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NIKOLA ŠUHAJ THE ROBBER

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They went down the edge of the wood bordering the meadow and when they came out on to it, they stood facing the three with fifty paces between them.

Adam Chrepta's heart was beating wildly.

They came up to each other. Nikola shook hands with Jasinko and Sopko. Of Adam he took no notice. Through Adam's head there flashed yesterday's scene in the garden behind Lejbovič's tavern: on the table his father, naked, with stomach opened up, the gentlemen standing round and himself at the fence waving his fist and being dragged back by the gendarmes. Nikola was talking about something with Jasinko. Juraj remained standing at a little distance and, holding his gun ready to shoot, watched the axes of the three men and their every movement.

"Anything going on in the village?"

Jasinko told him about the previous day's visitors from Chust and made fun of the new gendarmierie captain. "Don't stay here, Nikola!" said Juraj. It was almost a scream.

Nikola looked round at the meadow and the bit of wood at their backs. "You're right, let's shelter from the rain." They went into the depths of the wood. First Nikola, behind him Jasinko, then Sopko followed by Adam, and four paces behind them, Juraj with his gun at his hip.

Jasinko looked round to stay the situation and seeing Juraj, sullen and frowning, said with a laugh: "And what are you doing, Juraj, escorting us like a gendarme with a gun?"

Nikola turned round, too, and stopped. He looked laughingly at his brother. Then he ran his eyes over his comrades faces, and nodding towards Adam asked:

"What's he wanting here?"

Adam felt the colour drain from his cheeks. Juraj pressed the gun closer and mixed a questioning gaze on his brother. "He was helping me to fence the hayshed and so he came with us," said Ihnat.

Nikola's merry eyes, his smile and a scarcely perceptible shake of the head replied: Don't do anything silly, Juraj!

The strange procession, like a squad of herded prisoners, set out again on their silent trek, making in the direction of the nut-tree grove.

They stopped on the little clearing in the middle. The small misty rain kept on falling. Through it shone noonday brightness.

Here they sat down. Nikola on the right hand of the semi-circle, then Ihnat, Jasinko and Adam, and on the left, again some steps away, Juraj. The brothers were directly facing each other. Here it was deeply bedded with rustling leaves and full of

dry twigs so that anybody approaching would immediately be betrayed by his footsteps. Nikola was calm.

Not so Juraj. He had an evil foreboding. It was almost a certainty. Like that time in spring when the God of the woods had led him straight to Zvorec to his sick brother. He scented danger. It was all around and pressing in on his body from all sides. And if Nikola didn't feel it with every breath he took, did not observe it in the sharp pressure in the pit of his stomach, it was up to Juraj to take the watchfulness on himself. His eyes and nerves were constantly on guard. Only to hold out! Only not to faint! When they leave it will be possible to rest. Tomorrow. Perhaps for the rest of his life. Only not today!

Jasinko and Ihnat were again speaking about the meeting and the new captain, about what the people were saying to his senseless suggestions, of the talk of the comrades let out of prison. They talked about everything only not about Derbák Derbačok. But Nikola, as if he missed just this subject, in the middle of their talk suddenly turned to Adam.

"Are you sorry about your Father, Adam?" Adam gave a start.

"Of course, I am sorry about him." Nikola gave him a long look.

"Oh well, nothing can be done about it now," he said.

And then in a little.

"I hear you are wanting to get married." "So I am."

"When you do, come and I'll give you something for the wedding."

"The devil you'll give me anything for my wedding!" thought Adam to himself.

Then Ihnat brought water in a cup and began to shave Nikola. Juraj's nerves were stretched to breaking-point. He only saw how the white lather on his brother's face gradually disappeared under the strokes at Ihnat's hand. The rifle on his knee became a living thing and he was acutely aware of the cold touch of the trigger on his fingers. "Should I . . . Now?" thought Ihnat, moving over Nikola's throat with the razor-blade. "It was planned differently, but will such a chance occur again, today?" But when he gave a squint at Juraj and saw his lynx's eyes and the barrel of the gun turned at him as if by chance, he finished shaving him with a calm band. Nikola's soap-lathered face now and again gave Juraj a brotherly smile. My God, thought Adam, how the quarters-of-an-hour fly! Ihnat hadn't dared to risk it. Will the day pass and nothing come of it?

Juraj's nerves could stand the tension no longer.

"Nikola, Nikolka, let's get out of here!" It was the beseechingly impatient voice of a wilful child. His eyes were fixed on his brother's.

But Jasinko opened his double-sack and took the provisions out of it - ewe's milk cheese, onions, Jewish wheaten bread and a bottle of spirits. The choice was intentional: anybody who eats soft white bread and washes it down with spirits will soon be drunk.

They pulled out their jack-knives, ate and drank from the bottle. With the handing out of food their relative positions had changed somewhat. Jasinko and Adam had

moved nearer Juraj and Ihnat Sopku was half a pace behind Nikola. The axe handle was resting on the slope and he was sitting on the blade.

And it was then that it happened.

As Nikola was bending forward for the bottle of spirits at his feet, Ihnat Sopko slowly straightened himself, took the axe into his hands and holding the axe at arm's length, slowly stretched himself.

"Oh my back's aching terribly today somehow." But quick as a flash the axe flew down and the blade cut into the head, the whole back of the neck and head being laid open to the blow.

Juraj fired and jumped to his feet.

Adam seized him by the shoulders from behind. Jasinko made a lunge at his head from the front.

But as Juraj bent back in an attempt to throw off Adam's grasp, the blade missed only scratching his forehead and buried itself, with full force, in his stomach. His bowels protruded.

Juraj fired once again, tore himself free and with open body fled. Jasinko bent down for his gun and shot him at six paces in the back. Juraj fell. For a little he writhed on the ground, clawing at the stones and biting into the earth. They ran back to Nikola determined to finish him off if he should still show any signs of life. But when they turned him over his eyes were already beginning to close.

"Finished . . . The job's done!" ran through their heads. The air was full of the bitter scent of decaying nut-tree leaves. A deep silence reigned. Fine mist was falling. Adam's temples were throbbing madly.