

*Evaluation Sample*

# **THE SIMPLICITY OF LIFE**

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Once that has been said, enjoy!

# Part One

## *A Simple Village*

### 1

*“When I plant my spade, it not only pleases me, but I think that with each blow, with each effort, a mouth will be fed. And when I’m through counting over the whole village, I’m bringing new babies to life.”*

– Gregory

Gregory was in his fields as usual on a summer day. The main harvest had not yet begun, but there were several minor crops that required constant maintenance, and some were even ready to be picked, though just a little everyday. He was using a spade as old as the world for precision work. He loved this direct contact with the earth and its fruits, felt an almost sensual bond with his feeding ally.

He had already inspected his grain, which contributed to feeding the entire village and, sometimes, when the crop was abundant, the nearby communities if they were having difficulties. This year he was anxious because like last year, the beautiful flora decorating his fields had not yet reached the expected height for this time of the season.

The village had some reserves, but if the phenomenon were

to repeat itself again this year, they would perhaps have to employ draconian measures. As was his duty, he would discuss his fears at the next council meeting. The latter, after deliberation and a decision by its leader, would find the right path to follow.

His thoughts moved away from that topic as he continued the relentless work of unearthing the first vegetables of his garden: good, large, round radishes. They were intended mainly for his personal use because his little family liked them so much. He gave and exchanged some with a few neighbors who shared the same inclination, but he did not cultivate enough for everybody.

Digging out a particularly attractive specimen, he was delighted in advance for the joy it would bring to his wife. His mood darkened for a few moments. He didn't know if it was his imagination or if he had unconsciously detected some signs—visible solely to the eyes of a life partner of two decades—but a question had suddenly come to him; was his wife still happy with him?

Twice already, the idea had irrupted in his mind and this most recent occurrence completely drew his attention. At the first signs he had not reacted, but he could no longer ignore the message. He was hoping he was mistaken and that it was just a problem with him.

Had he developed habits that weighed on his wife? Perhaps he didn't show her enough affection? He promised himself he would discuss it with her this very evening in order to be reassured or find out what he had to change—or improve—so they could both have their old joy back. They had been in such true accord all their lives, but people changed and evolved,

and sometimes became less compatible, if not outright antagonistic.

Since he could do nothing about it there and then—and since he would know everything that night—Gregory was able to smile again. So, after having uncovered some additional plants, he dug his spade firmly into the ground and used it as a support. A small break for some water, from a bottle ever present at his side, would do him some good.

As he paused, he spotted his neighbor Clifford coming towards him. He was undoubtedly going to the village and must have decided to pass through the fields rather than use the road. He was not really saving any time or distance but, like Gregory, he preferred the landscape of the rising crop to that of the sterile path the horses and wagons used.

“Hey, farmer Clifford, are you trespassing on my fields?”

“I wanted to ask for your permission, but my voice doesn’t carry that far!”

“Perhaps I should move my garden closer to your house!” laughed Gregory.

“Yes, that would be most convenient! I wouldn’t have to walk so far just to speak with you.”

“You were coming to see me? I thought you were going to the village.”

“I am, but it seemed to me that we hadn’t had a chance to chat for a long time. So I said to myself: pass through his fields, if he’s there, good, if not, too bad! In any case, you know that I’m responsible for making the rounds of the crops and drawing up a complete assessment for the next council meeting. So I’m killing two birds with one stone.”

“Splendid idea, my good man. Well now, what do you

make of it? My grain is not even as high as it was last year at this time.”

“Tell me about it! My cows are so thin I can almost see through them. And I’m afraid it isn’t going to get better before the end of the year.”

“Two years in a row. It may be too soon to panic, but I have a feeling that we’ll have to ask people to avoid having children for a year or two.”

“I fear that may be true. It would be a pity. There were many marriages this spring. We’ve already asked them to be careful until we know if the harvest will be good or not. The beginning of my circuit isn’t very encouraging.”

“I remember a situation like this very well. I married Agnes during the great drought and we had to wait five years for our first child.”

“I remember that. I was luckier. I had my daughter the first year. By the way, I think she finds your Michael quite to her taste. She’s still a little young, but you never know!”

“You never know. Michael doesn’t seem in a hurry. He must be starting to look at girls, but I think his younger brother is more passionate!”

“Perhaps, is he more interested in boys?”

“Maybe. I haven’t spoken to him about it yet, but now that you mention it, it might be time for me to have a new conversation with him. The last one was a good two years ago. He might know more about himself by now.”

“You should. It’s important to keep the channels of communication open. Sometimes young people have thoughts they don’t understand and they hesitate to open up.”

“Yes, that’s all true enough. Just lately I’m more worried

about my wife.”

“Yes? Something serious?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ve just been trying to figure it out. It’s as if she’s less happy. In any case, I’ll talk to her this evening. I’ll see to Michael tomorrow.”

“Yes, speak to her as soon as possible. One should never let these things wait. Take my wife and I, for example. We had problems a few years ago. It could have degenerated. We waited too long before initiating the dialogue. Fortunately, everything fell back into place, but we needed three months in separate bedrooms all the same.”

“Oh yes, I remember that. It was quite a difficult time. Sometimes there is nothing better than taking a step back though.”

“My opinion exactly. Now, just for a change of subject; I went to see my Aunt Beatrice last week...”

“The one now living in Springfield?”

“That’s the one. Things aren’t going very well over there. The drought is even worse than here. I think they’re going to need some assistance.”

“Is that right? We’ll see in due time. They’ll have to start thinking about the future. Their lands are not very good. Maybe they should exploit some other resources? We’ll just have to see. It looks like our provisions are likely to be quite small this year, but if we can help we should; we’ll just have to tighten our belts a little more.”

“Yep, that’s how it goes. They do need to think of something, or maybe move their village. The regional council is supposed to meet next month. That would be the right time to tackle the subject.”

“Yes. I’ll mention it to Charles before he goes there.”

“Speaking of Charles. What do you think of his mistake with the town hall? Do you think we should talk to him and maybe start looking for a new leader?”

“We won’t have much choice but to talk about it. He feels guilty and will certainly propose a discussion very soon, but to go from there to replacing him... I’m not so sure,” concluded Gregory after a few seconds of reflection.

“We’ll go deeper into it at the meeting. I brought it up simply because your name is often bandied about as the next village head.”

“Oh no! That’s a lot of work and responsibility.”

“Yes, I understand. It’s always a bit annoying to have your own farm taken care of by other people when time runs short. Nevertheless, for the good of the community...”

“There’s still some time to deal with this, and I’m not in any hurry.”

“As you said, we’ll see. Well, I must take my leave of you. I still have a lot of things to do today.”

“If you run into Albert, could you remind him that I’ll be waiting for him tonight?”

“Albert? Do you have problems and need help from the city bank?”

“No, no. Nothing so dramatic. Simply an idea I had. I’ll talk to you about it some other time.”

“I’ll pass the message on then. Bye now!”

“Bye!”

And Gregory returned to his spade. He had a few more hours work ahead of him. Now that all his business was well organized in his head, he went back to work thinking of

nothing more than the pleasure of laboring in his fields.

2

*“I love my husband; we built everything together. I have two beautiful children. However, there are days when I can feel the fire in my veins.”*

– Agnes

Agnes left the barn by the door leading directly to the house. She tried to maintain an upright and dignified posture, but she only managed it for a few steps. One hand on her belly, she wavered and had to lean on the wheel of a nearby abandoned old cart for support. All her senses were razor-sharp. It had been years since she had felt this excited. As she leaned on the wagon, she began to regain control of herself.

She was hoping that Philip had left the premises, as he had promised, and that he would not pursue her while she was so vulnerable. Part of her wanted the exact opposite, of course. Nevertheless, Philip was a gentleman and he would never take advantage of her weakened state. A new wave of desire made her bend her knees slightly. She took a deep breath and let it out very slowly, as if she were coming down to earth like an autumn leaf.

It was now over. Agnes was breathing freely and her thoughts became clear again as she renewed contact with reality. For a while now, she had been reading more than friendship in Philip’s eyes and finding that she was not immune to it. Her first assumption had been that it was just a small and inconsequential flirting interlude.

This morning however, he had come into the barn, looking for Gregory. They had exchanged some banal words, which had turned out to be more revealing than a balcony serenade. Their vague feelings had gradually taken fire and they had fallen into each other's arms, kissing passionately. Suddenly ablaze, they had sought each other's bodies, completely detached from this world. Philip was the first to recover his wits and had broken off their embrace.

Agnes, initially confused, also regained control, and forehead to forehead, they had remained silent for several minutes, savoring the moment that would perhaps never be renewed. Philip had spoken first. He'd told her that he was very attracted to her. He had believed it to be just a small thing, but he was realizing now that it was much more than that. He had apologized for his incipient passion bursting out in such a manner, without warning.

Agnes had acknowledged that she had just gone through the same thing. However, she was married and it would not be fair to Gregory to go any further without first talking to him. Philip agreed. He was a friend and he would feel better if the situation was clear for everyone. She told him that she had to think things over. After all, even though they now knew that a strong attraction existed between them, was it sufficient? He felt the same way. It was necessary to let some time pass, to confirm the validity of their feelings or dismiss them. After another kiss—more controlled—they separated for good and left each other to go their separate ways.

Agnes, confused, sad, happy and decided, resumed her way towards the small house where she had been living with Gregory for a little over twenty years. She didn't know yet how

she would tackle the subject or what she would say—still being unsure of her feelings—but she had to talk to him this very evening. She would find the words and Gregory would certainly help her. With this thought, her heart became lighter.

Between her and her husband, although they were no longer in the first blush of their original passion, there existed a great friendship, and she loved him very much. She now had to decide what was most important to her. On top of that, there were the children. They must not be forgotten. Of course, they would understand, but Gregory and she had to make sure that, in the advent of a separation, they had the opportunity to express their feelings, and that the arrangements between her and her husband would satisfy their needs as much as possible. Philip came back to her mind and a new surge of heat traversed her body. It was now more like a soft wave of anticipation—easily controlled—giving her new resolve.

### 3

*“There are days where, when I’m coming back from the fields, my body tells me that I should have stopped an hour earlier. But when I think about everything I have achieved, every little pain is a celebration.”*

– Gregory

Gregory was approaching the house. Every day, the prospect of finally having a moment of rest made him almost groan. It was rather like his body, which had not complained the whole day, was suddenly demanding he hasten, and that

the last steps still separating him from his home were really too much. He slowed his pace, stretched in all directions and resumed his route. Again, he felt his muscles rebel. However, he was now sufficiently close to ignore the complaints and he entered in a single movement.

Agnes was not in. He did not pay undue attention to this, his favorite armchair was already in sight, and he fell into it like a rock. His body, expressing its joy at finally being released from its drudgery, sent waves of happiness and relief washing over him. A few minutes later, a broad smile spread over his face. He was already feeling much better. He was always astonished to see how just a few minutes in his armchair were enough to soothe him after a whole day spent standing up.

He got up—his back protesting a little—and went to fetch the bag of vegetables he had abandoned in his eagerness a few steps from the door. When he returned, he ran into Agnes carrying a basket of laundry, which had been drying outside for the best part of the afternoon. She smiled at him and he returned it in the same way, showing her his radish collection. She opened hungry eyes.

“They’re so beautiful! If I hurry, I can make a salad.”

“As you wish, my darling,” he answered, handing her the best specimens. They’re the first of the season and that’s certainly worth a small treat.”

“That’s for sure! Oh, but if I do that, I won’t have time to set the table. Would you take care of it?”

“Of course,” agreed Gregory, telling his whining body not to interfere.

Agnes left for the kitchen and he went to get the large tablecloth, which he then spread on the dining room table.

He headed for the kitchen to take what he needed to set four places. When he appeared, Agnes couldn't repress a small movement of discomfort, which Gregory noticed. He threw her an interrogative glance, which she answered with a small smile and a quick hand signal meaning "later."

He didn't insist, understanding that it was not the right moment. But he became even more determined to share his concerns and offer his support if she was experiencing some difficulties. Nevertheless, he felt perked up by the simple fact that they could still talk without saying a word. Once his share of the chores were completed, he went back to his throne and closed his eyes to better prepare for the evening.

Agnes quickly finished washing and cutting her vegetables and went on to make supper. She felt a little odd. Her movements were mechanical, as if everything were happening outside reality. She was tearing up lettuce, speaking with her husband and waiting for her children. But she was also with Philip; it seemed as if the ghost of what she had felt that morning had accompanied her all day long, giving a new color to everything and constantly reminding her that nothing would ever be the same again.

She saw her children coming from afar, the oldest, Michael, was in front of his young brother John and often stopped to wait when the latter decided to interrupt his walk to investigate something more closely. The two brothers loved each other a lot but, like all children, they also mutually exasperated one another since they didn't have the same inclinations.

Michael would soon be sixteen and would be making some important decisions in the very near future. This summer, he was working for the blacksmith with one of his friends, in

order to determine if that trade was of interest to him. He had already done an apprenticeship at the general store, the bakery, and also with the village leader. There was still the possibility that if he showed both the required talent and interest he could continue his studies near some of the more educated of the village as well.

Of course, Michael helped on the farm when needed, especially during harvest. Nevertheless, it was essential that he had the chance to try out several professions. For the same reason, the butcher's son was presently assisting Gregory in the fields several days a week.

As for John, he was showing more taste and aptitude—according to Gregory—for following in his father's footsteps. However, it was imperative that he too should develop his talents to the maximum, and so he was assisting another farmer—a childless one—who raised hens, pigs and a variety of other animals every year. In any case, he still had three years of school left before he had to choose his profession.

Going back to her dilemma, Agnes wondered how the separation would happen. For John's good, it would perhaps be better to remain with his father, since he had more affinity with him. Michael could easily go with her. Since Philip was a carpenter, it would give him an additional option. She would see. It was pointless to waste her time with idle speculations. She and Gregory, if it came to that, would certainly find the best solution for everyone.

“Hello dad, hello mom. We're home.”

“Hello Michael. Where's John?”

“Right behind me. He had to wash up a bit. He couldn't resist jumping in a puddle like a six-year-old.”

“What are you saying about me now, you big toad?” shouted John as he came in.

“Nothing but the truth, kid.”

“Well, well, children, don’t start with that,” said Gregory, as he got up to kiss them. “Tell us how your day went instead. Supper’s ready. Go and help your mother bring everything to the table and you can tell us all about it.”

Five minutes later, they were sitting together at the table. As they began serving themselves from the large platters in the middle, Michael went first:

“Today I helped to shoe a horse. Old Gustav let me prepare everything. I had to take the measurements, decide on the forge’s temperature according to the alloy, everything!”

“Yeah? How did it go?”

“Pretty well. I got the temperature wrong, though. I misjudged the proportions of metals in the alloy. Gustav told me it was normal and he showed me what I had done wrong.”

“Is he still happy with you?”

“Sort of. He finds that I can handle many things and it pleases him to teach me. But he doesn’t really think it’s in my nature to be a blacksmith. He encourages me anyway though, because he’s proud of his trade and he likes having apprentices.”

“Of course. It’s like Sebastian and I. Although he’s really out of his element on a farm, it’s still pleasant to see his eyes avid for knowledge, and so I don’t mind restarting my lessons all over again two or three times. How’s Richard doing?”

“He’s gifted. I think Gustav will ask him to continue working there on weekends this winter. And Richard really loves the work. I think he can’t wait for harvest time to arrive so he can have Gustav all to himself.”

“Why? Doesn’t he spend enough time with both of you?”

“Yes, but more with me because I don’t always get it the first time. So he spends more time with me, even though he knows it’s kind of a lost cause. Richard understands the situation. He just wants to go further. Anyway, he won’t have to wait for long.”

“Yes, I see. Listen, here’s what you should do. Tomorrow, talk to Gustav. If he believes you don’t have anything useful to learn over there anymore, and you don’t like it much, then he ought to be able to tell you right away. There are a few weeks left before the harvest and you could try something else. Or you could even study more advanced subjects to see whether you would like to have more schooling. I’m quite sure Albert wouldn’t mind having someone to help him.”

“Okay. But I don’t dislike being a blacksmith. It’s just not in my blood and I can’t see myself doing it for the rest of my life.”

“In any case, that’s for tomorrow,” intervened Agnes. “Now you, John, how is it going with young Matthew?”

“Very well. It’s fun to take care of all the animals. It’s a change from the routine of milking cows. But I can’t wait for the harvest!”

“It’s coming,” Gregory reassured him. “Three weeks to go and we can start.”

“Is the corn growing well?”

“Unfortunately, the rains are too scattered and it’s shy by a good six inches of what it ought to be.”

“Again. Just like last year.”

“A little worse, even, I would say. It’s the same everywhere. Clifford told me this morning that his herd is thinner than

usual.”

“Well,” added Agnes, “I imagine there’ll be serious discussions at the council meeting.”

“That’s my intention. However, I have other fish to fry this evening,” he paused, and then said: “It’s nearly six o’clock and you two still have the cows to milk. Better get to it!”

“Okay dad,” John sprang happily out of his seat, followed a little less enthusiastically by his big brother.

Agnes, believing that her husband wanted to talk immediately, quickly told him:

“Gregory, we have to speak tonight, but I’d rather do it after the children are in bed.”

“I know, Hon, we’ll do it before we go to bed. In the meantime, I’ve invited Albert for an informal meeting. I have a project that I’d like to discuss with him and your opinion on it is essential too.”

“Okay. We won’t have to wait for long. I see someone descending the hill and coming towards us.”