

THE LIPCE PEASANTS FIGHT THE SQUIRE'S MEN

BY W. S. REYMONT

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THE world was still numbed with the cold of night, it was full of a drowsy stillness, and enveloped in chill and glassy mists.

Silence lay over the forests, sharply the cold cut through the air, and a faint glimmer of dawn reddened the tree-tops and fell here and there on the pale snows.

Only from the 'Wolves' Hollows' came the thud of trees falling one by one, the ring of axes and the screech of saws.

They were felling the wood! . . .

More than forty sturdy men had been at work since daybreak. It was as though a swarm of woodpeckers had alighted on the forest, and clung to the trees, and were pecking away now resolutely and furiously. Trees fell one after another, the clear space increased, the overthrown giants of the wood lay prostrate like a field of trodden corn, and only here and there, like stiff thistles, the slender saplings remained — bending down like weeping women over the fallen; here and there half-cut shrubs rustled, or some miserable, dwarfish tree, not touched by the axe, trembled fearfully. And everywhere on the quilts of trodden snow, as though on shrouds, lay fallen trees, heaps of branches, dead tree-tops, and mighty trunks, like stripped and mutilated corpses; while streamlets of yellow sawdust were trickling about through the

snow, as it were the pitiful blood of the forest.

And all round the clearing, as over an open grave, there stood the wood, a serried, lofty, impenetrable mass, like friends, relations, and acquaintances gathered in a throng, bending in anxious silence, repressing a cry of despair, listening as their kinsfolk fell to their death, and gazing, horror-stricken, at the pitiless harvesting.

For the woodcutters advanced unceasingly. They spread out in a broad column, and slowly and silently pushed their way on into the forest — the forest which seemed invincible and blocked their way with a gloomy, lofty wall of serried trunks, and overshadowed them with its hugeness so that they disappeared in the darkness of the branches. Only the axes glittered in the gloom and hewed untiringly; the screech of the saws never ceased even for a little space. Ever and anon some tree tottered, and suddenly, like a bird treacherously caught in the toils, it broke loose from its fellows, beat about with its branches, and fell down, with mortal moan, on the ground — and after it another, and a third, and a tenth. . . .

Huge pines, green with age, were falling; and firs clad in homespun, and spruces with widespread arms, and gray oaks, overgrown with beards of hoary moss — like old men whom thunders

had not crushed and hundreds of years had not broken, till at last the axe laid them low. And many other trees were falling, less noble — who will tell them all by name and number!

The wood was dying with moans, trees were falling heavily like warriors pressed by the foe and pushed one by another, unyielding, sturdy, but beaten down with invincible power, so that they will never even cry out 'O God!' before they fall in a row and sink to death.

Only their moan resounded through the wood, the earth shook unceasingly with felled trees, the axes went on striking, the grating sound of the saws continued, and the rustle of branches stirred the air like a dying sigh.

Hours passed; new swathes of cut trees covered the clearing, and the work did not cease.

The magpies clamored as they clung to the saplings; again, a swarm of rooks would pass, cawing over this field of death, or some forest animal would emerge from the thickets, stop on their fringe and long run its glassy eyes over the tangled smokes of the fires, over the fallen trees — till at last, seeing men, it fled, howling.

And the men worked furiously, eating their way into the forest, like wolves into a herd of sheep, when they overtake it, and it huddles together, and, paralyzed with deadly fear, bleating now and again, waits till the last lamb falls under the fangs of the aggressors.

Only after breakfast, when the sun had risen so high that the rime began to fall in drops, and golden spiders of light crept through the wood, somebody heard a far-off tumult.

'A crowd is coming,' one of the woodcutters said, putting his ear to a tree.

Indeed, the noise came nearer and grew more distinct. From all sides cries were heard, and a muffled beat of many feet, and the time for one short prayer

had scarcely passed before a sledge was dimly seen on the road running from the village. In the sledge there stood old Boryna, and behind him, on horseback, on carts, and on foot, there swarmed into sight a dense crowd of women, boys, and striplings, and, all raising a fierce cry, began to run towards the woodcutters.

Boryna jumped down from the sledge and ran in front of the crowd; behind him others, each where he could squeeze in; some had sticks, some brandished pitchforks threateningly, some were clutching flails with clenched fist, some flashing scythes, and some carried only boughs of trees. As for the women, they had only their nails for weapons, and their shouting. And they all bore down upon the terrified woodcutters.

'Don't cut the wood! Hands off the forest! The wood is ours, we won't let you!' All cried at once, so that nobody could understand what they wanted, until old Boryna came up close to the terror-stricken band of woodcutters and roared so that the whole wood echoed:

'Men from Modlica, from Rzepki, and wherever else you may be from! Hear me!'

There was silence, and he cried again: 'Take with you what is yours and go in God's name; we forbid you to stay, and whoever does n't obey us, will have to do with all our people.'

They did not resist, because fierce faces, pitchforks, flails, and such a multitude of people, all angry and ready to fight, filled them with fear. So they began to talk among themselves and draw together, sticking the axes behind their belts, collecting the handsaws, and gathering for departure — not without some angry growls, however, particularly those of Rzepki, as they were of gentry stock and had had neighbors' quarrels with those of Lipce time out of mind. They cursed them aloud,

then they clattered their axes, they threatened; but, willy-nilly, they had to retreat before such a show of force, the Lipce people shouting at them menacingly, pressing in upon them, and pushing them on into the forest.

Others bustled about the clearing, putting out the fires, and pulling down the piled-up blocks of sawn wood. The women, with old Kozłowa in front, seeing the plank-sheds on the border of the clearing, made a rush for them and began to tear them to pieces and scatter the boards about the woods, so that there should be no trace left.

But old Boryna, seeing the woodcutters had retired so easily, called the farmers together and was persuading them to go in a body up to the Manor at once and tell the Squire that he must not dare touch the wood so long as the Courts of Law did not restore what belonged of right to the peasants. Yet before they came to an understanding, before they had made up their minds what they had best do, the women raised a cry and began to run confusedly away from the sheds, for a dozen horsemen had ridden out of the wood and were bearing down upon them.

The Manor — informed of what had happened — was coming to the rescue of the woodcutters.

The Steward was there on horseback, heading a body of mounted Manor servants. They cantered sharply into the clearing and, overtaking the women, began to lash them with their whips; the Steward, a big man of oxlike stature, was the first to lay about with his lash, and he shouted:

'Lousy thieves! Give it 'em with the whips, boys! Bind 'em, to prison with 'em!'

'Come here! Come round me all, don't let 'em beat you!' Boryna belowered out in his turn. For his people were already scattering in fright.

But at his voice they stopped, and

regardless of the lashes that were raining down on so many, they covered their heads with their hands and ran towards the old man, to rally round him.

'Have at 'em with your sticks! Have at the horses with your flails!' the old man shouted fiercely, and catching up a pole he went foremost for the assailants and struck out at random. Behind him, like a forest swept by a wind of fury, the peasants bore down in serried ranks, shoulder to shoulder, flail to flail, pitchfork to pitchfork, and with one huge shout they rushed upon the Manor servants, belaboring them as best they could till the wood resounded with the blows as though somebody were husking peas with a stick on the floor.

Inhuman shrieks arose, and curses; injured horses neighed piercingly, wounded men moaned, while the thud of beating sticks went on. The snorting breath of wrestling men and wild cries of alarm shook the air of the battlefield.

The Manor men resisted bravely, they cursed and struck out no worse than the peasants, but they became confused at last and began to retire, because the horses, hit with flails, were rearing, screeching, turning, shying. The Steward, perceiving what was happening, gave the spur to his bay horse and jumped right into the middle of a whole crowd of peasants, where Boryna stood; but that was the last that was seen of him, for at once there was a whirr of flails, blows rained down upon him, a swarm of hands caught him on all sides and tore him out of the saddle, so that he flew up into the air like a weed dug up at the root and fell down into the snow under their feet. It was all Boryna could do to shield him and drag him, senseless, into a safe place.

Then, all was in a welter, as when a sudden gust of wind strikes into piles of corn and mixes them up so that there

is only one inextricable tangle, and then rolls them over the field and turns them about through the furrows. A terrible cry arose, and there was such a whirl of confusion that nothing more could be seen but weltering heaps of men on the snow, and fists thrashing furiously. Sometimes a man tore himself out of the struggle and ran like mad, but he soon turned, and, with new shouts and new fury, rushed into the thick of the combat.

They were fighting man to man, and in groups, they wrestled holding on to each other round the shoulders or by the neck, they pressed each other down with their knees, they tore the flesh open; but neither could as yet get the upper hand of the others, because the Manor servants had jumped down from their horses and did not give way by a foot's breadth, for help was constantly arriving for them. The woodcutters had taken their side and were pressing on strenuously. First among them, the men of Rzepki, in a body, grimly and silently, like fierce dogs, had thrown themselves into the fray on their side; and all were led by the forester, who had appeared at the last moment. Being a man known throughout the whole neighborhood for his strength, and quarrelsome besides, and having accounts of his own to settle with the men of Lipce, he rushed about, foremost of all, attacking whole troops of them single-handed. He broke heads with the butt of his gun; he drove them all apart, and lashed out wildly at them so that it was a pity to behold.

Stacho Ploszka went for him to make a stand against him because the peasants were already beginning to run away from him: but the forester caught him by the neck, whirled him round in the air, and threw him down on the ground like a threshed-out sheaf. Stacho fell senseless. Again, one of the Wachniks jumped up to him and dealt

him a blow over the shoulder with his flail, but he got a backhand blow himself with the fist between the eyes, and he only spread out his arms and cried 'Jesus!' and fell to the ground.

At last, Matthew could not hold back any longer, and he, too, rushed at the forester. But though Anthony Boryna's match in strength, and he the strongest man in the village, Matthew did not hold out so much as for a short prayer's time: the forester overcame him, beat him down, rolled him about in the snow and made him run, while he himself made his way towards old Boryna, who in the middle of a group was at grips with a party of Rzepki men. But before the forester had got close to Boryna, the women, with shrieks, had overrun him, caught him with their nails, clutched at his shock of hair, entangled him and bent him toward the ground, and were dragging him about — just as curs, when they attack a sheep-dog, snap at his fur with their fangs and drag him hither and thither.

By this time, the peasants were getting the upper hand. They had got crowded and mixed up like leaves in a whirlwind. Each had seized on his man, and was throttling him and wallowing about with him in the snow, while women were clutching at men from the side and pulling them by the hair.

The uproar, the confusion, the tussle, were such that men scarcely knew those of their own side from the others. But finally the peasants overcame the squire's men. Some of these were already lying about in their blood, and others were tired out and weak by now, and were stealthily running off into the wood. Only the woodcutters fought on with the remnant of their strength, and sometimes even they asked for mercy: but the people being even more infuriated against them than against those

of the Manor, and burning with rage like a torch in the wind, no prayers were heard, none took heed — all struck out with might and main.

They had thrown away their sticks, their flails, their pitchforks, and come to grips closely, powerfully, man to man and fist to fist and strength to strength: they were pressing and smothering each other, tearing each other, and rolling each other about on the ground. Even the shouts had died down, and only hoarse and heavy breathings were heard, and curses, and wrestlings.

A Judgment Day had come which there is no describing. Men had gone almost mad, fury was casting them about and rage carrying them like a horse. Kobus and the woman, Kozlowa, evidently had gone crazy altogether; it was a horror to behold them bleeding, beaten all over, and yet attacking whole bunches of men.

So they still struggled with each other, and cries ever louder rose again on the part of the Lipce peasants, because the pursuit of the flying had begun, and isolated men were now being hit about by small groups. But then, the forester at last shook off the women. Badly hurt, and therefore all the more furious, he began to call his men together, and, seeing old Boryna, he jumped up to him, they caught hold of each other, twisted their mighty arms round each other like bears, and began to wrestle, and drag each other about, and strike against trees, because they had got well into the forest.

Upon this, Anthony, Boryna's son, came running up. He had come late. He only stopped for a moment at the border of the clearing to catch breath, and soon saw what was happening to his father.

He rolled his hawk's eyes about — nobody was looking at them — all were in such combat and confusion that he

knew not one single face. So he retired, stealthily got round, close to where old Boryna was fighting the forester, and stopped a few paces off, behind a tree.

The forester was getting the upper hand. It was hard work. He was mortally tired, and the old man was holding out stoutly. They were down on the ground, both, wallowing about like two fighting dogs, striking the earth with each other's bodies. But the old man was the more often undermost now. He had lost his sheepskin cap, and his gray head was knocking against the roots of the trees.

'Help, men! Help —!'

The forester had just struck Boryna over the head with the butt of his gun. The blood gushed forth; the old man, with one piercing cry, threw up his hands and fell to the ground like a log.

Anthony came to in a moment, cast away his gun, and jumped to his father's side. The old man lay still: there was a rattle in his throat, as of a dying man. Blood was streaming over his face — his head was nearly broken in two — he was still alive — but his eyes were growing dim — he was beating the ground with his heels.

'Father! Jesu mine! Father!' — the son roared in a voice of horror. He caught the old man up in his hands, pressed him to his breast, and began to cry with a voice fit to rend the heavens:

'Father! They've killed him! Killed him!' He howled as a bitch howls when men have drowned her puppies.

Some men who were near him, heard and came up to help. They laid the old man down on boughs, and began to put snow to his head, and tried to help as best they could. Anthony sat down on the ground; he was tearing his hair and kept crying wildly: 'They've killed him! Killed him!' until they thought his wits had suddenly left him.

But then he all at once stopped crying, remembered everything and rushed

at the forester with a terrific shout and with such madness in his eyes that the forester was frightened and ran. But feeling he would be overtaken, he turned sharply round and fired on Anthony point-blank, aiming straight at his breast. By some miracle, however, he did not hit him, he only singed his face, and Anthony fell upon him like lightning.

Vainly did the forester defend himself, vainly did he try to escape, vainly did he even ask mercy in despair and mortal fear — Anthony caught him in his claws like an enraged wolf; lifted him up on high and knocked him about against the trees until the man had drawn his last breath.

And then he seemed to forget himself and no longer to know what he did. He rushed into the midst of the fight, and wherever he appeared hearts sickened with fear, men ran in horror, for he was terrible — splashed with his father's blood and his own, bareheaded, his hair glued to his brow with sweat, livid as a corpse, fearsome and so inhumanly strong that almost by himself he overcame and beat down the rest of those who still resisted, until his own people at last had to calm him and keep him back, for he would have beaten to death all around him.

The fight was over. The men of Lipce, though hurt and bleeding, were filling the wood with joyful shouts.

The women attended those more grievously wounded, and took them to the sledges. There were not a few of them. One of the Klebiaks had a broken arm; Andrew Paczes had a leg smashed and could not walk, and cried with pain when they carried him; Kobus was knocked about so cruelly that he could not move; Matthew was vomiting blood and complaining of his back, and others had suffered no less, so that there was not one who had come out of it whole. But having won the

victory, they did not care about their injuries, but shouted merrily and loudly, and were making ready to go home.

Boryna was laid on a sledge, and the sledge was driven slowly. They feared he would die on the way. He was insensible, and, from under the rags with which his wound was dressed, blood was flowing continually into his eyes, and all down his face. He was as pale as a shroud.

The men walked in loose order, by groups, each making his way as he could, through the wood, for down the middle of the road the sledges with the wounded were passing. One and another moaned and wailed, but the rest laughed aloud, shouting merrily and uproariously. They began to tell stories to each other, to boast of their feats and to mock at the vanquished; here and there songs burst forth, then again a shout shook the forest, and everybody was drunk with triumph, so that some even staggered against trees or stumbled on the roots.

Few felt the blows and the fatigue, for all hearts were elated with the unspeakable joy of victory, all men were full of glee and felt so strong that, let oppose them who would, they would grind him to dust — they would stand up against the world!

They walked on stoutly and noisily, rolling their flaming eyes over the conquered forest, which shook its branches over their heads, rustling sleepily, and dropping dewy rime upon them, as though it were sprinkling them with its tears.

Suddenly, Boryna opened his eyes, and looked at Anthony for a long time as if he did not believe his own eyes, until at last a profound, tranquil joy lit up his face, he moved his lips several times, and whispered with supreme effort:

'Is it you, my son? Is it you?'

And then he fainted again.

LETTERS AT SEA

BY RABINDRANATH TAGORE

From the *Modern Review*, December.
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S.S. MOREA, July 5, 1921.

I KNOW I need not write to you, for I am traveling toward your own nest in the *Venu Kunja*, 'The Bamboo Cottage.' But the steamer is an ideal place for letter-writing. If ever I have the chance to visit Bagdad or Samarkand, I am sure to go out shopping, simply because shopping will have a value for its own sake — it will be so delightfully unnecessary. But it is a humiliation to have to go — to prove that man is compelled to sacrifice his precious leisure and even his good taste to the petty needs of respectability.

In a steamer, I sit down to write letters, not because it is necessary, but because it is natural, and consequently above all needs. Land has its claims upon you in return for its hospitality, but sea has none: it repudiates humanity with a magnificent indifference; its water is solely occupied in an eternal dialogue with the wind — the two inseparable companions, who retain their irresponsible infancy as on the first day of their creation.

Land imposes on us our missions of usefulness, and we have to be occupied with writing lectures and textbooks; and our guardians have the right to rebuke us when we waste good paper in making literary paper-boats. But the sea has no inspiration of moral obligation for us; it offers no foundation for a settled life; its waves raise their signals and have only one word of command: 'Pass on.'

I have observed, on board a steamer, how men and women easily give way

to their instinct of flirtation, because water has the power of washing away our sense of responsibility; and those who on land resemble the oak in their firmness behave like floating seaweed when on the sea. The sea makes us forget that men are creatures who have innumerable roots, and are answerable to their soil.

For the same reason, when I used to have my dwelling on the bosom of the great river Padma, I was nothing more than a lyrical poet. But since I have taken my shelter at Santiniketan I have developed all the symptoms of growing into a schoolmaster, and there is grave danger of my ending my career as a veritable prophet! Already everybody has begun asking me for 'messages'; and a day may come when I shall be afraid to disappoint them. For, when prophets do appear unexpectedly to fulfill their mission, they are stoned to death; and, when those whom men warmly expect to be prophets fail to act their part to the end, they are laughed to extinction. The former have their compensation; for they fulfill their purpose, even through their martyrdom. But for the latter, their tragic end is utter waste; it satisfies neither men, nor gods.

Who is there to save a poet from such a disaster? Can anybody give me back my good-for-nothingness? Can anyone restore to me the provision with which I began my life's journey to the realm of inutility? One day I shall have to fight my way out of my own reputation; for the call of my Padma River still comes