pierre went off to his brandies. But this was Christmas Eve, and he was very tired. The cold crept into the shed, until even the scent of the sandal-wood could not make him dream himself warm, and the roof cracked sullenly in the frost. There came upon Hyacinthe one of those awful, hopeless despairs that children know.

I cannot endure to think of Hyacinthe, poor lad, shut up despairing in the workshop with his loneliness, his cold, and his hunger, on the eve of Christmas. He was but an overgrown, unhappy child. And for unhappy children no aid, at this season, seems too divine for faith. So Madame says, and she is very old and very wise. Hyacinthe even looked at the chisel in his hand, and thought that by a touch of that he might lose it all, all, and be at peace, somewhere not far from God; only it was forbidden. Then came the tears, and great sobs that sickened and deafened him, so that he scarcely heard the gentle rattling of the latch.

At least, I suppose it came then, but it may have been later. The story is all so vague here, so confused with fancies that have spoiled the first simplicity. I think that Hyacinthe must have gone to the door, opening it upon the still woods and the frosty stars. And that the lad who stood outside in the snow must have said, "I see you are working late, comrade. May I come in?" or something like it.

Hyacinthe brushed his ragged sleeve across his eyes, and opened the door wider with a little nod to the other to enter. Those little lonely villages strung along the great river see strange wayfarers adrift inland from the sea. Hyacinthe said to himself that surely here was such a one.

**A**fterwards he told the curé that for a moment he had been bewildered. Dully blinking into the stranger's eyes, he lost for a flash the first impression of youth, and received one of some incredible age or sadness. But this also passed, and he knew that the wanderer's eyes were only quiet, like the little pools in the wood where the wild does went to drink. As he turned within the door, smiling at Hyacinthe and shaking some snow from his fur cap, he did not seem more than sixteen or so.

"It is very cold outside," he said; "there is a big oak tree on the edge of the fields that has split in the frost and frightened all the little squirrels asleep there. Next year it will make an even better home for them. And see what I found close by!" He opened his fingers, and showed Hyacinthe a little sparrow lying unruffled in the palm.

"Pauvrette!" said the dull Hyacinthe. "Pauvrette! Is it then dead?" He touched it with a gentle forefinger.

"No," answered the strange boy, "it is not dead. We will put it here among the shavings, not far from the lamp, and it will be well by morning."

He smiled at Hyacinthe again, and the shambling lad felt dimly as if the scent of the sandal-wood had deepened, and the lamp flame burned clearer. But the stranger's eyes were only quiet, quiet.

“Have you come far?” asked Hyacinthe. “It is a bad season for travelling, and the wolves are out in the woods.”

“A long way,” said the other; “a long, long way. I heard a child cry—”

“There is no child here,” answered Hyacinthe, shaking his head. “Monsieur L'Oreillard is not fond of children, he says they cost too much money. But if you have come far, you must be cold and hungry, and I have no food nor fire. At the Cinq Châteaux you will find both.”

The stranger looked at him again with those quiet eyes, and Hyacinthe fancied his face was familiar. “I will stay here,” he said. “You are very late at work and you are unhappy.”

“Why, as to that,” answered Hyacinthe, rubbing again at his cheeks and ashamed of his tears, “most of us are sad at one time or another, the good God knows. Stay here and welcome if it pleases you; and you may take a share of my bed, though it is no more than a pile of balsam boughs and an old blanket in the loft. But I must work at this cabinet, for the drawer must be finished and the handles put on and these corners carved, all by the holy morning; or my wages will be paid with a stick.”

“You have a hard master,” put in the other boy, “if he would pay you with blows upon the feast of Noel.”

“He is hard enough,” said Hyacinthe; “but once he gave me a dinner of sausages and white wine, and once in the summer, melons. If my eyes will stay open, I will finish this by morning, but indeed I am sleepy. Stay with me an hour or so, comrade, and talk to me of your wanderings, so that the time may pass more quickly.”

“I will tell you of the country where I was a child,” answered the stranger.

**A**nd while Hyacinthe worked, he told—of sunshine and dust, of the shadow of vine-leaves on the flat white walls of a house; of rosy doves on the flat roof; of the flowers that come out in the spring, crimson and blue, and the white cyclamen in the shadow of the rocks, of the olive, the myrtle and almond, until Hyacinthe's slow fingers ceased working, and his sleepy eyes blinked wonderingly.

“See what you have done, comrade,” he said at last; “you have told of such pretty things that I have done no work for an hour. And now the cabinet will never be finished, and I shall be beaten.”

“Let me help you,” smiled the other; “I also was bred a carpenter.”

At first Hyacinthe would not, fearing to trust the sweet wood out of his own hands. But at length he allowed the stranger to fit in one of the little drawers. And so deftly was the work done that Hyacinthe pounded his fists on the bench in admiration. “You have a pretty knack,” he cried; “it seemed as if you did but hold the drawer in your hands a moment, and hey! ho! it jumped into its place!”

“Let me fit in the other little drawers, while you go and rest a while,” said the wanderer. So Hyacinthe curled up among the shavings, and the stranger fell to work upon the little cabinet of sandal-wood.

Here begins what the curé will have it is a dream within a dream. Sweetest of dreams that was ever dreamed, if that is so. Sometimes I am forced to think with him, but again I see as clearly as with old Madame’s eyes that have not seen the earthly light for twenty years, and with her and Hyacinthe I say, “Credo.”

Hyacinthe said that he lay among the shavings in the sweetness of the sandal-wood, and was very tired. He thought of the country where the stranger had been a boy, of the flowers on the hills, of the laughing leaves of aspen and poplar, of the golden flowering anise, and the golden sun upon the dusty roads, until he was warm. All the time through these pictures, as through a painted veil, he was aware of that other boy with the quiet eyes, at work upon the cabinet, smoothing, fitting, polishing. “He does better work than I,” thought Hyacinthe; but he was not jealous. And again he thought, “It is growing towards morning. In a little while I will get up and help him.” But he did not for the dream of warmth and the smell of the sandal-wood held him in a sweet drowse. Also he said that he thought the stranger was singing as he worked, for there seemed to be a sense of some music in the shed, though he could not tell whether it came from the other boy’s lips, or from the shabby old tools as he used them, or from the stars.

He lay without moving, and behind the forest there shone a pale glow of some indescribable color that was neither green nor blue, while in Termination the church bells began to ring. “Day will soon be here,” thought Hyacinthe, immovable in that deep dream of his, “and with that day will come Monsieur L’Oreillard and his stick. I must get up and help, for even yet the corners are not carved.”



But he did not get up. Instead, he saw the stranger look at him again, smiling as if he loved him, and lay his brown finger lightly upon the four empty corners of the cabinet. And Hyacinthe saw the little squares of reddish wood ripple and heave and break, as little clouds when the wind goes through the sky. And out of them thrust forth the little birds, and after them the lilies, for a moment living, but even while Hyacinthe looked growing hard and reddish-brown and settling back into the sweet wood. Then the stranger smiled again, and laid all the tools neatly in order, and opening the door quietly, went away into the woods.

Hyacinthe lay still among the shavings for a long time, and then he crept slowly to the door. The sun, not yet risen, sent his first beams upon the delicate mist of frost afloat beneath the trees, and so all the world was aflame with splendid gold. Far away down the road a dim figure seemed to move amid the glory, but the glow and the splendor were such that Hyacinthe was blinded. His breath came sharply as the glow beat in great waves on the wretched shed, on the foam of shavings, on the cabinet with the little birds and the lilies carved at the corners.

He was too pure of heart to feel afraid. But, "Blessed be the Lord," whispered Hyacinthe, clasping his slow hands, "for He hath visited and redeemed his people. But who will believe?"

Then the sun of Christ's day rose gloriously, and the little sparrow came from his nest among the shavings and shook his wings to the light.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Accents have been added to French words.

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[The end of *The Worker in Sandal Wood* by Marjorie L. C. Pickthall]