

IVAN OLBRACHT

NIKOLA ŠUHAJ

ROBBER

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IVAN OLBRACHT • NIKOLA ŠUHAJ - ROBBER

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by Ivan Olbracht

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SHEILING ABOVE HOLATÝN

When the writer of this story was in the Nikola Šuhaj* country, gathering material for the life of this invulnerable man, who took from the rich and gave to the poor, and who never killed save in self-defence or in just revenge, he had, after hearing the testimony of so many honest and trustworthy witnesses, in truth, no reason to doubt that Šuhaj's invulnerability was caused by his waving a green branch, which scattered the gendarmes' bullets as a farmer scatters a swarm of bees on a hot July day.

For in this country of forests, with mountains crumpled like a piece of paper to be thrown into the fire, things happen that we are foolish enough to smile at only because such things have not happened here for hundreds of years. In this country, with its endless succession of hills and ravines, where, in the mouldering, unlit depths of virgin forest, springs are born and ancient maples crumble to decay, there are enchanted places where neither deer nor bear nor human creature has ever set foot. The ribbons of early-morning mist, trailing their way laboriously above the crowns of the firs up into the mountains, are processions of dead souls, and the clouds sailing above the ravines are hounds with gaping jaws making their way to beyond the hills on an errand of destruction. And down below, in the narrow river valleys, in the villages green with fields of maize and yellow with sunflowers, there live werewolves that, having slipped at twilight over a fallen

* Pronounce: Shoohigh

tree-trunk, change from men into wolves and, in the morning again, from wolves into men. Here, on moonlit nights, young witches gallop on horses into which they have changed their sleeping husbands, nor is there need to seek witches beyond seven hills and seven rivers in wind-swept valleys, for these evil ones may be met with in the pastures as they sprinkle salt in three hoof-prints to make the cows run dry, and anyone can visit them in their cottages and call them away from their hemp-braking to pronounce their magic incantations for snake-bite or make an ailing child strong by bathing it in an infusion of nine herbs.

Here God still walks abroad. In the sultry silence of the primaeval forests, the old god of the earth, who embraces the hills and the valleys, who plays with the bears in their thickets, wantons with the cows that have run away from the herd and who loves the piping of the herdsman calling the cattle home at sundown. His voice is still heard in the murmuring of the tree-tops, he drinks of the stream from the hollow of his hand and burns at night in the flames of the camp-fire on the hill pasturages. He it is who rustles the broad green leaves of the maize-fields and sets the yellow discs of the sunflowers nodding. The old pagan god, the god of woods and herds, who will not be reconciled with that proud and majestic God, clothed in gold and silk, behind the colourful walls of an iconostasis or with the morose Ancient of Days concealed behind the frayed curtains of the Purjoches Synagogue.

But all the same the story about Šuhaj's green branch is not true.

"No," the herdsman told me, in a clearing in the woods above Holatýn, "that's what people say but it wasn't like that."

And while he toasted a mushroom impaled on a hazel twig over the fire, he told me of that event which determined the whole course of Nikola's life. A tale more apt for telling

on a winter evening by the flames of a beech-log fire in the wooden huts of these valleys than that of the green branch. A better tale — for that is the only expression that can be properly used, though the words wonder and miracle keep coming to the tongue. But these words taken from the Christian nomenclature mean something exceptional, something to be wondered at. Here, however, there is nothing exceptional and nothing to wonder at. Just as everybody knows that grain ripens in July and hemp in August, so they know, too, that the good fairies — the "mavky" — live in the maize and the bad fairies — the "rusalky" — by the muddy streams; and just as it is perfectly clear that anyone floating wood will drown if he falls from the raft into the swollen waters of the Terebla, so it is equally evident that madness will come on anyone who sets foot on the spot where a witch has poured out the dregs of her unclean brew of herbs.

The Holatýn herdsman began to tell the story of Nikola Šuhaj, sitting in a circle of cattle-herds round the fire whose flames shot up torch-like into the evening sky. But he did not finish it there because it began to rain — a quiet soaking rain such as is common enough at the beginning of July. He finished it on the hay in the darkness of a summer sheiling. The herds, having smoked their pipes with copper lids, sighed in their sleep, the rain beat a tattoo on the roof, and, from behind the wooden partition where the cattle lay sleeping, now from this corner now from another, came a faint rattling — faint and delicate like the sound of a rivulet tripping over a pebble, as the animals moved their heads in sleep and the tongue of the bell round their necks tinkled softly against the side. And this sound, so unwonted, coloured the whole night, for it gave the impression that someone was creeping from corner to corner like a stealthy eavesdropper.

And here is the Macbeth-like story of the invulnerable Šuhaj, of the robber Nikola Šuhaj, who took from the rich

and gave to the poor and never killed save in self-defence or in just revenge. For these are the virtues of all outlaws everywhere in the world where they still love a robber and an outlaw and honour him as a national hero.

It happened during the War, at some place near the front, where for weeks deserters remained in hiding, dodging the field gendarmerie and lying to the men of the 52nd regiment that they were looking for the 26th, and to those of the 26th that they were looking for the 85th, the Balassagyarmat. And to this regiment belonged both Šuhaj and his friend, a German machine-hand from Transylvania.

The two of them had found shelter with an old Russian woman. The woman was an ugly old hag, and the hut, with its mud-plastered walls and high straw-thatched roof, looked like a mushroom rising unexpectedly from the plain; or, still more, like a tall peaked hat set askew over a clutch of addled eggs out of which nothing decent could ever possibly hatch. She had two daughters, stupid, with long hair and legs covered with flea-bites. But it was far from any other human habitation, and because soldiers are very little given to philosophical reflections on the beautiful and very much to finding the best way to pass the time between two shells, they started going with the girls to pasture the cows and to the alder grove for wood, and, at night, climbed up the little ladder after them into the loft.

"You, Ruthenian," the old woman said one evening to Nikola, "you'll be a famous man yet in your country, soldiers and generals will fear you," and helped herself at the same time to a slice of pickled cucumber with rings of onion, speaking in the same tone of voice as if she were talking of a linchpin or the thatching on the roof. "I want you to marry my daughter Vasya."

Strike you blind, thought Šuhaj to himself, she knows all about everything, curse her. But he said: "Why not?" And then, clutching at a straw of hope, "But what if they shoot me tomorrow?"

The old woman made no reply.

"And you, German," she continued, after swallowing what she had in her mouth, "you'll be the richest man in your country. I want you to marry my daughter Yevka."

"Oh well," said the German, "if only I get out of this alive." Nor was it difficult to see that for him such talk was just about as agreeable as an awn in the eye.

Needless to say the soldiers had not the smallest intention of marrying her daughters. Nikola even then loved Eržika, and the German, too, had his girl at home. Their one idea was to get out of the fighting and have a good time, and in this, with the old woman's contrivance, they had succeeded.

Then suddenly, as they sat there at supper, they were seized with a feeling of revulsion. Yevka was crunching a mouthful of cucumber and onion and Vasya was scratching the back of her neck with the handle of a wooden spoon, chasing a louse somewhere beneath her pigtail.

"But if you have lied to me, thrice seven times woe be to you," said the hag and the curse was all the more horrid for being pronounced with such seeming indifference, the while the old woman's eyes looked past the soldiers and fixed themselves on the wall beyond.

"And what if we have?" the German muttered, but only because he felt that something like that should be said.

But the silence and the gathering dusk affected Šuhaj strangely. As if far away from here, where he had his home, somebody had cut out a piece of the atmosphere and transported it to above the hut with the high straw roof. And there at home was now a round empty space, the enchanted spot in the forest where bear, deer and man are doomed to wander in an endless circle. He felt distinctly the smell of mould and resin floating in through the window along with the silence and the dusk.

"Give me your mugs," said the old woman, and in a little while brought them back with some kind of electuary.

"Drink it up!"

It was neither bitter nor sweet, neither good nor bad . . .

That evening they went to bed sooner and they did not follow the girls up into the loft. But before they fell asleep on the hay in the barn, they had a long talk.

What utter nonsense! The German was angry. Did she really think they would swallow such idiotic nonsense? Let her try to fool silly old crones like herself and not soldiers and "old-timers". He was really furious that he had let himself be taken by surprise, that he hadn't given the old hag a bit of his mind and that he had even touched the decoction. And it must be said that he was really angry in spite of, or was it just because of, a disturbing voice somewhere within him that kept whispering what a good thing it would be if it were only true.

"Let's get out of here!" said Šuhaj.

All right then. In a few days they could disappear. What need had they of an old crone!

The few days passed and many more. Here was quiet and peace — as if they were living a hundred miles and a hundred years away from any war. The whole time not a soul came near and they had no wish to get within range of the barking Russian machine-guns and the gleam of Russian shrapnel. This wonderful feeling of safety, of all things the most desirable, was worth even a bad conscience. Again they went with the girls to pasture the cows and to the alder-grove for brushwood.

But one day, early in the morning, the two of them were in the yard. Nikola was cutting wooden pegs from a pine branch and fitting them into a rake for the old woman. The German was sitting on the ground with his back against a willow fence playing a mouth-organ. The old woman came out of the hut, set a ladder against the wall and climbed up it to get something from the hay-loft. Suddenly a gust of wind lifted the old woman's skirts and revealed something very strange. The old

woman's backbone ended in a stump covered with hair — like the tail of a goat.

The German, the stupid German, who knows nothing except his machines and his numbers and believes in nothing, started roaring with laughter.

But Šuhaj got a shock. For Nikola Šuhaj was from Ruthenia — and there God still exists. And Nikola was from the country of Oleksa Dovbuš — the famous robber chief; Oleksa Dovbuš who, for seven years, with seven hundred young fellows, fought up and down the countryside, took from the rich and gave to the poor and could not be hurt by a bullet save one of silver, hidden among grains of spring wheat, over which twelve masses had been read. Nikola Šuhaj knew on the instant that before him on the ladder was the "Baba Yaga" — The Old Woman, The Hag, The Caillach, The Witch.

"She'll do us a hurt, let's kill her," he whispered.

"Why, what for?" and the German made a gesture with his hand indicating how unnecessary he thought it was.

But soldiers do not take much account of an old woman's life. They have done too much killing themselves and have seen too many comrades killed to be squeamish. Why not do a comrade a good turn? Especially when he still had a score to pay off for the attack she had made on his common sense!

Next morning when the old woman went into the shed, they killed her with cudgels and ran away.

They wandered about the countryside for some time and then returned to their regiment — the 22nd Balassagyarmat.

The shooting started again, and again they carried the wounded to the field dressing-station and the dead into pits, and again the scorched smell of the trenches was in their nostrils and hunger gnawed at their vitals. And again, like all proper soldiers, they longed for a clean wound that would not harm them very much and would help them, if not to get

home, at least to get away from the front for a few months. That there had once been an old woman and a Yevka or Vasya had long since passed from their thoughts.

And then it happened that these two were sent on patrol through an old wood of oaks. For three days and three nights the bombardment had been going on and it was after a hot day. A full four hours the guns had been roaring and everything was one great white cloud of smoke and swirling sand lit up by flashes of flame — three attacks of Russian infantry and one counter-attack, flesh by the waggon-load, and when it was all over they had not the strength left to breathe a sigh of relief that they had got through it unscathed. Now, after three days of quiet, signs of restlessness on the other side and preparations in their own trenches indicated that the whole circus was going to start again. Go into hiding? Where? Run away? From the trenches it was no longer possible. And to let oneself be taken prisoner?

Not on your life!

"I say, Šuhaj," said the German, and as they were walking between the widely-spaced trees, he stretched out his left hand, turned it palm up and then turned it over again. "I'm fed up with this. Wouldn't you take a shot at me?" In such a matter you must have the services of a comrade, for to do it oneself is difficult, unless you can do it through a loaf of bread, which absorbs the tell-tale specks of powder that would burn the circumference of the wound and bring you before a court-martial.

"You really want me to?"

"Yes, really."

Šuhaj nodded silently.

The German placed the back of his hand on the trunk of an oak and the white palm stood out like the paper targets they had at school when they first taught them to shoot.