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THE MURMURING FOREST

A Polesye Legend

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Long ago, and long forgotten.

I

The forest murmured....

A perpetual murmur filled these woods—steady, continuous, like the echo of distant chiming, serene and faint, like the crooning of a song, like a vague remembrance of the past. The murmur never ceased, for this was an old and dense pine forest untouched as yet by the timber merchant's saw and axe. A host of stately, centennial pines with powerful ruddy trunks stood in gloomy array, the rich crowns closing in the ranks overhead. Under the trees it was peaceful, and fragrant with resin; brilliant ferns had pushed their way up through the needle-matted ground and froze stock-still in an opulence of whimsical tassels, with not a leaf stirring; green grass grew tall in shady corners; while clover as though drooping from exhaustion bent under the weight of its heavy blossoms. Up above the murmur persisted, endless and unbroken, and it seemed that faint sighs were heaved by the venerable forest.

These sighs grew heavier and more pronounced as I now rode along the woodland path, and though the sky was hidden from view I could tell from the frowning of the forest that dark clouds were gathering. The afternoon was on the wane. Here and there, in between the tree trunks, penetrated the slanting rays of the setting sun, but the dark shadows of twilight already lurked in the thickets. A storm was drawing on.

All thought of hunting therefore had to be abandoned; the most I could hope for was to reach shelter for the night before the storm broke. With a clatter of

hoofs on the naked roots, my horse snorted and pricked up his ears at the ominous rambling of the woodland echo. And he now galloped all the faster to the familiar lodge.

A dog barked at our approach and in between the thinning trees loomed the clay walls of the lodge. From beneath the overhanging foliage a wreath of blue smoke curled; a crooked cottage with a tousled roof stood in the clearing nestling to the wall of ruddy tree trunks, and seemed half-sunken in the earth, while the proud and graceful pines tossed their heads high above it. In the middle of the clearing rose a clump of densely growing young oak-trees.

It is in this lodge that the forest rangers Zakhar and Maxim, invariable companions of my hunting excursions, live. But they do not seem to be in, for no one is roused by the barking of the great big sheep dog. The only one who is around is the old man, bald-headed, with fierce grey moustaches. He is sitting on the earth-bank around the wall and fiddling with his bask shoe. His moustache ends dangle almost to his waist, and his eyes have the blank stare of one who is making a vain attempt to recollect something.

"Hullo, Grandfather! Is anybody in?"

"Ay, ay!" he exclaims with a shake of the head. "None's in, nor Zakhar, nor Maxim, and Motria, too, is a-roaming in the woods, searching for the cow. The cow has gone off—the bears might have got her.... That's how 'tis. Nobody's in."

"Never mind. I'll wait. I could sit here with you for a while."

"No harm in waiting," he nods. And as I tether my horse to an oak branch he peers at me with his feeble, bleary eyes. The old man is very decrepit; his eyes do not see and his hands shake.

"And who may ye be, son?" he asks when I sit down beside him.

Every time I arrive at the lodge he poses the same question. Then suddenly he seems to remember.

"I know you, I do," he declares, and turns his attention again to the shoe. "My old head's like a sieve, everything slips through it. I am more likely to remember those as is long dead. New people I forget.... I've been living too long."

"Have you been living long in this forest, Grandfather?"

"Ay, ay, long! Way back when the French set foot on our soil, I was here."

"You must have seen a good deal in your lifetime, and can tell a story or two."

He now gives me a bewildered look.

"What have I seen besides the forest, son?... The forest murmurs, murmurs day and night, winter and summer.... And like that tree yonder, so I've lived a lifetime in the forest without thought of it. Now that I am at death's door, I wonder and don't know if I've lived or not.... Ay, ay! See,—what if I haven't lived at all?..."

A shred of dark cloud drifted in from behind the dense tree crowns and cast a shadow on the clearing; the wind rocked the branches of the surrounding pines, and the murmur of the forest rose to a loud crescendo. The old man cocked his head and listened.

Presently he said, "A storm is coming on. I know it is. My, my, there'll be a wild night—pines will break and be pulled out with their roots!... 'Tis the forest master at his old game," he added in a hushed tone.

"How d'you know that, Grandfather?"

"Ay, ay, I know it, for I know what the trees are saying.... The trees, too, son, get frightened. Take the asp, 'tis a cursed tree. It keeps muttering—and a-trembling even when there is no wind. Now the pine is playful and a-ringing on bright days,

but should a wee wind blow, it gets frettin' and moanin'. But that's not so bad. Just you listen. My sight is poor, but my ear can hear—the oaks are -stirred up in the clearing, too. That's a sure sign there'll be a thunderstorm."

True enough, with a shudder of their sturdy boughs, the clump of short and snaggy oaks, standing in the middle of the clearing, and well protected by the surrounding wall of forest, broke into a low whine, easily distinguishable from the ringing of the pines.

"Ay, ay! D'you hear 'em, son?" he asked with a mischievous childish smile. "I know it: when the oaks are stirred up, the *master*'ll be roaming by night, shatterin' the trees. But not the oaks—he won't break them.... The oak is a mighty strong tree, and a match, e'en for the master, that's how it be!"

"What master is that, Grandfather? You said yourself it's the storm that breaks the trees."

Looking slyly at me the old man wagged his head.

"Ay, ay! I know that! They says nowadays folk believe in nothing, that's how things be! As for me, I've seen the master as good as I see you, nay, better, for my eyes be feeble now, and then they were young; in my young days my eyes missed nothing!"

"Just tell me, Grandfather, how you were able to see the master?"

"It was much like now—first the pines in the wood took to moanin', not a-ringin', as they always do but moanin': o-o-ho-o-ho-o ... o-ho-oh! The moanin' dies away but then comes again, more and more often and plaintive-like. That's because the master will bring lots of them pines down in the night. After a while the oaks start up. By evening the din grows louder, and by night there is hell to pay: the master runs about wild, laughin' and wailin) a-whirlin' and prancin'. He is tryin' to get at the oaks, to pull them out.... I remembers one autumn I looked out of the window. *He* did not like that. He dashed up to the window and took a go at me with the snag of a pine. And he'd 've smashed up my face—may he rot in hell! But I was no fool, I jumped back. See, son, that's how mad the master can get!"

"And, pray, what does he look like?"

"Much like the old willow in the marsh. The spit and image of it! The hair is like withered mistletoe that grows on trees, and the beard's the same, the nose is like a big stump, the mug all gnarled and scabby.... By god, he's an ugly one! May no Christian man look like him ever! God forbid! Another time I saw him quite close, down at the marshland. Should you come here in wintertime, you be sure to see *him* yourself. Get to the top of that hill yonder that's covered with woods, and climb the highest tree, right to the top. There be days you're likely to glimpse him from there: like a white cloud he passes above the trees, a-whirlin' and a-whirlin', tumblin' downhill into the hollow.... He runs about, does he, and then before you know it he's gone. Ay, ay! And wher'er he passes he leaves a white trail of snow. If ye believe not what an old man says, come one day and see for yourself."

The old man became quite garrulous. The gusty, chattering woods and the brewing storm must have stirred the blood in his old veins. He wagged his head, chuckled, and blinked his faded eyes.

Then a shadow flitted across his furrowed forehead. He poked me with an elbow and said somewhat mysteriously:

"But there is one thing to be said for him, son; of course, the master of the forest be a mean rascal, and a Christian will not want to see an ugly mug like his,

but the truth is, he won't do a man any real harm.... He'll mock a body, make fun of him, but he won't do him harm."

"But, Grandfather, did you not say he meant to strike you with a snag?"

"Ay, ay! So he did! But it was 'cause he got angry with me for looking at him out of the window, don't ye see? But he won't play mean tricks on ye, once ye mind your own business. That's the kind of forest master he is. And let me tell ye—far more terrible deeds were done in this forest by men. Lord witness, they were!"

The old man cocked his head and kept silent for a minute or so. But when he looked at me again, I caught the flicker of a reawakened memory breaking through the misty film covering his eyes.

"I'll tell ye, son, a tale of our woods. 'Tis something that happened long ago, in this very place. I remembers it like a dream. It all comes back to me, once the forest starts a-murmurin' loud. Would you care to hear the tale?"

"I would indeed, Grandfather."

"Hark and I shall tell it."

II

My father and mother died long ago, when I was a little boy. And so 'twas I was left a poor orphan alone in the world. Ay, ay! The village folk scratched their heads: "What shall we do with the laddie?" The squire, too, did not know. But then one day comes the forester Roman and says to our folk: "Give me the laddie to take to the lodge, I'll provide his keep and he'll make life more cheerful for me...." The village folk replied: "You can have him." Roman took me and from that day on I stayed in the woods.

'Twas Roman who reared me. Fearful he was, so help me God. A great big man, with black eyes and a heart no less black looking out of them. This was because all his life long he lived alone in this forest. Folk said the bear and the wolf were brother and nephew to him. Every forest beast he knew and feared not, but he kept away from his fellow men, wouldn't even look them in the face.... God's my witness, he was that sort of man, and one look from him would send shivers down my spine. But for all that, there was kindness in him. He fed me well, with plenty of pork fat in the gruel, and when he'd shot a duck, we'd feast on the bird. He did not grudge me my food, and that is a fact!

And so we lived, the two of us. Roman would go off to the woods, locking me up in the lodge so that no beast would make a meal of me. This went on until he was given a wife, Oxana by name.

It was the squire's doing. He calls Roman to the village and says: "You've got to take a wife!" To this Roman replies: "What the deuce do I want a wife for? What'll I do with a woman in the woods, when I've got the little fellow to care for? I don't want to marry!" Nor was he one who carried on with wenches! But the squire was a wily one. When I think of that squire I can tell you that there is none like him nowadays. Squires like that one have died out. Take yourself! They tell me you, too, come of gentry stock. Maybe ye do, but you're not the real stuff. You're measly sort, that's what you are!

That squire was a real one ... of the old breed. I tell you, son, the world is made that way that one hundred people will tremble before a single man. Take the hawk and the chick! Both were hatched out of an egg, but the hawk is up in the sky. He need but let out a cry for the old cock, let alone the chicks, to run for their lives. And so the hawk be a noble bird, and the hen is a lowly fowl....

There be this I remember: I was a little fellow and I sees some peasants, about thirty of 'em, carting big logs from the woods. Just then the squire comes along on that very road, twirling his moustaches. His frisky horse prances and he be looking around proudly. And the moment the men see him, they turn their horses off the road into the deep snow, and doff their caps. What a hard time they have afterwards getting the carts and logs out of the snowdrifts! And squire gallops off—might proud to have the whole road to himself. A lift of his eyebrow could make the peasants tremble, a merry laugh raise their spirits. When his face grew dark, all went in fear. And there was not a man who dared cross the squire's wishes.

Roman grew up in the forest. And as you'd expect he was boorish. But the squire did not lose his temper with him.

"It is my wish for you to marry," he said, "and whatever for is my own business. You'll wed Oxana!"

"Nay, I shall not," replied Roman. "I need no wife, even if she be Oxana. Let the devil wed her, not me. That's final!"

The squire now ordered the flogging whips to be brought, Roman was laid on the ground.

"Do you agree to the marriage, Roman?" asks the squire. "I do not," retorts he.

"Give it to him," says the squire, "good and hard." They flogged Roman mighty hard. And strong as he was, he got fed up with it all.

"Stop it!" he cries. "I'll do as I'm bid. May the woman burn in hell before I'm going to suffer so many lashes for her. Fetch her and I'll wed her!"

And just as they be whippin' Roman to get him married who should come along but Opanas Shvidld, the squire's steward, riding in from the fields. When he learns what it's all about, Opanas flops on the ground before the squire, kissing his boots.

"Dear sir," he entreats, "why flog this fellow when I am only too willing to marry Oxana without any urging!"

See, Opanas was willing to marry Oxana—a good sort he was, I swear!

Roman cheered up, got to his feet and pulled tight the drawer strings around him.

"Well and good, man, but why hadn't ye come along before? And the squire's no better. Why not take the trouble to ask if there be a willing man? But no! Instead he grabs me and beats the life out of me. Is that acting like a Christian?"

Pooh!"

Roman was a fellow that could even tell the squire off. Ay, ay! Once he was enraged no one, nor the squire either, could get on the right side of him. But the squire was a wily one—in this whole business he had something at the back of his mind—and so he ordered Roman to be put down flat on the grass again.

"I do it for your own good, you fool," he cries, "and you're turning your nose up. You live lonely like a bear, and the lodge is a cheerless place.... Flog him, the fool, till he screams he's had enough.... As to you, Opanas, get the hell away from

here! This is a repast you've not been invited to share! There's no room for you at the table—unless it's the treat Roman is getting that you're hankering for."

By now Roman was real rageful. Ay, ay! The blows fell thick and fast 'cause folk in those days knew how to give a flogging. Roman stood the whipping for a long time. He would not say "Enough!" But in the end he gave in.

"It's not fair for a Christian to be flogged like that," he said, "all because of a wench, and the blows not even counted. Enough! May your arms wither away, you flunkeys of the devil. Ye've been taught well how to use the whips! Am I a sheaf of corn that you should thrash me so? If that's how it is, I agree to the marriage."

"Good!" says the squire, well pleased. "And with the flogging you've had—though you'll find it hard to sit, you'll do all the more dancing at the wedding!"

The squire was merry, that he was, but what befell him afterwards I would not wish upon any Christian, nor Jew either! That's what I think....

Well, that was how Roman got married. He brought his young bride to the lodge. At the beginning he kept chiding her and blaming her for the lashing he got.

"You're not worth it," he would say, "for a man to be flogged like I was for your sake!"

And soon as he comes from the woods he drives her out of the lodge.

"Be gone! I want no woman in the lodge! Get out and stay out! I won't have a woman sleeping here, for I can't stand the smell of one."

After a while a change came over him. Oxana would sweep the floor, whitewash the walls and set out the crockery all pretty. Everything was soon shining, a joy to look at! Roman could see that she was a good woman, and bit by bit he grew used to her. Nay, more than that, son, he took her unto his heart. And that's the Lord's truth. That was the turn things took for Roman. So, after he got to know his woman well, he says:

"Thanks to the squire for doing me a good turn. I was a fool to have taken that flogging. I see it now there was no evil but e'en good in what was wanted of me!"

After some time went by—I wouldn't know how long 'twas—Oxana laid down on a bench and started moaning. By evening she seemed to be real bad. Waking next morning I heard a low whimperin' and thought to myself—a baby has been born. Sure enough there was a baby.

But the little baby did not live long in this wide world, not longer than from morn till evening. The whimpering stopped.... Oxana took to weeping bitterly, and Roman says to her:

"The baby's gone, and soon as it's gone there is no call to fetch the priest. We'll bury the little one under the pine."

That's the way Roman spoke, and more than that, it was just what he did. He dug a little grave and buried the child. See that old tree stump there, charred by lightning? That's what be left of the pine under which Roman buried the little one. And what I'll tell you, son, is that to this day soon as the sun sets and the evening star rises in the sky over the forest, a birdie can be seen fly in' and twitterin' over the grave squeakin' so sad that it breaks the heart. That's the wee unbaptised soul that's beggin' for a cross to be put on the grave. Men that know and are book-learned say that if a cross is put up, the soul will not fly over it any more.... But we who live in the woods are ignorant. The soul goes on flyin' and complainin'. All we can say is—"Go away, poor soul, we can't do anything for you!" It starts weepin' and flies off, but then flies back again. I can't tell you, son, how sorry I am for that poor soul!

Oxana got well again, and she'd go to the little grave, and sit by it, and weep so loud that the forest shook with her sobs. She took the baby's death very much to heart, but Roman did not, he was only sorry for Oxana. He would come from the woods, stop in front of Oxana, and say:

"Stop crying, foolish woman. What's there to cry about? We can have a second, if the first died, and a better one. For all I know the dead child was not mine. That's what folk said. And when another comes, I'll know I'm the father."

Oxana hated such talk. She would stop crying and get to yapping bad words at him. But Roman was not angry with her.

He'd only ask: "What are you yapping at me like that for? I said I did not know and nothing more. I knew nothing about you before our marriage, only that you did not live in the woods, but in the wide world, among people. So how am I to judge? Now you do live in the woods. That's good. But let me tell you that when I went to fetch the old midwife Fedosya from the village, she said to me: 'Look, Roman, hasn't that baby come too soon?' 'How am I to know if a baby comes too soon or not?' I asked her. But you had better stop hollering 'cause I can lose my temper and give you a good beating."

After scolding Roman some more Oxana would stop.

Sometimes she bawled him out or hit him on his back, but when Roman's own anger was up she grew quiet—she was afraid. She'd cuddle to him, put her arms around him, give him a kiss and look into his eyes. Roman'd be sure to soften. 'Cause, son, you might not know it, but I who am an old man, though I've never been wed, have seen a thing or two. And let me tell you that a young wench's kisses are sweet enough to soften the surliest man. Oh! I know what these wenches are like! And Oxana was a buxom wench, such as you won't find nowadays. The wenches now, I tell you, are not what they used to be in my day.

One day a trumpet sounded in the forest. Tra-ta, tara-tata-ta it went ringing, real merry 'twas. I knew not what it meant, for I was just a mite. I saw the birds flushing from their nests, a hare run for his life with ears laid back, and me thinks—'tis some strange beast a-hollerin'. But 'twas no beast, 'twas the squire come riding his mount—and blowing his trumpet. Behind him rode his huntsmen, with dogs on leashes. In his blue tunic Opanas Shvidki rode right back of the squire. Opanas was sure the handsomest of the men. He wore a hat with a gold-embroidered crown. His horse frisked, his gun gleamed behind his back, and slung over the shoulder was his bandore. The squire had a soft spot for Opanas, 'cause he played the bandore well, and was a master, too, at singing songs. Opanas was a fair lad too. The squire was nothing to him in looks. He was bald, his nose was red, and though he, too, had a merry twinkle, 'twas nothing like the sparkle in Opanas's eyes. Opanas would give me a look—and I wanted to laugh, though no maid was I, mind ye, just a laddie. Twas said that Opanas's fathers and grandfathers were Zaporozhye Cossacks who belonged to the free Sech. These Cossacks be all handsome, slick and dashing fellows. Just think, son, 'tis one thing to dart across the plains with a lance, and another to fell trees with an axe....

I ran out of doors. Just then the squire drew up at our lodge together with his men. Roman came out to welcome the squire. He held the stirrup as the squire dismounted and greeted him.

"Hope you're well!" said the squire.

"I'm sure well, thank you. Why shouldn't I be well?" replied Roman. "And what about yourself?"

Roman was not one to make up to the squire. The men laughed at his words, and the squire joined in.

"Thank goodness, you're well," said the squire. "And, pray, where is the missis?"

"Where she ought to be! In the house, of course."

"We'll go inside then," decided the squire, and turning to his men commanded: "Lay a carpet on the grass, and get out the refreshments and drinks, for we want to wish the young couple happiness."

And now the squire, Opanas Shvidki, and Roman, who was hatless, went into the house. Bogdan, the squire's head huntsman and most trusted servant, followed behind. Bogdan was a servant the like of which you will not find nowadays. He was an old man, strict with the menials under him, but crawled on his belly like a dog before the squire. The squire was all he had in the world. It was said that when Bogdan's father and mother died he wanted to get married and asked the squire to allow him to farm a plot, but the old squire would not hear of it. He made Bogdan man-nurse to the young master who'd be to him, he said, father, and mother, and wife, all in one. Twas Bogdan then that reared and cared for the present squire when he was a little boy. From Bogdan the squire first learned to ride a horse and to shoot. When the young master grew up he became the squire of the manor. Old Bogdan followed him around like a cur. To tell the truth, many were the curses heaped by the people on Bogdan for his severity and many were the tears shed because of him. He did the squire's bidding and took no pity on anyone... At a word from the squire could he do away with his own father.

The little lad that I was, out of curiosity, I slipped in after them into the house.

I now saw the squire standing in the middle of the room, stroking his moustaches and chuckling. Roman was right there, too, shuffling from one foot to another, crumpling his cap in his hands. Opanas stood a bit apart, leaning with his shoulder against the wall. He had a dark and frowning look, poor fellow, like that young oak in the storm now brewing.

The three of them turned to Oxana. Bogdan alone had dropped down on a bench in a corner and sat there, with head hung, a-waiting the squire's biddin'. Oxana drew away into a corner at the stove, lowered her eyes, and turned as red as that poppy growin' twixt the barley. She sensed misfortune, knowin' that she would be the cause of it. Let me tell you, son, that when three men have their eye on one wench, no good will come of it. There'll be a fight, if not worse. I know it well, for I have seen it happen.

The squire laughed: "Well Roman, my fellow, did I get you a good enough wife?"

"I'd say she's as good a wench as any," Roman replied.

Opanas glanced at Oxana and muttered under his breath.

"Yea, quite a wench! But too bad 'tis a fool that got her for a wife!"

Roman heard what he said and turned to face him.

"Pray, Opanas sir, why do you take me for a fool, I'd like to know."

"I take you for one," Opanas retorted, "'cause you're not smart enough to protect your wife."

See what Opanas hinted at? The squire stamped his foot in anger. Bogdan shook his head. Roman thought a while, lifted his head, and glanced at the squire.

"What need be there to protect her?" he asked Opanas without taking his eyes off the squire's face. "Except for the beasts, she's got nothing to fear. Tis only our

gracious squire that comes our way now and then. Against whom then must I protect my wife? Don't ye go taunting me, ye devil of a Cossack, or I'll catch ye by that forelock of yours."

The two men would have come to blows. But the squire stopped 'em. He stamped his foot and they fell silent.

"Keep your mouths shut, you rascals," he cried. "We hadn't come all the way here to start a fight. We came to wish the young people happiness, and to shoot grouse in the marshes. Come on out!"

The squire turned on his heels and walked outdoors. His huntsmen had a spread of refreshments ready under a tree. Bogdan followed the squire out of the house and Opanas stopped Roman in the entry for a word with him.

"Now, don't ye be mad at me, brother," said the Cossack Opanas. "But listen to what I have to say to you. You saw me beg the squire on my knees and kiss his boots so that he would give me Oxana to wed. Well, let's forget that. You were wed by the priest and so it must be. But I'd hate to see that cruel devil of a squire make sport of both of ye again. None can know of the sadness in my heart.... I'd rather put a bullet through her and him, and see them lie in the damp earth, than bed together."

"Ye haven't gone out of your mind, Cossack, have ye?" Roman asked.

I did not catch what Opanas replied, for they both spoke in a low voice, but I saw Roman give the other a friendly slap on the shoulder.

"What evil and cunning folk walk the earth!" remarked Roman. "Living in the woods as I do, Opanas, I know nothing of such goings on. And you, squire, are playing a dangerous game!..."

"Now get you along," said Opanas to him, "and take care not to give away that you know anything, above all to Bogdan. That cur is sly enough to outsmart you any time. And see you don't drink too much of the squire's liquor. If he decides to stay behind and sends you off with his men, take them as far as the old oak-tree, show them the round-about way and tell them you will take the short-cut—and return as fast as you can."

"Good!" said Roman. "And if I go, I won't load my gun with small shot but with the buck-shots we use for hunting the bear."

When Roman and Opanas came out, the squire had already made himself comfortable on the carpet. He asked for the wine-flask and drinking cup into which he poured out some brandy and handed it to Roman. It was a dandy flask and drinking cup that the squire had and the brandy was even better. You downed one cup and your heart glowed, you downed a second, and your heart frisked in your breast, and if a man was not accustomed he would be sprawling under the bench after a third when there was no woman to get him into bed.

Oh, I tell ye, the squire was a wily one! He wanted to get Roman dead drunk but there was no such brandy as could do that to Roman. Roman drained one cup filled by the squire, another and then a third. But it only made his eyes gleam dangerous like a wolf's, and his moustaches twitch.

The squire grew angry.

"Look at the bastard! He swills brandy without batting an eyelid. Another one with that much brandy in him would have been weeping a long time ago. And this one, my good folk—why, he's laughing!"

This devil of a squire knew full well that once a drunken man got to the point of weeping he would drop his head on the table soon. But this time he had the wrong man!

"And why, pray, should I be weeping?" asked Roman. "Surely that would not be a proper thing to do—to bawl like a woman when my gracious squire comes to wish me happiness! Thank the Lord, I have nothing to shed tears about, let my enemies shed tears...."

"Does that mean you're well pleased?" asked the squire.

"So I am. Why should I be displeased?"

"Have you forgotten how we urged you into marriage with a whip?"

"I couldn't forget that! But I tell ye I was a fool then. I knew not what was bitter and what sweet. The whip was bitter and I liked it better than the woman. But now I must thank you, sir, for teaching a fool to know the sweetness of honey."

"Very well," replied the squire. "Then it's your turn to do me a service. Guide my men to the marshland to shoot plenty of game—and don't fail to bring some woodcock."

"When do you want us to start out?"

"After a couple of more drinks, and when Opanas sings for us. Then off you go!"

Roman looked at the squire and said:

"It'll be tough going. The day's on the wane. It's a long ride to the marshland, and with the way the wind's whistling there's sure to be a storm. Small chance we have of shooting a watchful bird like the woodcock."

By now the squire was tipsy himself, and at such a time his temper was quick to rise. He heard his men say in an undertone—"Roman is right about the storm coming on"—and flew into a rage. He brought his drinking cup down angrily, raised his eyes and all fell silent.

Opanas alone did not get frightened. He came forward with his bandore and while tuning it said with a sidelong glance at the squire:

"Surely, sir, you won't act against your better judgment and send the men to shoot grouse into the storm at so late an hour?"

He was bold right enough! Of course, the others were in fear of the squire—they were his chattels. But Opanas was a free man, him being of Cossack descent. He was brought to these parts by an old Cossack bandore player from the town of Uman in the Ukraine. The folk there, son, had been rioting. And the Cossack's eyes were gouged out, his ears slashed off and he was sent to wander in the wide world. The boy Opanas was his guide. And thus they went from one town and village to another, until one day they showed up at the manor of the old squire. The old squire was fond of songs, and he let them remain in his household. When the bandore player died, Opanas was kept on the manor. He pleased the new lord. And he stood from Opanas a boldness for which he'd flay another's skin.

Now, too, at first what Opanas said angered the squire and it seemed like he would hit him, but he only said:

"You're a smart enough fellow, Opanas, to see that if you stick your nose into an open door you're likely to get it slammed...."

Opanas was quick to guess his meaning. He answered him in the words of his song. Oh, and if the squire was quick enough to catch the meaning of the song, the lady of the manor would not be shedding bitter tears over him some hours later.

"Much obliged for the warning," said Opanas, "and now hearken to my song, will you?"

Opanas struck a few chords on his bandore.

He then raised his head and looked into the sky. There an eagle soared and the wind tossed about the dark clouds. He heard, too, the murmur of the pines.

Once again he struck a few chords.

You've missed much, son, 'cause you never heard Opanas Shvidki play, for there is no one who can play like him. The bandore is no special instrument but it wants a skilled hand to make it talk. And Opanas had but to pass his fingers over the strings for the bandore to tell many things—like the soughin' of the pine forest in stormy weather, the wind rustlin' through the underbush in the plains and the withered weeds whisperin' over the high Cossack graves.

Son, you'll never hear such playing! All kinds of people travel to Polesye nowadays. They've been all over the Ukraine—in Chigirin, Poltava, Kiev and Cherkassy. They tell us that the bandore players are gone for good, not heard any longer at the fairs and marketplaces. I have an old bandore hanging idly on the wall of my hut. It was Opanas who taught me to play it, but no one cares to learn from me. When I die—and it'll be soon—the song of the bandore, I tell you, will die with me.

Opanas began to chant his song softly. His voice was not very strong but so taking that it went right to the heart. And the song, to be sure, was one he had composed himself for the squire. I never heard it again, and when afterwards I would ask Opanas to sing it, he refused.

"The man for whom this song was made up," he said, "is not longer in this world."

In his song the Cossack Opanas told the squire what was in store for him. The squire fell to weeping, tears trickled from his moustaches, and yet not a word of the song did he truly understand.

"Ah, there is nothing but a bit of the song that I remember."

The Cossack sang about the squire, the squire Ivan:

*Oh pan, oh Ivan!
Wise pan knows a lot—
He knows the hawk that flies on high
Lills the crows up in the sky.
Oh pan, oh Ivan!
Has the pan forgot:
It happens sometimes, like as not,
A nesting crow can beat a hawk....*

Even as I speak now, son, I hear the song and see the people—the Cossack Opanas standin' with the bandore, the squire seated on the carpet with hung head and weepin', the huntsmen crowdin' around, pokin' each other with their elbows; and old Bogdan waggin' his head.... And the forest murmurs, as it does today, the bandore rings soft and sad, Opanas sings of the lady of the manor weeping over the squire, over Ivan:

*Pani weeps and sighs,
While over pan Ivan a black raven cries.*

Alas, the squire missed the meaning of the song, dried his tears, and said:

"Get going, Roman! Lads, mount your horses! You, Opanas, go along with them. I've had enough of your songs! This was a good one, but ne'er what you sang will come about."

The heart of Opanas softened from the song and his eyes were sorrowful.

"Squire, sir," he said, "old folks in our parts say there is truth in a tale, and there is truth in a song, save that in a tale the truth is like iron grown rusty for 'tis long passed around the world from hand to hand, while in a song it is like gold, proof against rust. That is what the old and wise say!"

The squire brushed his words aside.

"That may be so where you come from, but not in these parts. Be off with you, Opanas, I've had enough of your chatter!"

Opanas lingered about a minute longer, and then all of a sudden dropped on his knees before the squire.

"Look, squire, get on your horse and ride back to your lady. I have a forebodin' of evil."

The squire grew so angry at these words that he kicked the young Cossack as he would a dog.

"Get out of my sight! You're no better than a woman! Get away before you catch it from me!" He then turned to his men:

"What are you standing there for like that, you swine? Am I your lord or not? I'll do to you what my fathers have not done to yours!..."

Opanas rose from the ground, dark as a thundercloud. He exchanged a look with Roman who stood apart from the rest, leaning calmly on his rifle, as though nothing had happened.

Suddenly he smashed his bandore against a tree, and it broke into smithereens and let out a pitiful moan that rang out all through the forest.

"Let the devils in the other world knock sense into a man who refuses to listen to reason!" he said. "I can see, squire, that you have no need of a loyal servant."

Before the squire could reply, Opanas jumped into his saddle and rode off. The other men, too, mounted their horses. Roman threw his gun on his shoulder and shouted to Oxana before he left.

"It's time to put the laddie to bed, Oxana. And make the bed for the squire, too."

When everybody rode away—going down that road over there—the squire went into the lodge. There was only his horse standing tethered under a tree. It was growing dark, blustery, and beginning to rain, just the way it is now.... Oxana put me to bed in the hayloft and made the sign of the cross over me for the night.... And then I heard her sobs.

I was too small to understand what was happening around me. I curled up in the hay, listened for a while to the hum of the storm, and started to doze off.

But just then I heard a man walking near the lodge. He went to the tree and untethered the squire's horse. It snorted, stamped its hoofs, and galloped off into the woods. Soon the sound of its steps died away. Then I heard another horse come down the road, this time to the lodge. The rider jumped down from the saddle and rushed to the window.

"Squire, sir, open the door, quick!" It was old Bogdan's voice. "That rascal of a Cossack is up to some wickedness. He's let your horse out into the woods."

Before Bogdan finished he was seized from behind. Then there was a thud that frightened me.

Now out of the door dashed the squire rifle in hand. But Roman had him in his grip before he left the entry, seizing him by the forelock and throwing him down on the ground....

The squire saw things looked bad for him and pleaded:

"Let me go, Roman boy, surely you remember the good I did to you?"

"I remember, you devil's own squire, the good you did to me and my wife, and I shall repay you for it...."

Opanas was there with Roman, and the squire now turned to him.

"You speak up for me! You said you were my loyal servant, and I loved you as a son."

"Loyal servant, you say? You've driven me away like a dog! You've loved me the way a rod loves the flogged man's back and now you love me the way that back loves the rod! You have not heeded my words when I pleaded with you and entreated you a while ago...."

And now the squire called to Oxana.

"Oxana, you have a kind heart, you speak up for me!"

Oxana came running out of the lodge and cried out desperately:

"Sir, did not I ask you and beg you to spare me, and not to disgrace a married woman? But you cared not. Now you beg me to do something for you. Oh, misery! I know not what to do!"

"Let me go!" cried the squire. "For this all of you will rot in Siberia...."

"You needn't worry about that, sir," Opanas retorted. "Roman will be at the marshland before the others get there, see? As to me, thanks to you, I'm all alone and care little for myself, so that I can go away into the woods with my rifle, gather a jolly band, and lead a merry life. We'll go out on the highway, and once we're in the village we'll make our way directly to the manor house." He now addressed Roman. "Let's carry the squire out into the rain."

And so they did, the squire screamin' and kickin', Roman growlin' like a bear and the Cossack Opanas mockin' the squire.

I was so frightened that I ran to the lodge to be with Oxana. She was sitting on a bench looking as white as a sheet.

The thunderstorm now blew full blast, the forest wailin', the wind howlin' and the thunder crashin'. As I sat on the bench beside Oxana a moaning came from the woods. It was so plaintive that to this day I cannot recall it without a shudder—though it goes many years back.

"Oxana, dear heart," I asked, "who can it be moaning like that in the woods?"

She cradled me in her arms, and rocked me, saying:

"Sleep, sonny, 'tis only the forest murmurs...."

And indeed the forest murmured, murmured louder than ever.

'Twas for another little while we sat. Then I thought I heard a rifle-shot in the woods.

"Oxana, dear heart," says I, "who may that be shooting out of a rifle in the woods?"

The poor thing went on rocking me and repeating:

"Hush, ye laddie, 'tis only the thunder!"

She couldn't stop crying, and she went on pressing me close to her heart, and saying: "The forest murmurs, the forest murmurs, laddie...."

And so I fell asleep in her arms.

Next morning, when I woke up, the sun was shining. Oxana was asleep with her clothes on. It seemed to me that I had dreamed the happenings of the night before.

But I had not dreamed them, not at all. They had happened. When I went out of the house and ran into the woods the birds were a-twitter and the morning dew glistened on the leaves. I came to a bush and there lay two corpses side by side—of the squire and Bogdan. The squire's face was pale and calm, while the head huntsman, grey as a dove, looked stern, as he did in life. And I saw blood on the chest of both.

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"What befell the others?" I asked when the grandfather dropped his head and fell silent.

"Ay, ay! Things turned out just as Opanas said they would. He himself lived long in the woods raidin' the highways and the manor houses with his fellows. As his father before him, it was his Cossack destiny to become a Haydamak. Time and again he dropped into this very lodge—and, mind ye, most often when Roman was away. He'd set for a while, sing a song, and play the bandore, too. But whenever he came with his fellows, Roman and Oxana always made him welcome. However, there was more than that to his visits. When Maxim and Zakhar are here, take a good look at them. I've never dropped a hint to them, but folks as knew Roman and Opanas will tell at once which resembles the one and which the other, though they be grandsons and not sons of them.... Such are the things that I remember happenin' in our pine forest.

"See how loud the forest murmurs—there is sure to be a storm."

III

It was on a weary note that the old man finished his tale. His excitement seemed all spent, fatigue possessed him, he stumbled over his words, his head shook and his eyes teared.

Evening's dark shadows had descended upon the forest and the earth below. The forest around the lodge tossed about like a violent sea; the frowning treetops rocking like the crests of waves in gusty weather.

The dogs' loud barking announced the arrival of their masters. Both forest rangers hurried towards the lodge, and close on their heels, to complete our company, came Motria with the missing cow.

A few minutes later we were seated inside the hut. A fire crackled merrily in the stove, and Motria was getting our supper ready.

Though I had seen Zakhar and Maxim many times before I now eyed them with keen interest. Zakhar was swarthy of face, with brows meeting beneath a low bulging forehead; his eyes had a sullen look though the face bespoke a good humour that goes with robust strength. Maxim's grey eyes, on the other hand, were frank, with a tender light in them; he was in the habit of giving a toss of his curly hair and his laughter was amazingly infectious.

"I bet you've been listening to the old tale about our grandfather," said Maxim.

"So I have!" I replied.

"That's the old man talking again! Old memories come back to him when the forest murmurs loudest. These memories are sure to keep him awake most of the night."

"He's like a child!" Motria remarked as she ladled cabbage soup into the old man's plate.

The old man seemed not to understand that he was the subject of conversation. He indeed now had a senile look; he smiled in a silly way, nodding his head; but his face showed genuine alarm and he listened apprehensively whenever a fresh gust of boisterous wind buffeted the lodge.

It soon grew still in the forest hut. The dying flame of the wick in the crock cast a faint flicker, and the only sound to be heard was a cricket's chirping. But outside the forest stirred with the rumbling of a thousand voices joined in forceful but suppressed clamour, holding grim discourse in the darkness. It was as though a conference was in progress at which a sinister power rallied forces to strike with concerted strength at the puny little lodge in this nook of the woods. At times the hollow rumbling grew in force and intensity. And then the door trembled—as if with an angry hissing someone was bearing upon it with his weight from the outside—and the night wind's shrill and plaintive whistling in the chimney brought a pang to the heart. But when the wild gusts of wind subsided for a while, an even more ominous silence set in before the storm resumed its bluster. It was as though the pines were conspiring to uproot themselves from their native ground, and drift off to some unknown clime upon the fluttering wings of the storm.

I dozed off for a few minutes, but not for long. The wind howled in a pandemonium of sound. At moments the flame in the crock flared bright, lighting up the lodge. The old man sat on his bench fumbling to reach a familiar hand. The expression on the poor old man's face bespoke fright and almost childish helplessness.

"Oxana, dear heart," I heard him mutter plaintively, "who's that moaning in the woods?"

He went on groping for someone in the dark and listened.

"Ay, ay!" he muttered again, "there's no one moanin'. It's only the rumblin' of the storm, only that, and the forest is murmuring...."

Another few minutes went by. And then blue flashes of lightning streaked across the small windows of the lodge outlining the trees in a phantom light—only to be dissolved in the darkness amidst the fretful rumbling of the storm. A blinding flash followed, obscuring for a moment the feeble shivery flame in the crock, and a thunderclap burst through the woods.

The old man again fidgeted on his bench.

"Oxana, dear heart, who may that be shooting in the woods?"

"Sleep, Grandfather, sleep!" came Motria's kind voice from the bunk on the stove. "There he goes again calling Oxana, for it's a stormy night. And he does not remember her being long dead! Oh! Oh my!"

Motria suppressed a yawn, said her prayers, and once again the lodge lapsed into silence—broken only by the rumbling of the forest and the old man's fearful mumblings:

"The forest murmurs, the forest murmurs... Oxana, dear heart!"

Shortly the rain burst into heavy torrents, their tumult deafened the buffeting of the wind and the moans of the pine forest....

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