

КОЛЛЕКТИВ АВТОРОВ

TALES BY
POLISH
AUTHORS

Коллектив авторов

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Tales by Polish Authors

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Of the contemporary Polish authors represented in this volume only Henryk Sienkiewicz is well known in England. Although the works of Stefan Żeromski, Adam Szymański, and Waław Sieroszewski are widely read in Poland, none have as yet appeared in English, so far as the present translator is aware. 'Srul – from Lubartów' is generally considered one of the most striking of Adam Szymański's Siberian 'Sketches.' The author writes from personal experience, having himself been banished to Siberia for a number of years. The same can be said of Waław Sieroszewski; during the fifteen years spent in Siberia as a political exile, he made a study of some of the native tribes, especially the Yakut and Tungus, and has written a great deal on this subject. Stefan Żeromski is also one of the most distinguished modern Polish novelists; several of his books have been translated into French and German.

The translator is under a deep obligation to the authors, MM. Sienkiewicz, Szymański, and Żeromski, for kindly allowing her to publish these tales in English, and to Mr. J. H. Retinger, Secretary of the Polish Bureau in London, for authorising the same on behalf of M. Sieroszewski.

E. C. M. B.

POLISH PRONUNCIATION:

After k, rz = English sh
sz = English sh
cz = English ch
ł = English w
w = English v

BARTEK THE CONQUEROR

HENRYK SIENKIEWICZ

CHAPTER I

My hero's name was Bartek Słowik¹; but owing to his habit of staring when spoken to, the neighbours called him 'Bartek Goggle-Eyes.' Indeed, he had little in common with nightingales, and his intellectual qualities and truly childish *naïveté* won him the further nickname of 'Bartek the Blockhead.' This last was the most popular, in fact, the only one handed down to history, though Bartek bore yet a fourth, – an official – name. Since the Polish words 'man' and 'nightingale'² present no difference to a German ear, and the Germans love to translate Barbarian Proper names into a more cultured language in the cause of civilization, the following conversation took place when he was being entered as a recruit.

'What is your name?' the officer asked Bartek.

'Słowik.'

'Szloik³ *Ach, ja, gut.*'

And the officer wrote down 'Man.'

Bartek came from the village of Pognębin, a name given to a great many villages in the Province of Posen and in other parts of Poland. First of all there was he himself, not to mention his land, his cottage and two cows, his own piebald horse, and his wife, Magda. Thanks to this combination of circumstances he was able to live comfortably, and according to the maxim contained in the verse:

To him whom God would bless He gives, of course,
A wife called Magda and a piebald horse.

In fact, all his life he had taken whatever Providence sent without troubling about it. But just now Providence had ordained war, and Bartek was not a little upset at this. For news had come that the Reserves would be called up, and that it would be necessary to leave his cottage and land, and entrust it all to his wife's care. People at Pognębin were poor enough already. Bartek usually worked at the factory in the winter and helped his household on in this way; – but what would happen now? Who could know when the war with the French would end?

Magda, when she had read through the papers, began to swear:

'May they be damned and die themselves! May they be blinded! – Though you are a fool – yet I am sorry for you. The French give no quarter; they will chop off your head, I dare say.'

Bartek felt that his wife spoke the truth. He feared the French like fire, and was sorry for himself on this account. What had the French done to him? What was he going after there, – why was he going to that horrible strange land where not a single friendly soul was to be found? He knew what life at Pognębin was like, – well, it was neither easy nor difficult, but just such as it was. But now he was being told to go away, although he knew that it was better to be here than anywhere else. Still, there was no help for it; – such is fate. Bartek embraced his wife, and the ten-year old Franek; spat, crossed himself, and went out of the cottage, Magda following him. They did not take very tender leave of one another. They both sobbed, he repeating, 'Come, come, hush!' and went out into

¹ Nightingale.

² 'Człowiek' and 'Słowik.'

³ 'Człowiek' (man).

the road. There they realized that the same thing which had happened to them had happened to all Pognębin, for the whole village was astir, and the road was obstructed by traffic. As they walked to the station, women, children, old men and dogs followed them. Everyone's heart was heavy; but a few smoked their pipes with an air of indifference, and some were already intoxicated. Others were singing with hoarse voices:

'Skrzynecki⁴ died, alas!
No more his voice is heard;
His hand, bedecked with rings,
No more shall wield the sword,'

while one or two of the Germans from Pognębin sang 'Die Wacht am Rhein' out of sheer fright. All that motley and many-coloured crowd, – including policemen with glittering bayonets, – moved in file towards the end of the village with shouts, bustle, and confusion. Women clung to their 'warriors' necks and wept; one old woman showed her yellow teeth and waved her arms in the air; another cried: 'May the Lord remember our tears!' There were cries of: 'Franek! Kaśka! Józek! good-bye!' Dogs barked, the church bell rang, the priest even said the prayers for the dying, since not one of those now going to the station would return. The war had claimed them all, but the war would not give them back. The plough would grow rusty in the field, for Pognębin had declared war against the French. Pognębin could not acquiesce in the supremacy of Napoleon III, and took to heart the question of the Spanish succession. The last sounds of the bell hovered over the crowd, which was already falling out of line. Heads were bared as they passed the shrine. The light dust rose up from the road, for the day was dry and fine. Along both sides of the road the ripening corn, heavy in the ear, rustled and bowed in the gentle gusts of wind. The larks were twittering in the blue sky, and each warbled as if fearing he might be forgotten.

At the station there was a still greater crowd, and more noise and confusion! Here were men called in from Krzywda Gorna, Krzywda Dolna, from Wywłaszczyniec, from Niedola, and Mizerów. The station walls were covered with proclamations in which war was declared in the Name of God and the Fatherland: the 'Landwehr' was setting forth to defend menaced parents, wives and children, cottages and fields. It was evident that the French bore a special grudge against Pognębin, Krzywda Gorna, Krzywda Dolna, Wywłaszczyniec, Niedola, and Mizerów. Such, at least, was the impression produced on those who read the placards. Fresh crowds were continually assembling in front of the station. In the waiting-room the smoke from the men's pipes filled the air, and hid the placards. It was difficult to make oneself understood in the noise, for everyone was running, shouting, and screaming. On the platform orders were given in German. They sounded strangely brief, harsh, and decisive.

The bell rang. The powerful breath of the engine was heard in the distance coming nearer, – growing more distinct. With it the war itself seemed to be coming nearer.

A second bell, – and a shudder ran through every heart. A woman began to scream. 'Jadom, Jadom!' She was evidently calling to her Adam, but the other women took up the word and cried, 'Jadą.'⁵ A shrill voice among them added: 'The French are coming!' and in the twinkling of an eye a panic seized not only the women, but also the future heroes of Sedan. The crowd swerved. At that moment the train entered the station. Caps and uniforms were seen to be at all the windows. Soldiers seemed to swarm like ants. Dark, oblong bodies of cannon showed grimly on some of the trucks, on others there was a forest of bayonets. The soldiers had, apparently, been ordered to sing, for the whole train shook with their strong masculine voices. Strength and power seemed in some way to issue from that train, the end of which was not even in sight.

⁴ A popular song. Skrzynecki was a well-known leader in the Polish Revolution of 1863.

⁵ 'They are going.' 'Jadom' and 'jadą' are pronounced similarly.

The Reservists on the platform began to fall in, but anyone who could lingered in taking leave. Bartek swung his arms as if they were the sails of a windmill, and stared.

'Well, Magda, good-bye!'

'Oh, my poor fellow!'

'You will never see me again!'

'I shall never see you again!'

'There's no help for it!'

'May the Mother of God protect and shelter you!'

'Good-bye. Take care of the cottage.'

The woman embraced him in tears.

'May God guide you!'

The last moment had come. The whistle and the women's crying and sobbing drowned everything else. 'Good-bye! Good-bye!' But the soldiers were already separated from the motley crowd, and formed a dark, solid mass, moving forward in square columns with the certainty and regularity of clockwork. The order was given: 'Take your seats!' Columns and squares broke asunder from the centre, marched with heavy strides towards the carriages, and jumped into them. The engine, now breathing like a dragon and exhaling streams of vapour, sent forth wreaths of grey smoke. The women cried and sobbed still louder; some of them hid their eyes with their handkerchiefs, others waved their hands towards the carriages; sobbing voices repeated the name of husband and son.

'Good-bye, Bartek!' Magda cried from amongst them. 'Take care of yourself! – May the Mother of God – Good-bye! Oh, God! –'

'And take care of the cottage,' answered Bartek.

The line of trucks suddenly trembled, the carriages knocked against one another, – and went forward.

'And remember you have a wife and child,' Magda cried, running after the train. 'Good-bye, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost! Good-bye –'

On went the train, faster and faster, bearing away the warriors of Pognębin, of both Krzywdas, of Niedola, and Mizerów.

CHAPTER II

Magda, with the crowd of women, returned crying to Pognębin in one direction; in the other the train, bristling with bayonets, rushed into the grey distance, and Bartek with it. There seemed to be no end to the long cloud of smoke; Pognębin was also scarcely visible. Only the lime-tree showed faintly, and the church tower, glistening as the rays of the sun played upon it. Soon the lime-tree also disappeared, and the gilt cross resembled a shining speck. As long as that speck continued to shine Bartek kept his eyes fixed upon it, but when that vanished too there were no bounds to the poor fellow's grief. A sense of great weakness came over him and he felt lost. So he began to look at the Sergeant, for, after the Almighty, he already felt there was no one greater than he. The Sergeant clearly knew what would become of Bartek now; he himself knew nothing, understood nothing. The Sergeant sat on the bench, and, supporting his rifle between his knees, he lighted his pipe. The smoke rose in clouds, hiding his grave, discontented face from time to time. Not Bartek's eyes alone watched his face; all the eyes from every corner of the carriage were watching it. At Pognębin or Krzywda every Bartek or Wojtek was his own master, each had to think about himself, and for himself, but now the Sergeant would do this for him. He would command them to look to the right, and they would look to the right; he would command them to look to the left, and they would look to the left. The question, 'Well, and what is to become of us?' stood in each man's eyes, but he knew as much as all of them put together, and also what was expected of them. If only one were able by glances to draw some command or explanation from him! But the men were afraid to ask direct, as war was now drawing near with all the chances of being court-martialled. What was permitted and was not permitted, and by whom, was unknown. They, at least, did not know, and the sound of such a word as 'Kriegsgericht,' though they did not understand it, frightened them very much.

They felt that this Sergeant had still more power over them now than at the manœuvres in Posen; he it was who knew everything, and without him nothing would be done. He seemed meanwhile to be finding his rifle growing heavy, for he pushed it towards Bartek to hold for him. Bartek reached out hastily for it, held his breath, stared, and looked at the Sergeant as he would at a rainbow, yet derived little comfort from that. Ah, there must surely be bad news, for even the Sergeant looked worried. At the stations one heard singing and shouting; the Sergeant gave orders, bustled about and swore, as if to show his importance. But let the train once move on, and everyone, including himself, was silent. Owing to him the world now seemed to wear two aspects, the one clear and intelligible – that represented by home and family – the other dark, yes, absolutely dark – that of France and war. He effectually revived the spirits of the Pognębin soldiers, not so much by his personality, as that each man carried him at the back of his mind. And since each soldier carried his knapsack on his shoulder, with his cloak and other warlike accoutrements, the whole load was extremely heavy.

All the while the train was shaking, roaring, and rushing along into space. Now a station where they added fresh carriages and engines; now another where helmets, cannon, horses, bayonets, and companies of Lancers were to be seen. The fine evening drew in slowly. The sun sank in a deep crimson, and a number of light flying clouds spread from the edge of the darkening sky across to the west. The train, stopping frequently at the stations to pick up passengers and carriages, shook and rushed forward into that crimson brightness, as into a sea of blood. From the open carriage, in which Bartek and the Pognębin troops were seated, one could see villages, hamlets and little towns, church steeples, storks – looking like hooks, as they stood on one leg on their nests, – isolated cottages, and cherry orchards. Everything was passed rapidly, and everything looked crimson. Meanwhile the soldiers, growing bolder, began to whisper to one another, because the Sergeant, having laid his kit bag under his head, had fallen asleep, with his clay pipe between his teeth. Wojtek Gwizdała, a peasant from Pognębin, sitting beside Bartek, jogged his elbow: 'Bartek, listen!'

Bartek turned a face with pensive, wide open eyes towards him.

'Why do you look like a calf going to be slaughtered?' Gwizdała whispered. 'True, you, poor beggar, are going to be slaughtered, that's certain!'

'Oh, my word!' groaned Bartek.

'Are you afraid?' Gwizdała asked.

'Why shouldn't I be afraid?'

The crimson in the sky was growing deeper still, so Gwizdała pointed towards it and went on whispering:

'Do you see that brightness? Do you know, Blockhead, what that is? That's blood. Here's Poland, – our frontier, say, – do you understand? But there in the distance, where it's so bright, that's France itself.'

'And shall we be there soon?'

'Why are you in such a hurry? They say that it's a terribly long way. But never fear, the French will come out to meet us.'

Bartek's Pognębin brain began to work laboriously. After some moments he asked: 'Wojtek.'

'Yes?'

'What sort of people are these Frenchmen?'

Here Wojtek's wisdom suddenly became aware of a pitfall into which it might be easier to tumble headforemost than to come out again. He knew that the French were the French. He had heard something about them from old people, who had related that they were always fighting with everyone; he knew at least that they were very strange people. But how could he explain this to Bartek to make him understand how strange they were? First of all, therefore, he repeated the question, 'What sort of people?'

'Why, yes.'

Now there were three nations known to Wojtek: living in the centre were the Poles; on the one side were the Russians, on the other the Germans. But there were various kinds of Germans. Preferring, therefore, to be clear rather than accurate, he said:

'What sort of people are the French? How can I tell you; they must be like the Germans, only worse.'

At which Bartek exclaimed: 'Oh, the low vermin!'

Up to that time he had had one feeling only with regard to the French, and that was a feeling of unspeakable fear. Henceforth this Prussian Reservist cherished the hatred of a true patriot towards them. But not feeling quite clear about it all, he asked again: 'Then Germans will be fighting Germans?'

Here Wojtek, like a second Socrates, chose to adopt a simile, and answered:

'But doesn't your dog, Łysek, fight with my Burek?'

Bartek opened his mouth and looked at his instructor for a moment: 'Ah! true.'

'And the Austrians are Germans,' explained Wojtek, 'and haven't they fought against us? Old Swiercz said that when he was in that war Steinmetz used to shout: "On, boys, at the Germans!" Only that's not so easy with the French.'

'Good God!'

'The French have never been beaten in any war. When they attack you, don't be afraid, don't disgrace yourself. Each man is worth two or three of us, and they wear beards like Jews. There are some as dark as the devil. Now that you know what they are like, commend yourself to God!'

'Well, but then why do we run after them?' Bartek asked in desperation.

This philosophical remark was possibly not as stupid as it appeared to Wojtek, who, evidently influenced by official opinion, quickly had his answer ready.

'I would rather not have gone myself, but if we don't run after them, they will run after us. There's no help for it. You have read what the papers say. It's against us peasants that they bear the chief grudge. People say that they have their eyes on Poland, because they want to smuggle vodka

out of the country, and the Government won't allow it, and that's why there's war. Now do you understand?'

'I cannot understand,' Bartek said resignedly.

'They are also as greedy for our women as a dog for a bone,' Wojtek continued.

'But surely they would respect Magda, for example?'

'They don't even respect age!'

'Oh!' cried Bartek in a voice implying, 'If that is so then I will fight!'

In fact this seemed to him really too much. Let them continue to smuggle vodka out of Poland, – but let them dare to touch Magda! Our friend Bartek now began to regard the whole war from the standpoint of his own interests, and took courage in the thought of how many soldiers and cannon were going out in defence of Magda, who was in danger of being outraged by the French. He arrived at the conviction that there was nothing for it but to go out against them.

Meanwhile the brightness had faded from the sky, and it had grown dark. The carriages began to rock violently on the uneven rails, and the helmets and bayonets shook from right to left to the rhythm of the rocking. Hour after hour passed by. Millions of sparks flew from the engine and crossed one another in the darkness, serpentine in long golden lines. For a while Bartek could not sleep. Like those sparks in the wind, thoughts leapt into his mind about Magda, about Pogonin, the French and the Germans. He felt that though he would have liked to have lain down on the bench on which he was sitting, he could not do so. He fell asleep, it is true, but it was a heavy, unrefreshing sleep, and he was at once pursued by dreams. He saw his dog, Łyszek, fighting with Wojtek's Burek, till all their hair was torn off. He was running for a stick to stop them, when suddenly he saw something else: sitting with his arm round Magda was a dark Frenchman, as dark as the earth; but Magda was smiling contentedly. Some Frenchmen jeered at Bartek, and pointed their fingers at him. In reality it was the engine screaming, but it seemed to him that the French were calling, 'Magda! Magda! Magda!' 'Hold your tongue, thieves,' Bartek shouted, 'leave my wife alone!' but they continued calling 'Magda! Magda! Magda!' Łyszek and Burek started barking, and all Pogonin cried out, 'Don't let your wife go!' Was he bound, or what was the matter? No, he rushed forward, tore at the cord and broke it, seized the Frenchman by the head, – and suddenly – !

Suddenly he was seized with severe pain, as from a heavy blow. Bartek awoke and dragged his feet to the ground. The whole carriage awoke, and everyone asked, 'What has happened?' In his sleep the unfortunate Bartek had seized the Sergeant by the head. He stood up immediately, as straight as a fiddle-string, two fingers at his forehead; but the Sergeant waved his hand, and shouted like mad:

'Ach, Sie! beast of a Pole! I'll knock all the teeth out of your head, – blockhead!'

The Sergeant shouted until he was hoarse with rage, and Bartek stood saluting all the while. Some of the soldiers bit their lips in order not to laugh, but they were half afraid, too. A parting shot burst forth from the Sergeant's lips:

'You Polish Ox! Ox from Podolia!'

Ultimately everything became quiet again. Bartek sat back in his old place. He was conscious of nothing but that his cheek was swollen, and, as if playing him a trick, the engine kept repeating:

'Magda! Magda! Magda!'

He felt a heavy weight of sorrow upon him.

CHAPTER III

It was morning!

The fitful, pale light fell on faces sleepy and worn with a long restless night. The soldiers were sleeping in discomfort on the seats, some with their heads thrown forward, others with their noses in the air. The dawn was rising and flooding all the world with crimson light. The air was fresh and keen. The soldiers awoke. The morning rays were drawing away shadows and mist into some region unknown. Alas! and where was now Pognębin, where Great and Little Kzrywda, where Mizerów? Everything was strange and different. The summits of the hills were overgrown with trees; in the valleys were houses hidden under red roofs, with dark crucifixes on the white walls, – beautiful houses like mansions, covered with vines. Here, churches with spires, there, factory chimneys with wreaths of purple smoke. There were only straight lines, level banks, and fields of corn. The inhabitants swarmed like ants. They passed villages and towns, and the train went through a number of unimportant stations without stopping. Something must have happened, for there were crowds to be seen everywhere. When the sun slowly began to appear from behind the hills, one or two of the soldiers commenced saying a prayer aloud. Others followed their example, and the first rays of splendour fell on the men's earnest, devout faces.

Meanwhile the train had stopped at a larger station. A crowd of people immediately surrounded it: news had come from the seat of war. Victory! Victory! Telegrams had been arriving for several hours. Everyone had anticipated defeat, so when roused by the unexpected news, their joy knew no bounds. People rushed half-clad from their houses and their beds, and ran to the post-office. Flags were waving from the roofs, and handkerchiefs from everyone's hands. Beer, tobacco and cigars were carried to the carriages. The enthusiasm was unspeakable; everyone's face was beaming. 'Die Wacht am Rhein' filled the air continuously like a tempest. Not a few were weeping, others embraced one another. The enthusiasm animating the crowd imparted itself to the gallant soldiers, their courage rose, and they too began to sing. The carriages trembled with their strong voices, and the crowd listened in wonder to their unintelligible songs. The men from Pognębin sang:

'Bartoszu! Bartoszu! never lose hope!'

'The Poles, the Poles!' repeated the crowd by way of explanation, and, gathering round the carriages, admired their soldierly bearing, and added to their joy by relating anecdotes of the remarkable courage of these Polish Regiments.

Bartek had unshaven cheeks, which, in addition to his yellow moustache, goggle-eyes, and large bony face, made him look terrifying. They gazed at him as at some wild beast. These, then, were the men who were to defend Germany! Such were they who had just disposed of the French! Bartek smiled with satisfaction, for he too was pleased that they had beaten the French. Now they would not go to Pognębin, they would not make off with Magda, nor capture his land. So he smiled, but as his cheek hurt him badly, he made a grimace at the same time, and did certainly look terrifying. Then, displaying the appetite of a Homeric warrior, he caused pea-sausages and pints of beer to disappear into his mouth as into a vacuum. People in the crowd gave him cigars and pence, and they all drank to one another.

'There's some good in this German nation,' he said to Wojtek, adding after a moment, 'and you know they have beaten the French!'

But Wojtek, the sceptic, cast a shadow on his joy. Wojtek had forebodings, like Cassandra:

'The French always allow themselves to be beaten at first, in order to take you in, and then they set to until they have cut you to pieces!'

Wojtek did not know that the greater part of Europe shared his opinion, in general, and in particular now.

They travelled on. All the houses were covered with flags. They stopped a long while at several of the stations, because there was a block of trains everywhere. Troops were hastening from all sides of Germany to reinforce their brothers in arms. The trains were swathed in green wreaths, and the Lancers had decorated their lances with the bunches of flowers given them on the way. The majority of these Lancers also were Poles. More than one conversation and greeting was heard passing from carriage to carriage:

'How are you, old fellow, and where is God Almighty leading you?'

Meanwhile to the accompaniment of the train rumbling along the rails, the well-known song rang out: —

'Flirt with us, soldiers! dears!'
Cried the girls of Sandomierz.

And soon Bartek and his comrades caught up the refrain: —

Gaily forth the answer burst:
'Bless you, dears! but dinner first!'

As many as had gone out from Pognębin in sorrow were now filled with enthusiasm and spirit. A train which had arrived from France with the first batch of wounded, damped this feeling of cheerfulness, however. It stopped at Deutz, and waited a long time to allow the trains hurrying to the seat of war to go by. The men were marched across the bridge *en route* for Cologne. Bartek ran forward with several others to look at the sick and wounded. Some lay in closed, others in open carriages, and these could be seen well. At the first glance our hero's heart was again in his mouth.

'Come here, Wojtek,' he cried in terror. 'See how many of our countrymen the Frenchmen have done for!'

It was indeed a sight! Pale, exhausted faces, some darkened by gunpowder or by pain, or stained with blood. To the sounds of universal rejoicing these men only responded by groans. Some were cursing the war, the French and the Germans. Parched lips called every moment for water, eyes rolled in delirium. Here and there, amongst the wounded, were the rigid faces of the dead, in some cases peaceful, with blue lines round their eyes, in others contorted through the death struggle, with terrifying eyes and grinning teeth. Bartek saw the bloody fruits of war for the first time, and once more confusion reigned in his mind. He seemed quite stupefied, as, standing in the crowd, with his mouth open, he was elbowed from every side, and pomelled on the neck by the police. He sought Wojtek's eyes, nudged him, and said,

'Wojtek, may Heaven preserve us! It's horrible!'

'It will be just the same with you.'

'Jesu! Mary! That human beings should murder one another like this! When a fellow kills another the police take him off to the magistrate and prison!'

'Well, but now whoever kills most human beings is to be praised. What were you thinking of, Blockhead: did you think you would use gunpowder as in the manœuvres, and would shoot at targets instead of people?'

Here the difference between theory and practice certainly stood out clearly. Notwithstanding that our friend Bartek was a soldier, had attended manœuvres and drill, had practised rifle shooting, had known that the object of war was to kill people, now, when he saw blood flowing, and all the misery of war, it made him feel so sick and miserable he could hardly keep himself upright. He was impressed anew with respect for the French; this diminished, however, when they arrived at Cologne

from Deutz. At the Central Station they saw prisoners for the first time. Surrounding them was a number of soldiers and people, who gazed at them with interest, but without hostility. Bartek elbowed his way through the crowd, and, looking into the carriage, was amazed.

A troop of French infantry in ragged cloaks, small, dirty, and emaciated, were packed into the carriages like a cask of herrings. Many of them stretched out their hands for the trifling gifts presented to them by the crowd, if the sentinels did not prevent them. Judging from what he had heard from Wojtek, Bartek had had a wholly different impression of the French, and this took his breath away. He looked to see if Wojtek were anywhere about, and found him standing close by.

'What did you say?' asked Bartek. 'By all the Saints! I shouldn't be more surprised if I had lost my head!'

'They must have been starved somehow,' answered Wojtek, equally disillusioned.

'What are they jabbering?'

'It's certainly not Polish.'

Reassured by this impression, Bartek walked on past the carriages. 'Miserable wretches!' he said, when he had finished his review of the Regulars.

But the last carriages contained Zouaves, and these gave Bartek food for further reflection. From the fact that they sat huddled together in the carriages, it was impossible to discover whether each man were equal to two or three ordinary men; but, through the window, he saw the long, martial beards, and grave faces of veteran soldiers with dark complexions and alarmingly shining eyes. Again Bartek's heart leapt to his mouth.

'These are the worst of all,' he whispered low, as if afraid they might hear him.

'You have not yet seen those who have not let themselves be taken prisoner,' replied Wojtek.

'Heaven preserve us!'

'Now do you understand?'

Having finished looking at the Zouaves, they walked on. At the last carriage Bartek suddenly started back as if he had touched fire.

'Oh, Wojtek, Lord help us!'

There was the dark – nearly black – face of a Turco at the open window, rolling his eyes so that the whites showed. He must have been wounded, for his face was contorted with pain.

'But what's the matter?' asked Wojtek.

'That must be the Evil One, it's not a soldier. Lord have mercy on my sins!'

'Look at his teeth!'

'May he go to perdition! I shan't look at him any longer.'

Bartek was silent, then asked after a moment:

'Wojtek?'

'Yes?'

'Mightn't it be a good thing to cross oneself before anyone like that?'

'The heathen don't understand anything about the holy truth.'

The signal was given for taking their seats. In a few moments the train was moving. When it grew dusk Bartek continually saw before him the Turco's dark face with the terrible white of his eyes. From the feeling which at the moment animated this Pognębin soldier, it would not have been possible to foretell his future deeds.

CHAPTER IV

The particular share he took at first in the pitched battle of Gravelotte, merely convinced Bartek of this fact, – that in war there is plenty to look at, but nothing to do. For at the commencement he and his regiment were told to order arms and wait at the bottom of a hill covered by a vineyard. The guns were booming in the distance, squadrons of cavalry charged past near at hand with a clatter which shook the earth; then the flags passed, then Cuirassiers with drawn swords. The shells on the hill flew hissing across the blue sky in the form of small white clouds, then smoke filled the air and hid the horizon. The battle seemed like a storm which passes through a district without lasting long anywhere.

After the first hours, unusual activity was displayed round Bartek's regiment. Other regiments began to be massed round his, and in the spaces between them, the guns, drawn by plunging horses, rushed along, and, hastily unlimbered, were pointed towards the hill. The whole valley became full of troops. Commands were now thundered from all sides, the Aides-de-Camps rushed about wildly, and the private soldiers said to one another:

'Ah! it will be our turn now! It's coming!' or enquired uneasily of one another,

'Isn't it yet time to start?'

'Surely it must be!'

The question of life and death was now beginning to hang in the balance. Something in the smoke, which hid the horizon, burst close at hand with a terrible explosion. The deep roar of the cannon and the crack of the rifle firing was heard ever nearer; it was like an indistinct sound coming from a distance, – then the mitrailleuse became audible. Suddenly the guns, placed in position, boomed forth until the earth and air trembled together. The shells whistled frightfully through Bartek's company. Watching they saw something bright red, a little cloud, as it might be, and in that cloud something whistled, rushed, rattled, roared, and shrieked. The men shouted: 'A shell! A shell,' and at the same moment this vulture of war sped forward like a gale, came near, fell, and burst! A terrible roar met the ear, a crash as if the world had collapsed, followed by a rushing sound, as before a puff of wind! Confusion reigned in the lines standing in the neighbourhood of the guns, then came the cry and command 'Stand ready!' Bartek stood in the front rank, his rifle at his shoulder, his head turned towards the hill, his mouth set, – so his teeth were not chattering. He was forbidden to tremble, he was forbidden to shoot. He had only to stand still and wait! But now another shell burst, – three, four, ten. The wind lifted the smoke from the hill: the French had already driven the Prussian battery from it, had placed theirs in position, and now opened fire on to the valley. Every moment from under cover of the vineyard they sent forth long white columns of smoke. Protected by the guns, the enemy's infantry continued to advance, in order to open fire. They were already half way down the hill and could now be seen plainly, for the wind was driving the smoke away. Would the vineyard prove an obstacle to them? No, the dark caps of the infantry were advancing. Suddenly they disappeared under the tall arches of the vines, and there was nothing to be seen but tricolour flags waving here and there. The rifle fire began fiercely but intermittently, continually starting in fresh and unexpected places. Shells burst above it, and crossed one another in the air. Now and then cries rang out from the hill, which were answered from below by a German 'Hurrah!' The guns from the valley sent forth an uninterrupted fire; the regiment stood unflinching.

The line of fire began to embrace it more closely, however. The bullets hummed in the distance like gnats and flies, or passed near with a terrible whizz. More and more of them came: – hundreds, thousands, whistling round their heads, their noses, their eyes, their shoulders; it was astonishing there should be a man left standing. Suddenly Bartek heard a groan close by: 'Jesu!' then 'Stand ready!' then again 'Jesu!' 'Stand ready!' Soon the groans went on without intermission, the words of command came faster and faster, the lines drew in closer, the whizzing grew more frequent, more uninterrupted, more terrible. The dead covered the ground. It was like the Judgment Day.

'Are you afraid?' Wojtek asked.

'Why shouldn't I be afraid?' our hero answered, his teeth chattering.

Nevertheless both Bartek and Wojtek still kept their feet, and it did not even enter their heads to run away. They had been commanded to stand still and receive the enemy's fire. Bartek had not spoken the truth; he was not as much afraid as thousands of others would have been in his place. Discipline held the mastery over his imagination, and his imagination had never painted such a horrible situation as this. Nevertheless Bartek felt that he would be killed, and he confided this thought to Wojtek.

'There won't be room in Heaven for the numbers they kill,' Wojtek answered in an excited voice.

These words comforted Bartek perceptibly. He began to hope that his place in Heaven had already been taken. Re-assured with regard to this, he stood more patiently, conscious only of the intense heat, and with the perspiration running down his face. Meantime the firing became so heavy that the ranks were thinning visibly. There was no one to carry away the killed and wounded; the death rattle of the dying mingled with the whizz of shells and the din of shooting. One could see by the movement of the tricolour flags that the infantry hidden by the vines was coming closer and closer. The volleys of mitrailleuse decimated the ranks; the men were beginning to grow desperate.

But underlying this despair were impatience and rage. Had they been commanded to go forward, they would have gone like a whirlwind. It was impossible to merely stand still in one spot. A soldier suddenly threw down his helmet with his whole force, and exclaimed:

'Curse it! One death is as good as another!'

Bartek again experienced such a feeling of relief from these words that he almost entirely ceased to be afraid. For if one death was as good as another, what did anything matter? This rustic philosophy was calculated to arouse courage more rapidly than any other. Bartek knew that one death was as good as another, but it pleased him to hear it, especially as the battle was now turning into a defeat. For here was a regiment which had never fired a single shot, and was already half annihilated. Crowds of soldiers from other regiments which had been scattered, ran in amongst and round theirs in disorder; only these peasants from Pognębin, Great and Little Krzywda, and Mizerów still remained firm, upholding Prussian discipline. But even amongst them a certain degree of hesitation now began to be felt. Another moment and they would have burst the restraint of discipline. The ground under their feet was already soft and slippery with blood, the stench of which mingled with the smell of gunpowder. In several places the lines could not join up closely, because the dead bodies made gaps in them. At the feet of those men yet standing, the other half lay bleeding, groaning, struggling, dying, or in the silence of death. There was no air to breathe in. They began to grumble:

'They have brought us out to be slaughtered!'

'No one will come out of this!'

'Silence, Polish dogs!' sounded the officer's voice.

'I should just like you to be standing in my shoes!'

'Where is that fellow?'

Suddenly a voice began to repeat:

'Beneath Thy Shadow...'

Bartek instantly took it up:

'We flee, O holy Son of God!'

And soon on that field of carnage a chorus of Polish voices was calling to the Defender of their nation:

'Of Thy favour regard our prayers.'

while from beneath their feet there came the accompaniment of groans: 'Mary! Mary!' She had evidently heard them, for at that moment the Aide-de-Camps came galloping up, and the command rang forth: 'Arms to the attack! Hurrah! Forward!' The crest of bayonets was suddenly lowered, the column stretched out into a long line and sprang towards the hill to seek with their bayonets the enemy they could not discover with their eyes. The men were, however, still two hundred yards from

the foot of the hill, and they had to traverse that distance under a murderous fire. Would they not perish like the rest? Would they not be obliged to retreat? Perish they might, but retreat they could not, for the Prussian commander knows what tune will bring Polish soldiers to the attack. Amid the roar of cannon, amid the rifle fire and the smoke, the confusion and groaning, loudest of all sounded the drums and trumpets, playing the hymn at which every single drop of blood leapt in their veins. 'Hurrah!' answered the Macki⁶ 'as long as we live!' Frenzy seized them. The fire met them full in the face. They went like a whirlwind over the prostrate bodies of men and horses, over the wrecks of cannon. They fell, but they went with a shout and a song. They had already reached the vineyard and disappeared into its enclosure. Only the song was heard, and at times a bayonet glittered. On the hill the firing became increasingly fierce. In the valley the trumpets kept on sounding. The French volleys continued faster and faster, – still faster, – and suddenly —

Suddenly they were silent.

Down in the valley that old wardog, Steinmetz, lighted his clay pipe, and said in a tone of satisfaction:

'You have only to play to them! The daredevils will do it!'

And actually in a few moments one of the proudly waving tricolours was suddenly raised aloft, then drooped, and disappeared.

'They are not joking,' said Steinmetz.

Again the trumpets played the hymn, and a second Polish regiment went to the help of the first. In the enclosure a pitched battle with bayonets was taking place.

And now, oh Muse, sing of our hero, Bartek, that posterity may know of his deeds! The fear, impatience, and despair of his heart had mingled into the single feeling of rage, and when he heard that music each vein stood out in him like cast iron. His hair stood on end, his eyes shot fire. He forgot everything that had made up his world; he no longer cared whether one death was as good as another. Grasping his rifle firmly in his hands, he leapt forward with the others. Reaching the hill he fell down for the tenth time, struck his nose, and, bespattered with mud and the blood flowing from his nose, ran on madly and breathlessly, catching at the air with open mouth. He stared round, wishing to find some of the French in the enclosure as quickly as possible, and caught sight of three standing together near the flags. They were Turcos. Would Bartek retreat? No, indeed; he could have seized the horns of Lucifer himself now! He ran towards them at once, and they fell on him with a shout; two bayonets, like two deadly stings, had actually touched his chest already, but Bartek lowered his bayonet. A dreadful cry followed, – a groan, and two dark bodies lay writhing convulsively on the ground.

At that moment the third, who carried the flag, ran up to help his two comrades. Like a Fury, Bartek leapt on him with his whole strength. The firing flashed and roared in the distance, while Bartek's hoarse roar rang out through the smoke:

'Go to Hell!'

And again the rifle in his hand described a fearful semi-circle, again groans responded to his thrusts. The Turcos retreated in terror at the sight of this furious giant, but either Bartek misunderstood, or they shouted out something in Arabic, for it seemed to him that their thick lips distinctly uttered the cry: 'Magda! Magda!'

'Magda will give it you!' howled Bartek, and with one leap he was in the enemy's midst.

Happily at that moment some of his comrades ran up to his assistance. A hand to hand fight now took place in the enclosure of the vineyard. There was the crack of rifles at close quarters, and the hot breath of the combatants sounded through their nostrils. Bartek raged like a storm. Blinded by smoke, streaming with blood, more like a wild beast than a man, and regardless of everything, he mowed down men at each blow, broke rifles, cracked heads. His hands moved with the terrible swiftness of a machine sowing destruction. He attacked the Ensign, and seized him by the throat with

⁶ 'Macki' = 'Tommies.'

an iron grip. The Ensign's eyes turned upwards, his face swelled, his throat rattled, and his hands let the pole fall.

'Hurrah!' cried Bartek, and, lifting the flag, he waved it in the air.

This was the flag raised aloft and drooping, which Steinmetz had seen from below.

But he could only see it for half a second, for in the next – Bartek had trampled it to shreds. Meanwhile his comrades were already rushing on ahead.

Bartek remained alone for a moment. He tore off the flag, hid it in his breast pocket, and, having seized the pole in both hands, rushed after his comrades.

A crowd of Turcos, shouting in a barbarous tongue, now fled towards the gun placed on the summit of the hill, the Macki after them, shouting, pursuing, striking with butt-end and bayonet.

The Zouaves, who were stationed by the guns, received the first men with rifle fire.

'Hurrah!' shouted Bartek.

The men ran up to the guns, and a fresh struggle took place round these. At that moment the second Polish regiment came to the aid of the first. The flag pole in Bartek's powerful hands was now changed into a kind of infernal flail. Each stroke dealt by it opened a free passage through the close lines of the French. The Zouaves and Turcos began to be seized with panic, and they fled from the place where Bartek was fighting. Within a few moments Bartek was sitting astride the gun, as he might his Pognębin mare.

But scarcely had the soldiers had time to see him on this, when he was already on the second, after killing another Ensign who was standing by it with the flag.

'Hurrah, Bartek!' repeatedly exclaimed the soldiers.

The victory was complete. All the ammunition was captured. The infantry fled, and after being surrounded by Prussian reinforcements on the other side of the hill, laid down their arms.

Bartek captured yet a third flag during the pursuit.

It was worth seeing him, when exhausted, covered with blood, and blowing like a blacksmith's bellows, he now descended the hill together with the rest, bearing the three flags on his shoulder. The French? Why, what had not he alone done to them! By his side went Wojtek, scratched and scarred, so he turned to him and said:

'What did you say? Why, they are miserable wretches; there isn't a scrap of strength in their bones! They have just scratched you and me like kittens, and that's all. But how I have bled them you can see by the ground!'

'Who would have known that you could be so brave!' replied Wojtek, who had watched Bartek's deeds, and began to look at him in quite a different light.

But who has not heard of these deeds? History, all the regiment and the greater number of the officers. Everybody now looked with astonishment at this country giant with the flaxen moustache and goggle eyes. The Major himself said to him, 'Ah, you confounded Pole!' and pulled his ear, making Bartek grin to his back teeth with pleasure. When the regiment stood once more at the foot of the hill, the Major pointed him out to the Colonel, and the Colonel to Steinmetz himself.

The latter noticed the flags, and ordered that they should be taken charge of; then he began to look at Bartek. Our friend Bartek again stood as straight as a fiddle string, presenting arms, and the old General looked at him and shook his head with pleasure. Finally he began to say something to the Colonel; the words 'non-commissioned officer' were plainly audible.

'Too stupid, Your Excellency!' answered the Major.

'Let us try,' said His Excellency, and turning his horse, he approached Bartek.

Bartek himself scarcely knew what was happening to him: it was a thing unknown in the Prussian Army for the General to talk to a Private! His Excellency was the more easily able to do this, because he knew Polish. Moreover this Private had captured three flags and two guns.

'Where do you come from?' enquired the General.

'From Pognębin,' answered Bartek.

'Good. Your name?'

'Bartek Słowik.'

'Mensch,' explained the Major.

'Mens!' Bartek tried to repeat.

'Do you know why you are fighting the French?'

'I know, Your Excellency.'

'Tell me.'

Bartek began to stammer, 'Because, because – ' Then on a sudden Wojtek's words fortunately came into his mind, and he burst out with them quickly, so as not to get confused: 'Because they are Germans too, only worse villains!'

His Excellency's face began to twitch as if he felt inclined to burst out laughing. After a moment, however, His Excellency turned to the Major, and said:

'You are right, Sir.'

Our friend Bartek, satisfied with himself, remained standing as straight as a fiddle string.

'Who won the battle to-day?' the General asked again.

'I, Your Excellency,' Bartek answered without hesitation.

His Excellency's face again began to twitch.

'Right, very right, it was you! And here you have your reward.'

Here the old soldier unpinned the iron cross from his own breast, stooped and pinned it on to Bartek. The General's good humour was reflected in a perfectly natural way on the faces of the Colonel, the Majors, the Captains, down to the non-commissioned officers. After the General's departure the Colonel for his own part presented Bartek with ten thalers, the Major with five, and so on. Everyone repeated to him smilingly that he had won the battle, with the result that Bartek was in the seventh heaven.

It was a strange thing: the only person who was not really satisfied with our hero was Wojtek.

In the evening, when they were both sitting round the fire, and when Bartek's distinguished face was bulging as much with pea sausage as the sausage itself, Wojtek ejaculated in a tone of resignation:

'Oh Bartek, what a blockhead you are, because – '

'But why?' said Bartek, between his bites of sausage.

'Why, man, didn't you tell the General that the French are Germans?'

'You said so yourself.'

'And what of that? – '

Wojtek began to stammer a little – 'Well, though they may be Germans, you needn't have told him so, because it's always unpleasant – '

'But I said it about the French, not about them...'

'Ah, because when...'

Wojtek stopped short, though evidently wishing to say something further; he wished to explain to Bartek that it is not suitable when among Germans to speak evil of them, but somehow his tongue became entangled.

CHAPTER V

A little while later the Royal Prussian Mail brought the following letter to Pognębin:

May Jesus Christ and His Holy Mother be praised.

Dearest Magda! What news of you? It is all right for you to be able to rest quietly in bed at home, but I am fighting horribly hard here. We have been surrounding the great fort of Metz, and there was a battle, and I did for so many of the French that all the Infantry and Artillery were astonished. And the General himself was astonished, and said that I had won the battle, and gave me a cross. And the officers and non-commissioned officers respect me very much now, and rarely box my ears. Afterwards we marched on further, and there was a second battle, but I have forgotten what the town was called; there also I seized and carried off four flags, and knocked down one of the biggest Colonels in the Cuirassiers, and took him prisoner. And as our regiment is going to be sent home, the Sergeant has advised me to ask to be transferred and to stay on here, for in war it is only sleep you do not get, but you may eat as much as you can stand, and in this country there is wine everywhere, for they are a rich nation. We have also burnt a town and we did not spare even women or children, nor did I. The church was burnt on purpose, because they are Catholics, and very wicked people. We are now going on to the Emperor himself, and that will be the end of the war, but you take care of the cottage and Franek, for if you do not take care of it, then I will beat you till you have learnt what sort of a man I am. I commend you to God.

Bartłomiej Słowik.

Bartek was evidently developing a taste for war, and beginning to regard it as his proper trade. He felt greater confidence in himself, and now went into battle as he might have gone to his work at Pognębin. Medals and crosses covered his breast, and although he did not become a non-commissioned officer, he was universally regarded as the foremost Private in the regiment. He was always well disciplined, as before, and possessed the blind courage of the man who simply takes no account of danger. The courage actuating him was no longer of the same kind as that which had filled him in his first moments of fury, for it now sprang from military experience and faith in himself. Added to this his giant strength could endure all kinds of fatigue, marches, and overstrain. Men fell at his side, he alone went on unharmed, only working all the harder and developing more and more into the stern Prussian soldier. He now not only fought the French, but hated them. Some of his other ideas also changed. He became a soldier-patriot, blindly extolling his leaders. In another letter to Magda he wrote:

Wojtek is divided in his opinion, and so there is a quarrel between us, do you understand? He is a scoundrel, too, because he says that the French are Germans, but they are French, and we are Germans.

Magda, in her reply to both letters, set about abusing him with the first words that came into her head.

Dearest Bartek (she wrote), married to me before the holy Altar! May God punish you! You yourself are a scoundrel, you heathen, going with those wretches to murder half a nation of Catholics. Do you not understand, then, that those wretches are Lutherans, and that you, a Catholic, are helping them? You like war, you ruffian, because you are able now to do nothing but fight, drink, and illtreat others, and to go without fasting; and you burn churches. But may you burn in Hell for that,

because you are even proud of it, and have no thought for old people or children. Remember what has been written in golden letters in the Holy Scriptures about the Polish nation, from the beginning of the world to the Judgment Day, – when God most High will have no regard for sluggards, – and restrain yourself, you Turk, that I may not smash your head to pieces. I have sent you five thalers, although I have need of them here, for I do not know which way to turn, and the household savings are getting short. I embrace you, dearest Bartek.

Magda.

The moral contained in these lines made little impression on Bartek. 'The wife does not remember her vows,' he thought to himself, 'and is meddling.' And he continued to make war on the aged. He distinguished himself in every battle so greatly, that finally he again came under the honoured notice of Steinmetz. Ultimately when the shattered Polish regiment was sent back into the depths of Germany, he took the sergeant's advice of applying for leave to be transferred, and stayed behind. The result of this was that he found himself outside Paris.

His letters were now full of contempt for the French. 'They run away like hares in every battle,' he wrote to Magda, and he wrote the truth. But the siege did not prove to his taste. He had to dig or to lie in the trenches round Paris for whole days, listening to the roar of the guns, and often getting soaked through. Besides, he missed his old regiment. In the one to which he had been transferred as a volunteer, he was surrounded by Germans. He knew some German, having already learnt a little at the factory, but only about five in ten words; now he quickly began to grow familiar with it. The regiment nicknamed him 'the Polish dog,' however, and it was only his decorations and his terrifying fists which shielded him from disagreeable jokes. Nevertheless, he earned the respect of his new comrades, and began little by little to make friends with them. Since he covered the whole regiment with glory, they ultimately came to look upon him as one of themselves. Bartek would always have considered himself insulted if anyone called him German, but in thinking of himself in distinction to the French he called himself 'ein Deutscher.' To himself he appeared entirely distinct, but at the same time he did not wish to pass for worse than others. An incident occurred, nevertheless, which might have given him plenty to reflect upon, had reflection come more easily to this hero's mind. Some Companies of his regiment had been sent out against some volunteer sharpshooters, and laid an ambush for them, into which they fell. But the detachment was composed of veteran soldiers, the remains of some of the foreign regiments, and this time Bartek did not see the dark caps running away after the first shots. They defended themselves stubbornly when surrounded, and rushed forward to force their way through the encircling Prussian soldiery. They fought so desperately that half of them cut their way through, and knowing the fate that awaited captured sharpshooters, few allowed themselves to be taken alive. The Company in which Bartek was serving therefore only took two prisoners. These were lodged overnight in a forester's house, and the next day they were to be shot. A small guard of soldiers stood outside the door, but Bartek was stationed in the room under the open window with the prisoners, who were bound.

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