

**ГЕНРИК
СЕНКЕВИЧ**

SIELANKA: AN
IDYLL

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Henryk Sienkiewicz

Sielanka: An Idyll

SIELANKA

An Idyll

In the woods, in the deep woods, was an open glade in which stood the house of the forester Stephan. The house was built of logs packed with moss, and the roof was thatched with straw; hard by the house stood two outbuildings; in front of it was a piece of fenced-in ground, and an old well with a long, crooked sweep; the water in the well was covered with a green vegetation at the edges.

Opposite the windows grew sunflowers and wild hollyhocks, high, stately, and covered with blossoms as if with a swarm of gorgeous butterflies; between the sunflowers there peeped the red heads of the poppy; around the hollyhocks entwined sweet peas with pink blossoms and morning-glories; close to the ground grew nasturtiums, marigolds, primroses, and asters, pale because they were shaded from the sunlight by the leaves of the hollyhocks and sunflowers.

The fenced ground on either side of the pathway leading to the house was planted with vegetables – carrots, beets, and cabbage; further off in a separate fenced-in lot there waved with each breath of wind the tender blue flower of the flax; still beyond could be seen the dark green of the potato patch; the rest of the clearing was checkered with the variegated shades of the different cereals that ran to the edge of the lake which touched the glade on one side.

Near to the house a few trees were growing. Some were cherry trees, and one was a birch, with long, slender branches which swayed in the wind, and with every breeze its leaves touched the dilapidated moss-covered straw thatch of the roof; when the stronger gusts of wind bent its boughs to the wall, and pressed its twigs and the waves of leaves against the roof, it would seem as if the tree loved the house and embraced it.

In this tree the sparrows made their home; the rustling of the leaves and twigs commingled with the chirp and joyous noise of the birds; in the eaves of the house the doves had built their nests, and the place was filled with their speech, cooing and calling to each other, entreating and discussing as is customary between doves, these noisy and talkative people.

At times it happened that they were startled by some unknown cause; then around the house was heard a loud flapping, the air was filled with the whirl of wings and a multitude of white-feathered breasts; you could hear tumult, noise and excited cries – the whole flock flew out suddenly, circled round the house, now near, now far off. Sometimes they melted in the blue, sometimes their white feathers reflected the sunlight, again they hung over the house, undulating in the air, and alighting at last like a downfall of snowflakes on the gray straw of the roof.

If this occurred in the rosy morning or in the splendor of the red setting sun, then in the glory of the air these doves were not white, but tinted pink, and settled on the roof and birch tree as flames or scattered rose leaves.

At twilight, when the sun had hidden itself beyond the woods, this cooing under the roof and chirping in the birch tree became gradually quiet. The sparrows and the doves shook the dew from their wings and prepared to sleep; sometimes one of them gave voice once more, but more rarely, more softly, more drowsily, and then all was silent – the dusk was falling from the heavens upon the earth. The house, cherry trees, and birch were losing their form, mingling together, melting, and veiled in a mist which rose from the lake.

Around the glade, as far as the eye could reach, there stretched the wall of dark pine trees and thick undergrowth. This wall was broken in one place by a wide dividing line, which reached to the

edge of the lake. The lake was a very large one, the opposite side was nearly lost to view, and in the mist could be hardly discerned the red roof and steeple of a church, and the black line of the woods closing the horizon beyond the church.

The pines were looking from the high sandy banks upon their reflection in the lake as if in a mirror, and it seemed as if there was another forest in the water; and when the trees were swaying on the earth they were also swaying in the water, and when they quivered on the earth they seemed to quiver in the water; as they stood in the still air motionless, then every needle of the pines was painted distinctly on the smooth, unruffled surface, and the straight trunks of the trees standing like rows of pillars reaching afar off into infinity. In the middle of the lake the water in the daytime reflected the sun, and in the morning and the evening the glories of its rising and its setting; at night the moon and stars; and it seemed to be as deep as the dome of the sky above us is high, beyond the sun, moon, and stars.

In the house dwelt the forester, named Stephan, and his daughter, Kasya, a maiden of sixteen. Kasya was the light of the household, as bright and fresh as the morning. She was brought up in great innocence and in the fear of God. Her uncle, who was now dead, and who was a poor but devout man, the organist of the neighboring church, had taught her to read her prayer book, and her education was perfected by her communing with nature. The bees taught her to work, the doves taught her purity, the happy sparrows to speak joyfully to her father, the quiet water taught her peace, the serenity of the sky taught her contemplation, the matin-bell of the distant church called her to devotion, and the universal good in all nature, which reflected the love of God, sank deep into her soul.

Therefore the father and Kasya led a peaceful and happy life, surrounded by the silence and solitude of the woods.

One noon, before Ascension Day, Stephan came home to his dinner. He had visited a large tract of the forest, so he arrived weary, having returned through the thickets of the swamp. Kasya placed the dinner on the table, and after they had finished and she had fed the dog and washed the dishes, she said:

“Papa.”

“What is it?”

“I shall go into the woods.”

“Go, go,” adding jestingly, “and let some wolf or wild beast devour you.”

“I shall go and gather herbs. To-morrow is Ascension Day and they will be needed in the church.”

“If so, you can go.”

She covered her head with a yellow kerchief embroidered with blue flowers, and looking for her basket she began singing:

“The falcon came flying, the falcon came grey.”

The old man began to grumble: “If you were as fond of working as you are of singing.”

Kasya, who was standing on her tiptoes to look on a shelf, turned her head to her father, laughed merrily, and showing her white teeth, sang again as if to tease him:

“He hoots in the woods and the cuckoo’s his prey.”

“You would be glad yourself to be a cuckoo until a falcon came,” said the old man. “Perhaps ’tis falcon who is at the turpentine works? but this is folly. You can’t earn a piece of bread by singing.”

Kasya again sang:

“Hoot not thou, my falcon, unhappy thy quest,

In the depths of the lake thy cuckoo doth rest.”

Then she said:

“Wilt thou decorate the room with the evergreens for to-morrow? I shall return in time to milk the cows, but they should be brought from the pasture.”

She found her basket, kissed her father, and went out. Old Stephan got his unfinished fishing-net, and seated himself on a bench outside the door. He gathered his twine, and half-closing one eye he tried to thread his netting needle; after several attempts he succeeded and began to work.

From time to time he watched Kasya. She was walking on the left side of the lake; against the background of the sandy banks she stood out in relief as if in a picture. Her white waist and red striped skirt and yellow kerchief glistened in the sunlight like a variegated flower. Though it was spring the heat was unbearable. After she had gone about half a mile she turned aside and disappeared into the woods. The afternoon hours were hot in the sun, but in the shade of the trees it was quite cool. Kasya pressed forward, suddenly stopped, smiled, and blushed like a rose.

In front of her in the pathway stood a youth about eighteen years of age.

This youth was the turpentine worker, from the edge of the woods, who was now on his way to visit Stephan.

“The Lord be praised!” said he.

“Forever and ever,” answered she, and in her confusion she covered her face with her apron, peeping shyly out of a corner of it and smiling at her companion.

“Kasya,” said he.

“What is it, John?”

“Is your father at home?”

“He is.”

The turpentine worker, poor fellow, perhaps desired to speak of something else beside the father, but somehow he was frightened and unconsciously inquired for him; then he became silent and waited for Kasya to speak to him first. She stood confused, twisting the corners of her apron.

At last she spoke.

“John?”

“What is it, Kasya?”

“Does the turpentine works smoke to-day?” She also wished to speak of something else.

“Why should it not? The turpentine works never stop. I left lame Frank there; but dost thou wish to go there?”

“No, I go to gather plants.”

“I will go with thee, and on our return, if thou dost not chase me away, I will come to thy house.”

“Why should I chase thee away?”

“If thou dost like me thou wilt not chase me away, and if thou dost not, then thou wilt. Tell me, Kasya, dost thou like me?”

“Fate, my fate,” and Kasya covered her face with her hands. “What can I say to thee? I like thee, John, very much I like thee,” she whispered faintly.

Then before he could reply she uncovered her blushing face and cried out, “Let us go and gather plants; let us hurry.”

And so went they, John and Kasya. The radiance of love surrounded them, but these simple children of nature dared not speak of it. They felt it, although they knew not what they felt; they were embarrassed but happy. Never before had the forest sung so wonderfully over their heads, never was the wind so sweet and caressing, never at any time had the noises of the forest, the rustling of the breeze in the trees, the voices of the birds, the echoes of the woods, seemed to merge into such an angelic choir, so sweet and grand, as at this moment, full of unconscious happiness.

Oh, holy power of love! how good an angel of light thou art, how rosy an aureole in the dusk, how bright a rainbow on the cloud of human tears!

Meanwhile, in the woods resounded echoes from pine to pine, the barking of the dog, Burek, who had escaped from the house and ran on the pathway after Kasya. He came panting heavily, and with great joy he jumped with his big paws on Kasya and John, and looked from one to the other with his wise and mild eyes, as if wishing to say:

“I see that you love one another; this is good.”

He wagged his tail and ran quickly ahead of them, then circled round to them, then stopped, barked once more with joy, and rushed into the woods, looking back from time to time on the boy and girl.

Kasya put her hand to her forehead, and looking upward upon the bright sun between the leaves she said:

“Just think, the sun is two hours beyond noontime and we have not yet gathered any plants. Go thou, John, to the left side and I shall go the right, and let us begin. We should hasten, for the dear Lord’s sake.”

They separated and went into the woods, but not far from one another and in a parallel direction, so that they could see each other. Among the ferns between the pine trees could be seen fluttering the vari-colored skirt and yellow kerchief of Kasya. The slender, supple maiden seemed to float amid the berry-laden bushes, mosses and ferns. You would say it was some fairy *wila* or *rusalka* of the woods; every moment she stooped and stood erect again, and so, further and further, passing the pine trees, she entered deeper into the forest as some spritely nymph.

Sometimes the thick growth of young hemlocks and cedars would conceal her from view, then John stopped, and putting his hand to his mouth would shout, “Halloo! Halloo!”

Kasya heard it; she stopped with a smile, and pretending that she did not see him, answered in a high, silvery voice:

“John!”

The echo answers:

“John! John!”

Meanwhile Burek had espied a squirrel up a tree, and, standing before it looking upward, barked. The squirrel sitting on a branch covered herself with her tail in a mocking manner, lifted her forepaws to her mouth and rubbed her nose, seemed to play with her forefingers, make grimaces, and laugh at the anger of Burek. Kasya, seeing it, laughed with a resounding, silvery tone, and so did John, and so the woods were filled with the sound of human voices, echoes, laughter and sunny joy.

Sometimes there was a deep silence, and then the woods seemed to speak; the breeze struck the fronds of the ferns, which emitted a sharp sound; the trunks of the pines swayed and creaked, and there was silence again.

Then could be heard the measured strokes of the woodpecker. It seemed as if some one kept knock – knocking at a door, and you could even expect that some mysterious voice would ask:

“Who is there?”

Again, the wood thrush was whistling with a sweet voice; the golden-crowned hammer plumed his feathers. In the thicket the pheasants clucked and the bright green humming birds flitted between the leaves; sometimes on the top of the pine tree a crow, hiding itself from the heat of the sun, lazily flapped its wings.

On this afternoon the weather was most clear, the sky was cloudless, and above the green canopy of the leaves there spread out the blue dome of the heavens – immense, limitless, transparently gray-tinted on the sides and deep blue above. In the sky stood the great golden sun; the space was flooded with light; the air was bright and serene, and far-off objects stood out distinctly, their forms clearly defined. From the height of heaven the eye of the great Creator embraced the whole earth; in the fields the grain bowed to Him with a golden wave, rustled the heavy heads of the wheat, and the

delicate tasseled oats trembled like a cluster of tiny bells. In the air, filled with brightness here and there, floated the spring thread of the spider's web, blue from the azure of the sky and golden from the sun, as if a veritable thread from the loom of the Mother of God.

In the vales between the fields of the waving grain stood dark-green meadows; here and there were crystal springs, around whose edges the grass was greener still; the whole meadows were sprinkled with yellow buttercups and dandelions which struck the eye with a profusion of golden brightness. In the wet places there thrived cypress trees, which had an air of coldness and moisture.

In the woods among the pine trees there were now both heat and silence. It seemed as if a dreamy stillness enveloped the whole world. Not a breath of wind stirred; the trees, grain, and grass were motionless. The leaves hung on the trees as if rocked to sleep; the birds had ceased their noises, and the moment of rest had come. But this rest seemed to come from an ineffable sweetness, and all nature seemed to meditate. Only the great expanse of heaven seemed to smile, and somewhere, high in the unknowable depths of its blue, the great and beneficent God was glad with the gladness of the fields, the woods, the meadows, and the waters.

Kasya and John were still busy in the woods collecting herbs, laughing gleefully and speaking to each other joyfully. Man is as artless as a bird; he will sing when he can, for this is his nature. John now began to sing a simple and touching song.

As Kasya and John sang in unison the last refrain of the song ended mournfully, and as if in accompaniment the echo repeated it in the dark depths of the woods; the pines gave resonance as the words ran between their trunks and died away in the far distance like a sigh, less distinct, light, ethereal; then silence.

Later Kasya sang a more cheerful song, beginning with the words:

“I shall become a ring of gold now.”

This is a good song. A willful young girl quarrels with her lover and enumerates the means she intends to use to escape from him. But it is useless. When she says that she will be a golden ring and will roll away on the road, he says that he will quickly see and recover her. When she wants to be a golden fish in the water he sings to her of the silken net; when she wants to be a wild fowl on the lake he appears before her as a hunter. At last the poor maiden, seeing she is unable to hide herself from him on the earth, sings:

“I shall become a star in heaven,
Light to earth by will be given.
My love to thee I shall not render,
Nor my sweet will to thee surrender.”

But the undaunted youth answers:

“Then shall I pray to the saint's grace
That the star may fall from its heavenly place.
Thy love to me thou then wilt render,
And thy sweet will to me surrender.”

The maiden, seeing there is no refuge either in heaven or on earth for her, accepts the view of Providence and sings:

“I see, I see, fate's decree doth bind me;
Where'er I hide, thou sure wilt find me.

My love to thee I must now render,
And my sweet will to thee surrender.”

John, turning to Kasya, said:

“Do you understand?”

“What, John?”

He began to sing:

“Thy love to me thou must now render,
And thy sweet will to me surrender.”

Kasya was troubled, and laughed loudly to cover her confusion; and wishing to speak, she said:
“I have gathered a large lot of plants; it would be well to dip them in water, for in this heat they will wither.”

Verily the heat was great; the wind had entirely ceased. In the woods, though in the shade, the air vibrated with moist heat, the pines exuding a strong, resinous odor. The delicate, golden-tinted face of Kasya was touched with perspiration, and her blue eyes showed traces of weariness. She removed the kerchief from her head, and began to fan herself. John, taking the basket from her, said:

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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