

Pan Tadeusz

by

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(continued from the April 2012 issue)

Book Nine

The Battle

Argument:

On the perils resulting from disorderly encampment. Unexpected relief. The sorry plight of the nobility. The almsman's visit, a portent of rescue. Major Plut's excessive gallantry brings down a storm on his head. A pistol shot, the signal for battle. Baptist's exploits, Matthias' exploits and perils. Watering Can's ambush saves the Manor. Cavalry reinforcements, assault on the infantry. Tadeusz's feats of valor. The leaders' duel cut short by an act of treachery. The Chief Steward tips the balance of the battle by a decisive maneuver. Gerwazy's bloody exploits. The Chamberlain, a magnanimous victor.

Translated by Christopher A. Zakrzewski

So soundly did the nobility sleep that neither the light of the lanterns nor an incursion of several dozen men roused them from their slumber. The intruders pounced on them even as the harvestman spider drops from the wall on a drowsy fly: scarcely has the fly time to emit a buzz when the grim assassin envelops it in its long legs and throttles the life out of it. The nobility slept more soundly than any fly; no one so much as peeped. All lay as dead, though strong hands seized and turned them bodily like sheaves for the binding.

Only Matthias Watering Can who could hold his liquor better than any guest in the district (he was capable of draining two firkins of linden mead before beginning to sway on his feet or slur his speech)—only Matthias, though he had feasted long and slept soundly, showed any sign of life. He opened one eye. Horrors! What a sight! Two frightful faces, each sporting a pair of whiskers, leaned directly over him. He could feel their breath on his cheeks, feel their long whiskers brushing his lips. Two pairs of hands whirred like wings over his body. Panic-stricken, he tried to bless himself, but he found his right hand pinioned to his side. He tried to move his left arm. Alas! The phantoms had swathed him up like a newborn babe. More frightened than ever, he shut his eyes and lay

still, holding his breath. His blood ran cold; you would have sworn he was dead.

But Baptist sprang up to defend himself. Too late! They had constrained him by his own belt. Nothing daunted, he curled himself into a ball and flipped onto his feet with such force as to come crashing down on the breasts of his sleeping companions. Rolling over their heads, he began to toss about like a pike on a sandy shore, all the while roaring like a bear, for he had a lusty pair of lungs.

“Treachery!” he bellowed. Instantly the awakened throng picked up the refrain, “Treachery! Assault! Treachery!”

Their cries of alarm echoed all the way to the hall of mirrors where the Count, the Warden, and the jockeys slept. Gerwazy awoke and tried to break free; but he was bound and stretched upon his rapier. Looking up, he saw by the window a band of armed men clad in green uniforms and short black shakos. One of them, girt with a sash, was directing the ruffians with the point of his sword. “Bind them! Bind them!” he whispered. On the floor all around, the jockeys lay trussed up like sheep. The Count was sitting up, unbound but disarmed. Two rascals with gleaming bayonets stood over him. Gerwazy recognized them at once. Muscovites!

But the Warden was no stranger to such straits. Many a time had he found himself bound hand and foot and always he had managed to set himself free. Being uncommonly strong and resourceful, he had ways of bursting his bonds; and so, contriving to save himself, he shut his eyes and pretended to sleep, all the while stretching his arms and legs by degrees. He breathed in, and shrank his belly and chest to smallest size. Like a molting snake drawing its head and tail into itself, he proceeded to tense and relax his body in rhythmic succession. Thus did Gerwazy the long become short and stout. The bonds began to stretch and even to creak. But no use; they refused to snap. Dismayed and ashamed, he turned over, buried his face in the ground and, shutting his eyes, lay still as a log.

A battery of drums rolled, slowly at first, then steadily faster and with greater insistence. At this signal the Muscovite officer left the Count and his jockeys confined under guard in the great hall. The rest of the nobility he led under escort to the manor house where another company of yagers stood waiting. To no avail did Baptist sulk and squirm.

The staff officers were stationed in the courtyard. Among them was a large throng of armed noblemen, including the Podhajskis, Birbaszes, Hreczechas, and Biergels, all friends and kinsmen of the Judge. They had

received word of the raid and come to his aid; the more willingly as they had long had a bone to pick with the men of Dobrzyn.

Who had summoned the Muscovite battalion from the villages? Who so quickly mustered the gentry from the neighboring settlements? Was it the Assessor? Was it Jankiel? All sorts of rumors made the rounds, but no one knew for certain, either then or later.

By now the sun had risen. Blood red, dull-edged, and rayless, it glowed among the murky clouds like a horseshoe in the smithy's coals. From the east a stiff wind blew up, driving the racks like jagged lumps of ice. Each passing cloud sprinkled a chilly drizzle. No sooner did the pursuing wind dry the rain than another heavy moisture-laden cloud scudded up; and so by turns the day was cold and wet.

Meanwhile, the Major ordered his yagers to haul down logs from the woodpile by the house and hew out semicircular notches along their length. This done, he bade them thrust in the captives' legs, place another log on top, and nail the ends together so that the two beams clamped down on their ankles like the jaws of bulldog. Finally, the Major had the prisoners' hands bound behind their backs with cords. To add to the nobility's torment, he had his men strike off their caps and tear off their cloaks, robes, and even their taratalkas and tunics. Teeth chattering in the growing cold and rain, the nobility sat ranged in rows, confined in the stocks; to no avail did Baptist sulk and squirm.

Neither the Judge's interposition on the nobility's behalf, nor Sophy's tearful appeals, nor Telimena's pleas for clemency had any effect. True, Captain Nikita Rykov felt moved by the entreaties, for even though he was a Muscovite, he was a decent fellow at heart. But what could he do? Major Plut was a man to be obeyed.

The Major, a Pole by birth, hailed from the village of Dzierowicz. Christened Plutowicz (or so it was rumored), he had converted to Orthodoxy and russified his name to Plut; and a scoundrel he was indeed, as so often happens when Poles turn renegade in the service of the Tsar. All this time he stood by, hands on his hips, pipe in his mouth, turning up his nose at the people bowing before him. At last, registering a surly reply with a thick plume of smoke, he stalked off to the house.

Meanwhile, the Judge continued to mollify Rykov. Taking the Assessor aside, he consulted with him as to how they might settle the matter without resort to court; above all, he wished to forestall any intervention by the authorities.

"Sir!" said Captain Rykov, approaching Major Plut. "What use are all these prisoners? Shall we drag them before the court? Much grief it will inflict on the nobility, and there's not a kopeck in it for us. Come now, Major, we had better settle the matter here and now. The Judge will repay us for our trouble, and we shall simply say we popped in for a visit. This way the goat will be safe and the wolf satisfied. Remember the Russian saw, 'All's possible that's prudently done.' Or this one, 'Broil your portion on the Emperor's skewer.' Or this one, 'Harmony's better than discord.' Come, sir, tie a good knot and stick the ends in the water. We'll make no report, and no one will be the wiser. 'God made hands to be greased.' Now there's a Russian saw!"

But the Major rose to his feet and snorted with anger. "Rykov!" said he. "Have you gone mad? This is the Tsar's service, and service isn't chumship. Stupid old Rykov! Have you taken leave of your senses? 'Release these troublemakers' in times of war like these! Hah! You Polish lords! I'll teach you rebellion! Hah! You rascally noblemen of Dobrzyn! I know you well! Let the scoundrels enjoy a good soaking! (And looking out the window, he gave out a roar of laughter.)

Why, that same Dobrzynski sitting there with his coat on—hey, you there, tear his coat off!—picked a quarrel with me last year at the masquerade ball. Who started it? Why, him of course, not me! 'Show the thief the door!' he yelled, as I was engaged in a dance. Being then under suspicion of pilfering from the regimental till, I was greatly put out. Anyhow, what business was it of his? There I was dancing the mazurka when he shouts 'Thief!' behind my back, and the nobility chorus 'Hear! Hear!' after him. Insulted me, see? Now I have the rascal in my clutches. 'Hey, Dobrzynski!' I says to him. 'So the goat comes to the cart, eh? Now you'll see what's what, eh Dobrzynski? You're in for the switch.'"

And, bending over, Plut whispered in the Judge's ear:

"So, Judge, if you want to get off lightly, it'll run you a cool thousand rubles per head, in cash. A thousand rubles, Judge; that is my final word."

The Judge tried to bargain with him, but the Major refused to listen. Once again he began to stride up and down the room, trailing thick clouds of smoke like a rocket or firecracker. The women went begging and weeping after him.

"Major!" said the Judge. "So you take the matter to court. Where's the gain? No battle was fought. No blood spilt. So they helped themselves to chicken and smoked goose. All right, then, they shall make restitution

according to the law. I will not lodge a complaint against the Count. A neighborly squabble! That is all it was.”

“Ever read the Yellow Book?” asked the Major.

“What yellow book?”

“Better than your Book of Statutes,” Plut replied. “Full of words like ‘Siberia,’ ‘gallows,’ ‘noose,’ and ‘knout,’ aye, the book of martial law, which stands proclaimed throughout Lithuania. Your courts are worthless now. According to the wartime decrees, your prank will earn you a stint of hard labor in Siberia at the very least.”

“I shall appeal to the Governor,” retorted the Judge.

“Appeal to the Emperor if you like,” said Plut. “You know very well that when the Tsar consents to affirm a sentence he is as likely to double the penalty. So, by all means, Judge, launch an appeal. If need be, I shall find something to pin on you too. That spy Jankiel, whose movements the authorities have long been watching, is a tenant of yours, bides in your tavern, eh? If I cared to, I could arrest the lot of you on the spot.”

“Arrest me?” said the Judge. “You would dare? Without orders!”

Just as their exchange was turning into a lively dispute, a new guest drove into the courtyard. A bizarre, tumultuous entrance! Announcing the cortege like a ceremonial runner came an enormous black ram, its brow bristling with four horns. One pair was hung with bells and curled about its ears; the other pair stuck out sideways with small jangling brass balls tied to the ends. After the ram came a herd of cattle, followed by sheep and goats; and behind these rolled four heavy-laden ox-wagons.

There could be no mistaking the arrival of the almsman priest. The Judge, knowing his duty as host, stood at the door to greet the guest. The almsman rode the leading wagon. His face was half-hidden by his hood; but they soon recognized him when, riding past the prisoners, he turned to them and made a sign with his finger. Equally easy to recognize was the driver of the second wagon: old Matthias, the Switch, disguised as a rustic. The nobility raised a cheer as soon as he hove in view. But he only said, “Stupid fools!” and silenced them with a wave of his hand. The Prussian, clad in a threadbare capote, drove the third wagon, while Zan and Mickiewicz brought up the rear in the fourth.

Meanwhile, seeing the dire straits of the Dobrzyn nobility, the Podhajskis, Isajewicz, Birbaszes, Biergels, Wilbiks, and Kotwicz, felt their old animosities cool. Though terribly prone to ructions and quick to take up

the cudgels, the Polish nobility are not vindictive. And so, running over to Matthias, they sought his advice. He marshaled the entire host around the wagons and bade them wait.

Meanwhile the Bernardine entered the house. Though he still had on his old habit, he was barely recognizable; so much had his demeanor changed. Normally somber and pensive, he now bore his head high, and his face beamed like a jolly mendicant friar’s. Before speaking, he gave out a long, hearty laugh:

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Good morning! Good morning! Ha! Ha! Splendid! Well done! Some hunt by day, but you, officers, hunt by night. A fine bit of hunting! I have seen your game. Oh, pluck ’em; pluck ’em, I say! Peel the skin off ’em! Put the bit in ’em; our nobility’s a restive steed. Major, I congratulate you for bagging the young Count. A plump morsel! Moneybags! A man of pedigree! Do not let him out of the cage without having him cough up three hundred ducats. And while you’re about it, spare three groats for my abbey and me, for I am always praying for your soul. As I am a beadsman, I give serious thought to the state of your soul. Does not death snatch even staff-officers by the ear? As Baka wrote, ‘Death rends purple by the yard, thrusts lustily at satin, snips linen as handily as she clips heads, cowls, and army serge.’ Aye, Old Mother Death’s an onion, says Baka. ‘She wrings tears from the eyes and snatches all to her bosom. None is spared, nor sleeping tot, nor carousing sot.’ Aye, Major, today we swill, tomorrow we rot. Nothing is ours but that which we gulp down today. Judge, is it not time we broke our fast? I take my seat at the table and bid you all join me. Major, what say you to beef collops and gravy? Lieutenant! What’s your idea? A bowl of punch perchance?”

“Indeed, Father,” agreed the officers, “high time we ate, and drank the Judge’s health!”

The household gaped at Robak, wondering whence came this new bearing and show of mirth. The Judge issued orders to the cook. They brought in the beef, bottles, punch, and sugar. Plut and Rykov pitched into the victuals with such gusto that within half an hour they had dispatched two-dozen collops and half-drained a prodigious bowl of punch.

At last, replete and jovial, lolling back in his chair, Plut pulled out his pipe, lit it with a banknote and, wiping his breakfast from his lips with the tip of a napkin, turned his mirthful eyes to the womenfolk.

“Now, pretty ladies,” said he, “You shall be my desert! By my major’s epaulets, after a breakfast of stewed beef

there is no better relish than a chat with pretty ladies such as yourselves. Eh, pretty ladies? A round of cards? *Vingt-et-un*? Whist? Or what say we dance a mazurka? Eh? By Beelzebub! Strike me dead if I ain't the finest mazurka dancer in the regiment!"

Saying which, he leaned forward closer to the ladies and puffed out clouds of smoke and compliments by turns.

"Yes, let's dance!" cried Robak. "When in my cups even I, a monk, am not averse to tucking up my habit and dancing a mazurka. But look you, Major, here we sit drinking, while your yagers stand frozen to the bone outside. Carousing's carousing! Judge, send out a keg of vodka! The Major will not mind. Let our brave yagers enjoy a tipple!"

"Indeed, why not?" said the Major. "But I don't insist."

"Make it a keg of pure spirits," whispered Robak to the Judge. Thus, while the merry staff tiddled in the house, the troops outside went on a spree of their own.

Captain Rykov drained cup after cup in silence; meanwhile, the Major both drank and paid court to the ladies. At last, itching to dance, Plut threw down his pipe and seized Telimena by the hand; but she promptly tore herself free. So he went up to Sophy and, bowing unsteadily, begged her for the pleasure of a mazurka.

"Hey, Rykov, stop pulling at your pipe! Put it away, I say! You're handy with the balalaika. See the guitar there? Pick it up and play us a mazurka! As Major here, I'll take the top of the dance."

The Captain picked up the guitar and began tuning the strings. Once again Plut tried to entice Telimena into a dance.

"I give you my word as Major, dear lady, Call me no Russian if I lie. May I be a son of a bitch if I lie. Ask around, if you do not believe me. The officers—indeed the whole army—will bear witness that in the Second Army, Ninth Corps, Second Infantry Division, Fiftieth Yager Regiment, there is no mazurka dancer equal to Major Plut. So come, little lady, do not be skittish or I shall have to serve you out, officer-style."

And saying this, he sprang up, seized Telimena by the hand, and planted a loud kiss on her white shoulder. Instantly, Tadeusz leapt up from aside and gave him a resounding slap across the face. Kiss and slap rang out in rapid succession like a brisk repartee.

Thunderstruck, Plut rubbed his eyes. "Rebellion! Rabble rouser!" he roared, pale with rage. And drawing

his sword, he made for Tadeusz with murderous intent. But the priest drew a pistol from his sleeve.

"Shoot, boy!" he cried. "Shoot like the blazes!"

Tadeusz seized the small-bore from his hand, took aim, and fired. The shot went wide, though it stunned and blackened the Major with powder. Rykov leapt up, guitar in hand. "Rebellion! Rebellion!" he cried; and he made a rush at Tadeusz. But at that moment, the Chief Steward, who was sitting across from the two officers, swung back his arm and let fly. The blade whistled through the air between their heads and struck home even before they saw it flash; it hit the bottom of the guitar and went straight through the box. Rykov dodged smartly aside and so narrowly escaped with his life. But that brush with death gave him a terrible fright.

"Yagers! Rebellion! By thunder!" cried he and, drawing his sword, he backed away toward the door.

Suddenly, the nobility burst in from the other side of the room; in through the windows they swarmed, rapiers drawn, with Switch at their head. Plut made a dash for the hall; Rykov followed. They yelled to their soldiers for assistance. Three yagers standing nearest the house responded to the call. Three gleaming bayonets protruded through the open doorway; behind them inclined three black shakos. With Switch upraised, back pressed against the wall, Matthias stood by the door like a cat lying in wait for a rat. He swung a terrible blow. He would have trimmed all three heads from their necks, but weak eyesight or perhaps an excess of *Èlan* caused the old man to execute an untimely swing. Before the necks could show themselves, he smote on the shakos and swept them off, and Switch came clanging down on the bayonets. The Muscovites drew back. Matthias tore after them into the courtyard.

There the confusion was even greater. Soplica's men were vying with one another to free the Dobrzynskis from the stocks. They tore apart the beams. Observing this, the yagers seized their muskets and raced to the scene. A sergeant charged into the midst of the nobility, running Podhajski through, wounding two others, and firing on a third. The nobility took to their heels.

All this happened close to where Baptist sat fastened. Already his hands were free and ready to do battle. Raising himself up, he lifted his arm and, screwing up his long fingers into a ball, brought down his fist on the Russian's back. The resulting blow was so hard that it rammed his forehead into the musket firelock. The hammer clicked, but the blood-soaked powder failed to ignite. The sergeant pitched full length on his musket at Baptist's feet. Bending

over, Baptist seized the weapon by the barrel and began flourishing it like a sprinkling brush. Whirling it round, he smote two privates at once across the shoulders. A corporal caught a resounding blow across the head. The rest of the yagers took fright and backed away from the stocks. Even so did Baptist raise a whirling roof over the heads of his brethren.

They broke open the stocks and cut the captives' cords. No sooner free than the nobility dashed to the almsman's wagons where they helped themselves to rapiers, sabers, broadswords, scythes, and muskets. Matthias Watering Can found two blunderbusses and a bag of shot. Pouring a handful of powder into his own firearm, he passed the other, loaded, to Sack, the son of Baptist.

More yagers appeared on the scene. A fierce melee ensued. The nobility found themselves unable to cut and slash in the press; neither could the yagers fire their muskets. They battled it out hand to hand at close quarters. Steel set on steel, notch for notch. Blades shattered. Bayonet clanged on saber. Scythe broke on sword-hilt. Fist met fist. Arm met arm.

But Rykov made smartly with a number of his yagers to where the barn abutted on the fence. There he took his stand, calling on his soldiers to give up the disorderly combat, for it was plain that unable to use their muskets they were falling beneath the enemy's fist. His own inability to open fire infuriated him, but there was no way of telling the Poles from the Muscovites. "*Stroysya!*" he roared (which means "fall in!" in Russian), but in the din no one heard the command.

Meanwhile, not adept at close-quarters combat, old Matthias fell back. Left and right he flailed, clearing a space for himself. Here, with the tip of his Switch, he sheared bayonet from barrel like a wick from a candle; there, swinging lustily, he cut and jabbed. So wary old Matthias retired to open ground.

A seasoned old Gefreiter, the regimental instructor and grand champion of bayonet combat, pressed him the hardest. Gathering his strength and drawing himself in, he gripped his musket with both hands: right hand over the lock, left hand midway up the barrel. Twisting and turning, he began to leap up and squat down, now dropping his left arm and thrusting forward with his right like a striking snake, now drawing it back and resting it on his knee. Thus, twisting and prancing, he bore down on Matthias.

Taking stock of his adversary's skill, old Matthias rammed his spectacles over the bridge of his nose with his left hand and, grasping his sword with his right, held

it close to his chest. He backed away, eyeing the yager's every movement. He feigned a lurch as if the worse for liquor. The Gefreiter, sure of victory, made a sudden lunge forward. To reach the retreating Matthias he was forced to rise and thrust with his weapon to the full extent of his right arm. Such was the weight and momentum of the musket that he lost his balance. And here Matthias rammed his sword-hilt in between the bayonet and the barrel, swung the musket into the air and, bringing Switch down, took a slice at the Muscovite's arm. Then, swinging lustily again, Matthias split open his jaw. Thus fell the finest *fechtmeister* of all the Russias, knight of three military crosses and four-time medal winner.

Meanwhile, by the stocks, the nobility's left flank was on the verge of victory. There fought Baptist, clearly visible from afar; there, weaving in among the Muscovites, ran Razor. The latter clove torsos, the former cracked skulls. Even as that field-engine, that brainchild of German masters which we call a thresher and yet it doubles as a chaff-cutter, for, having flails and blades, it both cuts the straw and thrashes the grain—even so did Baptist and Razor work as one, wreaking murder on the enemy, one from above, the other from below.

With victory now assured, Baptist quitted the scene and made for the right flank where a new peril threatened Matthias. An ensign, seeking to avenge the Gefreiter's death, was harrying the old man with a long spontoon (something between a pike and ax, now obsolete in the infantry though still used in the navy). The ensign, a young fellow, was weaving nimbly about. Every time his adversary knocked aside his weapon, he stepped out of reach. Matthias tried to fend him off. But his attempts were useless: unable to wound him, he could only parry his thrusts. Already the ensign had grazed his arm. The ensign was even now raising his pike and poisoning himself for the downward stroke, when, Baptist, seeing he would never reach Matthias in time, stopped in mid-stride, swung his weapon, and sent it hurtling with bone-shattering force at the yager's legs. The ensign dropped his halberd and slumped to the ground. Again Baptist charged. A host of the nobility followed; but scattered units of yagers from the left flank pursued them. And so a fresh skirmish began to rage around Baptist.

To save Matthias, Baptist had sacrificed his weapon. The deed almost cost him his life. Two strapping yagers jumped him from behind, seized hold of his hair with their four hands and, bracing their legs, began to tug at it as wherry-men pull on the taut halyards of their vessel. Baptist lashed out backwards with random punches. No

use! He began to keel over. Catching sight of Gerwazy fighting close by, he cried out, "Jesu Maria! Pocketknife!"

Sensing Baptist's plight by the sound of his voice, the Warden whirled round and swung down the blade of his thin sword hard between Baptist's head and the yagers' arms. With cries of terror they recoiled; but one hand remained entangled in the hair, hanging there and spurting blood. Even so, when a young eagle seizes a hare with one set of talons, while anchoring itself to a tree with the other, the hare in a frenzied struggle rips the bird apart, so that one claw remains in the forest, while the other, dripping blood, is borne off into the fields by the hare.

Free once more, Baptist surveyed the ground around him. With hands outstretched, he cast about, shouting for a weapon, all the while raining down a storm of blows with his fists. He held his ground, keeping close to Gerwazy's side. At last, in the młłÈe, he caught sight of his son Sack. The boy was aiming his blunderbuss with his right hand; with his left, he trailed a knotty fathom-long tree mounted with knobs and pieces of flint. (None but Baptist could have lifted the club off the ground.) Seeing his cherished Sprinkling Brush, Baptist seized it, kissed it, leapt in the air for joy, and, whirling the club over his head, promptly imbrued it in blood.

Vain to sing of the wondrous feats he went on to perform; of the havoc he wrought on every side. None would believe the Muse. Neither did anyone believe the old woman who, from her vantage point on Ostra Brama's parapet, saw the Russian General Deyov enter the city of Wilno with a regiment of Cossacks; as they swung open the gate, a townsman by the name of Czarnobacki slew Deyov and put the entire regiment to rout.

Enough to say that everything came to pass just as Rykov had foreseen. The hampered yagers fell before the stronger foe. Twenty-three of them lay dead in the dust, another thirty or so lay groaning, covered with wounds. Many fled into the orchard or the hops. Some ran to the river; others bolted for the house, seeking refuge among the womenfolk.

The victorious nobility dashed off, shouting with joy, some looking for kegs of spirits, others plundering the enemy for booty. Only Robak refused to share in their triumph. Until now he had taken no part in the fighting (canon law expressly forbids a priest to fight), but he had imparted expert advice and made a complete circuit of the battlefield. With a look here, a hand signal there, he

put the fighting men on their mettle and urged them onward. Now he was calling the men to join him in a strike on Rykov and clinch the victory. In the meantime, he dispatched a runner to the Captain, informing him that if the yagers laid down their arms, he would spare their lives. Should they delay, he would have them encircled and cut down to a man.

But Captain Rykov was far from asking quarter. Mustering the half-battalion around him, he cried, "Ready!" With a clatter, the yagers shouldered their loaded muskets. "Aim!" he cried. A long line of barrels flashed upward. "Commence firing!" he cried. One after another, the men discharged their guns. One man fired, another loaded, still another stood at the ready. Bullets whined, firelocks crashed, ramrods thudded home. The line resembled a wood louse with its thousand gleaming legs all beating at once.

But strong spirits had addled the yagers' brains; they aimed poorly and fired wide. Few inflicted wounds, and scarcely one killed his man. Nevertheless, two Matthiases fell wounded and one Bartholomew went down to the dust. The nobility, replying sparingly with their few harquebuses, were eager to attack the enemy with their swords; but the older men restrained them. Meanwhile, bullets whizzed thickly around them, hitting some, driving others back. Before long the musketry cleared the yard, and now there were balls rattling the manor windows.

All this time, Tadeusz had bided indoors where his uncle had ordered him to guard the womenfolk. On hearing the battle take a turn for the worse, he raced outside. The Chamberlain (his valet Thomas having fetched him his saber at last) ran after him. Without delay, he joined the nobility and took his place at their head. Raising his saber, he sallied forward; the nobility followed. The yagers allowed them to approach then raked them with a hail of lead. Isajewicz was killed on the spot. Wilbik and Razor fell wounded. Robak and Matthias, standing at opposite flanks, halted the charge. Dismayed, the nobility looked around and began to fall back. Observing this, Captain Rykov decided to mount a final strike; to sweep the courtyard clean and storm the house.

"Prepare to attack!" he ordered. "Fix bayonets! Quick march!"

Instantly the line of soldiers thrust out their muskets like a rack of beamed antlers. Heads lowered, they marched forward, quickening their pace. Powerless to stem the advance head-on, the nobility fired from the flanks. By now the yagers had cleared half the courtyard.

"Soplica!" shouted the Captain, pointing his sword at the manor door. "Lay down your arms or I shall burn you out!"

"Burn away!" replied the Judge. "I'll fry you in the flames."

O Soplica Manor! If your lime-daubed walls still stand beneath the lindens, if the local nobility still gather there to feast at the generous board of their neighbor, Judge Soplica, then surely they must raise a toast to Matthias Watering Can, for without him the Manor would be no more.

Until now Watering Can had shown little proof of valor. Although he had been the first to break free from the stocks and retrieve his cherished blunderbuss and a bag of shot, yet he had been loath to join the battle. He always insisted he could never trust himself on an empty stomach. And so, going over to a vat of pure spirits standing nearby, he scooped the liquor into his lips with his hand. Only when he had adequately warmed and refreshed himself did he right his cap, seize his blunderbuss from between his knees, ram home a charge, sprinkle the pan, and take a survey of the battlefield. He saw a wave of gleaming bayonets dashing over and scattering the nobility; thither he swam, to meet that wave. Head down, he plunged through the dense patch of grass in the middle of the courtyard where the nettles grew; and there, signaling to Sack with his hand, he lay down in wait.

All this time, Sack had been standing guard with his own loaded blunderbuss outside the house where his beloved Sophy lived. Though she had spurned his attentions, he still loved her dearly and would fain have sacrificed his life for her.

As the yager line marched into the nettles, Watering Can squeezed the trigger. A dozen shards of lead poured out of the wide mouth of the blunderbuss, raking the Muscovite line. Sack unleashed a dozen more. The yagers fell into dismay. Panicked by the ambush, the extended line huddled up into a ball and pulled back, abandoning the wounded to Baptist, who promptly dispatched them with his Sprinkler.

It being now too far to return to the barn, Rykov, fearing a drawn-out retreat, made smartly for the garden fence. Checking his company in their flight, he drew them up again, this time changing the formation. Out of a single line he formed a triangle with its apex projecting forward like a wedge and its two sides extending back to the garden fence. He did well to do this, for just then a

body of horseman came bearing down upon them from the castle.

The Count, confined in the castle until the guards panicked and fled, had ordered his men to mount up. Hearing the detonations of the musketry, he urged his horsemen into the firing line, himself at their head, his steel raised aloft.

"Half-battalion, open fire!" roared Rykov.

A fiery thread ran the length of the line of leveled muskets as the pans ignited and three hundred whining bullets sped from the blackened barrels. Three riders fell wounded, another lay lifeless in the dust. The Count's charger took a bullet and tumbled to the ground, bringing the Count down with him. Gerwazy, seeing the yagers training their guns on the last male representative of the Horeszko clan (albeit on the distaff side), gave out a yell and ran to his aid. But Robak, standing closer, shielded the Count with his body and took a bullet intended for him. Pulling the Count out from under his mount, he led him away, all the while ordering the nobility to spread out, to take better aim, to save ammunition, and to seek cover behind the fence, the well, and the cowshed. As to the Count and his horsemen, a more auspicious occasion would soon present itself.

Tadeusz understood Robak's plans and executed them to perfection. He took cover behind the wooden well and, since he was sober and skilled in the use of a double barrel (he could hit a *zloty* piece tossed in the air), he wreaked slaughter on the Muscovites. One by one, he picked off the officers. With his first shot he killed the sergeant major; then, discharging one barrel after the other, he brought down two more sergeants. Here at a gold braid he aimed, there into the midst of the triangle where the staff-officers stood. Fuming with rage, Rykov stamped his foot and gnawed at his sword knot.

"Major Plut!" he shouted. "What is to become of us? At this rate, there will be no one left to take charge of the men!"

In an access of fury, Plut called out to Tadeusz:

"You, Pole! Shame on you for hiding behind a piece of wood! Are you a coward? Come out in the open! Fight with honor as befits a soldier!"

"Major!" Tadeusz replied. "If you are such a brave knight, why cower inside a ring of yagers? I fear you not! Come out from the fence. Did I not slap your face? I am quite ready to engage you in combat. But why continue with this bloodshed? The quarrel is between us. Let sword or pistol settle the matter. Cannon, rapier, choose your

weapon. Refuse, and I shall pick you off like wolves in a pit!”

With that he fired off another round with such accuracy that he felled the lieutenant standing next to Rykov.

“Major!” whispered Rykov. “Go out and fight this duel! Avenge the earlier slight to your honor. If someone else kills this nobleman, you shall never wash away the disgrace. You must lure him into the open. Since firearms will not do the job, then at least stick him with a rapier. Old Suvorov used to say, ‘What pops is for sops; the trick is to stick ’em.’ So, Major, go out into the field; otherwise, he will pick us all off. See? He’s taking aim again.”

“Rykov, old friend!” the Major replied. “You’re the expert with the blade. Go out yourself, my boy; or I tell you what, I shall send out one of our subalterns. I am Major after all. I cannot desert my soldiers. The command of the battalion belongs to me.”

Hearing this, Rykov took up his sword and stepped boldly out into the open. He called on his men to cease firing then flourished a white handkerchief. They offered Tadeusz his choice of weapon. Upon deliberation, both men agreed on blades. Since Tadeusz carried no foil, they were forced to find him one. Even as they were engaged in this search, the armed Count ran up and interrupted the talks.

“Mr. Soplica!” said he. “With all due respect, it was the Major you called out! But I have an earlier grievance against the Captain here, for it was he who broke into my castle . . .”

“Our castle, you mean!” cut in Protazy from behind.

“He is the one who broke in,” continued the Count. “He and his band of robbers. He—I recognize Rykov—ordered my jockeys bound. Now shall I punish him as I did those brigands on the crag the Sicilians call Birbante-Rocca.”

All fell silent. The firing ceased. The two armies watched as their leaders met on the field of honor. Rykov and the Count advanced, facing sideways, each menacing the other with his right arm and right eye; then, doffing their hats with their left hand, they bowed courteously. (An honorable custom this: the principals exchanging greetings before proceeding to slaughter.) Then, engaging their foils, they clashed. Thrusting right leg forward and flexing the knee, the two knights lunged and parried in turn.

But Plut, seeing Tadeusz directly in front of him, conferred quietly with Gefreiter Gont, the finest marksmen in the company.

“Gont!” he whispered. “See that gallows’ bird over there? Lodge a bullet under his fifth rib and I’ll give you four silver rubles.”

Gont drew back the hammer of his rifle, put his eye to the sights, while his faithful comrades covered him with their cloaks. He took aim, not at the rib, but at Tadeusz’s head. He fired; the bullet struck home—almost! It went clean through Tadeusz’s hat. The youth spun round; at once Baptist made a rush at Rykov. Crying foul, the nobility followed. But Tadeusz shielded Rykov, and the captain, falling back, regained the safety of his ranks in the nick of time.

Once more Lithuania and Dobrzyn went on the attack in a spirit of amicable rivalry. Their old differences put aside, they fought like brothers, each urging on his comrade. The men of Dobrzyn rejoiced at the sight of Podhajski prancing before the yager line and mowing it down with his scythe. “A Podhajski! A Podhajski!” they cried. “Forward, Lithuanian brothers! Hurrah! Hurrah for Lithuania!” The Skoluba clan, seeing the valiant and wounded Razor raise his sword yelled in reply, “A Dobrzynski! A Dobrzynski! Long live Mazovia!” Thus urging one another on, they sallied forth against the Muscovite. Robak and Matthias were powerless to hold them back.

While the nobility mounted this frontal assault on the yager company, the Chief Steward quit the battleground and made for the garden. Protazy padded warily beside him, listening intently to his orders.

In the garden there stood, towering over the fence that formed the base of Rykov’s triangle, an enormous old cheese dryer made of beams lashed crosswise in the shape of a cage. Several dozen gleaming white cheeses lay drying inside it, and all around them swung bundles of drying herbs, sage, blessed thistle, cardoon, wild thyme—in short, the full store of herbs comprising the Steward’s daughter’s domestic pharmacy. The upper structure measured three-and-a-half sazhen across, and the entire thing rested like a stork’s nest on a great pillar of oak, which, being old and half-rotted, leaned at a precarious angle and was in imminent danger of giving out. The Judge had often been advised to dismantle the decaying building, but he always said he would sooner repair it than take it down, or at least erect it elsewhere; as a result, he put off the business to a more favorable time. In the meantime, he had the old pillar propped up with two

supports. Thus buttressed, the unstable structure reared above the fence, overlooking Rykov's triangle.

Armed with stout spear-like poles, the Steward and the Court Usher made their way stealthily toward this cheese house. Through the hemp behind them followed the bailiff mistress and a kitchen boy—a small lad, but strong as they come. On reaching the spot, they thrust their poles into the top of the rotted pillar, then, swinging from the pole-ends, began pulling down with all their might. Even so do wherry-men, thrusting out from the bank with their long poles, heave their grounded vessel into deeper waters.

The pillar gave way with a crack. The dryer tottered and keeled over with a crash on top of the Muscovite triangle, crushing, maiming, and killing the men with its freight of beams and cheeses. On the ground where the yagers had stood lay a mass of timbers, bodies, and snow-white cheeses imbrued in blood and brain matter. Rykov's triangle lay shattered into bits. In no time Sprinkling-Brush was inside it, raining down a storm of blows. Razor flashed. Switch slashed. Still more of the nobility came swarming out of the house; and from the gate the Count set his horsemen on the scattered foe.

Only eight yagers and their platoon sergeant continued to put up a resistance. The Warden made a rush at them. They stood their ground. Nine barrels stood aimed at a point right between the Warden's eyes. Gerwazy charged blindly into the line of fire, whirling Pocketknife in the air. But the watchful priest ran across his path, dropped down, and knocked the Warden's feet from out under him; both men fell to the ground the instant the platoon fired. The fusillade had barely whistled overhead when Gerwazy was up again and diving into the smoke. In a flash he had hewed off two heads. The yagers fled in dismay; but the Warden tore after them, laying into them with the flat of his blade. They dashed across the courtyard. Gerwazy came close on their heels. They ran into the open barn. Gerwazy went after them, disappearing into the darkness, there to resume the battle. Through the open doorway you could hear groans, yells, and a storm of blows. Before long, all was quiet. Gerwazy emerged, alone, his blade dripping with blood.

By now the nobility held the field and were engaged in pursuing, cutting down, and sticking the last of the scattered yagers. Only Rykov remained. He fought on, swearing he would never lay down his arms. But at last the Chamberlain approached and, raising his saber, addressed him in a solemn tone:

“Captain! You will not stain your honor by accepting quarter. Brave, hapless knight! You have given proof of your valor. Give up this useless struggle. Lay down your arms before we disarm you with our swords. Your life and honor are safe. You are my prisoner!”

Won over by the gravity of the Chamberlain's tone, Rykov bowed and surrendered his naked sword, which dripped to the hilt with blood

“Brother Poles!” said he. “My misfortune was in not having a single cannon! Old Suvorov put it well. ‘Remember, comrade Rykov,’ he used to say. ‘Never venture against the Pole without a field-piece!’ What can I say? My yagers were drunk. Plut let them swill. Oh, that Major Plut! He has caused enough mischief for one day. He will answer to the Tsar, for he was in command. As for me, Chamberlain, I will be your friend. ‘The better the shover, the better the lover,’ says a Russian proverb. Aye, Chamberlain! You Poles tussle as well as you guzzle. But, please, no more pranks on my yagers.”

Hearing this, the Chamberlain raised his saber and ordered the Court Usher to announce a general pardon. He bade them tend the wounded, clear the field of the bodies and, after disarming the remaining yagers, take them captive. Long they searched for Major Plut; but he had plunged deep into the nettles and was playing dead. Eventually, he came out of hiding, but only after the battle was well and truly over.

Thus ended the last armed foray in Lithuania.

(to be continued in the next issue)



Reconciliation between the Horeszko and Soplica families, by Michał Andriolli. Public domain.