Uladzimir Karatkevich

KING STAKH'S WILD HUNT

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By Uladzimir Karatkevich

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I am an old man, a very old man. No book can give you any idea of what I, Andrey Belaretsky, now a man of ninety six years, have seen with my own eyes. People say that fate usually grants long life to fools so that they should have time enough in which to acquire rich experience, experience that will make up for their lack of wisdom. Well then, I wish I were twice as foolish and might have lived twice as long, for I am an inquisitive fellow. How much that is interesting will occur in this world in the coming ninety six years!

If someone should tell me that tomorrow I shall die, so what of it? To rest is not a bad thing. Some day people will be able to live much longer than I have lived, and they will not know any bitterness in their lives. In mine I have experienced everything – life has not always been a bed of roses – what then is there to regret? I can lie down and fall asleep, sleeping calmly and even with a smile.

I am alone. As Shelley puts it:

When the lute is broken,
Sweet tones are remember'd not:
When the lips have spoken,
Loved accents are soon forgot.

She was a good person and we lived together, as told in a fairy tale, happily ever after till death did us part. However, enough! I have overtaxed your heart with sorrowful words. Having already said that my old age is a happy one, I better now

tell you of those remote days of my youth. Here it is demanded of me that my story brings to an end my reminiscences of the Yanovskys and their decline, and the extinction of the Belarusian gentry. Evidently, I have to do it, for indeed what kind of a story would it be without an ending?

Besides, the story closely concerns me, and there's no one else left but myself to tell it. You will find it interesting to listen to this amazing story to its very end, only to say that it greatly resembles fiction.

So then, before we begin, I must say that all this is the truth and nothing but the truth, although you will have only my word for it.

CHAPTER ONE

I was travelling in a hired carriage from the provincial city M. to the most remote corner of the province, and my expedition was coming to an end. Some two more weeks remained of sleeping in barns or under the stars in the carriage itself, of drinking water from clay pots, water that made one's teeth and forehead ache, of listening to the long, drawn out singing of the old women sitting in the yards in front of their houses, singing of the woe of the Belarusians. And of woe there used to be plenty in those days – the cursed eighties were coming to an end.

However, you must not think that the only thing we did at that time was to wail and ask of the muzhyk "Where are you running to, muzhyk?"

or "Will you awaken in the morning, strong and hearty?" The real compassion for the people came later. It is well known that a man is very honest until the age of twenty five. He cannot in his heart of hearts bear injustice when young. However, young people are too preoccupied with themselves. Everything is new to them. They find it interesting to watch the development of new feelings that settle in their souls, and they are certain that no one has ever previously experienced anything equal to their emotions.

It is only later that the sleepless nights will come, when bending over a scrap of newspaper you'll read a notice in the same print as all the other news, that three were taken to the scaffold today – three, you understand, alive and merry fellows! It is only then that the desire will come to sacrifice yourself.

At that time, though considered a "Red", I was convinced in the depths of my soul that the forests which grow on Earth are not only forests of scaffolds which was, of course, true even during the times of Yazafat Kuntsevich and the Belarusian "slander" inquisition, and that it was not only moaning which we heard in the singing. For me at that time it was much more important to understand who I was and which gods I should pray to. My surname, people said, was of a Polish origin, though even today I do not know what is so Polish about it. In our high school – and this was at the time when the dreadful memory of the trustee, Kornilov, who was Muravyov's associate, had not yet been forgotten – our ethnicity was determined, depending on the language of our forefathers, "the

eldest branch of the Russian tribe, pure blooded, truly Russian people!" That's right, even more Russian than the Russians themselves!

Had they preached this theory to us before the beginning of the century, then Belarus would inevitably have overpowered Germany, while the Belarusians would have become the greatest oppressors on Earth, going on to conquer vital Russian territories of the not so Russian Russians, especially if the good gods had given us of the horn of plenty.

I sought my people and began to understand, as did many others at the time, that my people was here, at my side, but that for two centuries the ability to comprehend this fact had been beaten out of the minds of our intelligentsia. That is why I chose an unusual profession for myself – I was going to study and embrace this people.

And so, I graduated from the gymnasium and the university and became an ethnographer. This kind of work was only in its beginning at the time and the reigning powers considered the occupation dangerous for the existing order.

Contrary to the expectation, I met with eager helpfulness and attention wherever I went, and only this circumstance made my work easier for me. Many people offered their assistance. A clerk of our small district being a man of modest education, who later on mailed me and Romanov our notes on tales; or that village teacher who worried over his loaf of bread. My people lived even in the persona of one governor, an exceptionally benign man, a rarity and perhaps even a gem among his kind. He gave me a letter of recommendation in which he

ordered under threat of severe punishment that I should be given every aid I needed.

My thanks to you, my Belarusian people! Even now I offer prayers for you. What then can be said about those years?

Gradually I arrived to the understanding of who I was.

What was it that instigated the process?

Perhaps it was in the lights of the villages so dear and their names which even to this very day fill my heart with a sort of longing and pain. Linden Land, Forty Tatars, Broken Horn, Oakland, Squirrels, Clouds, Birch Land Freedom...

Could it have been the nights in the meadow when children told you stories and drowsiness was crawling up under your sheepskin coat together with the cold? Or was it the heady smell of fresh hay and the stars shining through the barn's torn roof? Perhaps none of these, but simply a teapot filled with pine needles and smoky black huts where women in their warm, long skirts, made of homespun fabric, sung their song. An endless song, more like a groan.

All of this was mine, my own. Over a period of two years I had travelled – on foot or in a carriage – across the Miensk, Mahilow, Vitsebsk provinces and part of the Vilnia province. And everywhere I saw blind beggars and dirty children, saw the woe of my people whom I loved more than anything else in the world – this I know now.

This region was an ethnographic paradise then, although the tale, especially the legend, as the most unstable product of a people's fantasy, began to

retreat farther and farther into the backwoods, into the most remote, forsaken corners.

There, too, I went. My legs were young, and young was my thirst for knowledge. And oh the things that I saw!

I saw the ceremony, an extraordinarily important one, called in Belarusian "zalom", that is, if an enemy wished to bewitch somebody's field, he had to tie together a bunch of wheatears into a knot.

I saw the stinging nettle yuletide, the game 'pangolin' otherwise known as 'lizard', rare even for those days. Yet more often I would see the last potato in a bowl of soup, bread as black as the soil and the tear stained sky wide eyes of the women, and I would hear a sleepy "a-a-a" over a cradle.

This was the Byzantine Belarus!

This was the land of hunters and nomads, black tar sprayers and quiet and pleasant chimes coming across the quagmires from the distant churches, the land of lyric poets and of darkness.

It was just at this time that the long and painful decline of our gentry was coming to an end. This death, this being buried alive, continued over a long period, a period of almost two centuries.

In the 18th century the gentry died out stormily in duels, in the straw, having squandered millions. At the beginning of the 19th century their dying out bore a quiet sadness for their neglected castles that stood in pine groves. There was already nothing poetic or sorrowful about it in my days; it was rather loathsome, at times horrifying even in its nakedness.

It was the death of the sluggards who had hidden themselves in their burrows, the death of the beggars, whose forefathers had been mentioned as the most distinguished nobles in the Horodlo privilege; they lived in old, dilapidated castles, went about dressed mostly in homespun clothing, but their arrogance was boundless.

It was a savage race, hopeless, abominable, leading at times to bloody crimes, the reasons for which one could have sought only in their eyes set either too closely or too far apart, eyes of vicious fanatics and degenerates.

Their stoves faced with Dutch tile they heated with splintered fragments of priceless Belarusian 17th century furniture; they sat like spiders in their cold rooms, staring into the endless darkness through windows covered with small fleets of drops that floated obliquely.

Such were the times when I was preparing for an expedition that would take me to the remote provincial District N. I had chosen a bad time for the endeavour. Summer, of course, is the most favourable time for the ethnographer; it is warm and all around there are attractive landscapes. However, our work gets the best results in the late autumn or in winter. This is the time for games and songs, for gatherings of women spinners with their endless stories, and somewhat later – the peasant weddings. This period is a golden time for us.

However, I had managed to arrive only at the beginning of August, which was not the time for storytelling, but for hard work in the fields. Only drawn out harvesting hymns were being hummed in the open air. All August I travelled about, and

September, and part of October, and only just managed to catch the dead of autumn – the time when I might find something worthwhile. In the province errands were awaiting me that could not be put off.

My catch was nothing to boast of, and therefore I was as angry as the priest who came to a funeral and suddenly saw the corpse rise from the dead. I never had a real chance to examine a particular feeling that tormented me, a feeling that in those days stirred in the soul of every Belarusian. It was his lack of belief in the value of his cause, his inability to do anything, his deep pain – the main signs of those evil years, signs that arose, according to the words of a Polish poet, as a result of the persisting fear that someone in a blue uniform would come up to you, and say with a sweet smile: "To the gendarmerie, please!"

I had very few ancient legends, although it was for them that I was on the hunt. You probably know that all legends can be divided into two groups. The first are those that are alive everywhere amidst the greater part of the people. In the Belarusian folklore they are legends about a snake queen, about an amber palace, and also a great number of religious legends.

The second type are those which are rooted, as if chained, in a certain locality, district, or even in a village. They are connected to an unusual rock or cliff at the bank of a lake, with the name of a tree or a grove or with a particular cave nearby. It goes without saying that such legends, being linked to a minority, die out more quickly, although they are sometimes more poetic than the well known ones, and when published they are very popular.

Such was, for instance, the legend of Masheka – I was hunting a different group of legends when I stumbled on this one. I had to hurry, as the very notion of a legend and a tale was dying out.

I don't know how it is with other ethnographers, but it has always been difficult for me to leave any locality. It would seem to me that during the winter that I had to spend in town, some woman might die there, the woman, you understand, who is the only one who knows that particular enchanting old tale. This story will die together with her, and nobody will hear it, and my people and I shall be robbed.

Therefore my anger and my anxiety should not surprise anyone.

I was in this mood when one of my friends advised me to go to the District N., which was even at that time considered a most unwelcoming place.

Could he have foreseen that I would almost lose my mind because of the horrors facing me there, that I would find courage and fortitude in myself, and what would I discover? However, I shall not forestall events.

My preparations did not take long. I packed all necessary things into a medium sized travelling bag, hired a carriage and soon left the hub of a comparatively advanced society, putting the civilization behind me. And so, I came to the neighbouring district with its forestry and swamps, a territory which was no smaller than perhaps Luxemburg.

At first, along both sides of the road I saw fields with several wild pear trees, resembling oaks, standing scattered here and there. We came across villages on our way in which whole colonies

of storks lived, but then the fertile soil came to an end and endless forest land appeared in front of us. Trees stood like columns, the brushwood along the road deadened the rumbling of the wheels. The forest ravines gave off a smell of mould and decay. Sometimes from under the very hoofs of our horses flocks of heath cocks would rise up into the air – in autumn heath cocks always bunch together in flocks – and here and there from beneath the brushwood and heather brown or black caps of nice thick mushrooms were already peeping out.

Twice we spent the nights in small forest lodges, glad to see their feeble lights in the blind windows. Midnight. A baby is crying, and something in the yard seems to be disturbing the horses – a bear is probably passing nearby, and over the trees, over the ocean-like forest, a solid rain of stars.

It is impossible to breathe in the lodge. A little girl is rocking the cradle with her foot. Her refrain is as old as the hills:

Don't go kitty on the bench,
You will get your paws kicked.
Don't go kitty on the floor,
You will get your tail kinked.
A–a–a!

Oh, how fearful, how eternal and immeasurable is thy sorrow, my Belarus!

Midnight. Stars. Primitive darkness in the forests.

Nevertheless, even this was Italy in comparison to what we saw two days later.

The forest was beginning to wither, was less dense than before. And soon an endless plain came into view.

This was not an ordinary plain throughout which our rye rolls on in small rustling waves; it was not even a quagmire... a quagmire is not at all monotonous. You can find there some sad, warped saplings, a little lake may suddenly appear, whereas this was the gloomiest, the most hopeless of our landscapes – the peat bogs. One has to be a man-hater with the brain of a cave man to imagine such places. Nevertheless, this was not the figment of someone's imagination; here before our very eyes lay the swamp.

This boundless plain was brownish, hopelessly smooth, boring and gloomy.

At times we met great heaps of stones, at times it was a brown cone. Some God forsaken man was digging peat, nobody knows why. At times we came across a lonely little hut along the roadway, with its one window, with its chimney sticking out from the stove, with not even a tree anywhere around. The forest that dragged on beyond the plain seemed even gloomier than it really was. After a short while little islands of trees began coming into view, trees covered with moss and cobwebs, most of them as warped and ugly as those in the drawings that illustrate a horribly frightening tale.

I was ready to growl, such resentment did I feel.

As if to spite us, the weather changed for the worse. Low level dark clouds were creeping on to meet us. Here and there leaden strips of rain came slanting down at us. Not a single crested lark did

we see on the road, and this was a bad sign – it would rain cats and dogs all night through.

I was ready to turn in at the first hut, but none came in sight. Cursing my friend who had sent me here, I told the man to drive faster, and I drew my rain cloak closer around me. The sky became filled with dark, heavy rain clouds again and a gloomy and cold twilight made me shiver as it descended over the plain. A feeble streak of lightning flashed in the distance.

No sooner did the disturbing thought strike me that at this time of the year it was too late for thunder, than an ocean of cold water came pouring down on me, on the horses and the coachman.

Someone had handed the plain over into the clutches of night and rain.

The night was as dark as soot, I couldn't even see my fingers, and only guessed that we were still on the move because the carriage kept on jolting. The coachman, too, could probably see nothing and gave himself up entirely to the instincts of his horses.

Whether they really had their instincts I don't know – the fact remains that our closed carriage was thrown out from a hole onto a kind of a hillock and back again into a hole.

Lumps of clay, marshy dirt and paling were flying into the carriage, onto my cloak, into my face, but I resigned myself to this and prayed for only one thing – not to fall into the quagmire. I knew what these marshes were famous for. The carriage, the horses, and the people, all would be swallowed up, and it would never enter anybody's

mind that somebody had ever been there. That only a few minutes ago a human being had screamed there until a thick brown marsh mass had blocked his mouth, and now that human being was lying together with the horses buried six metres down below the ground.

Suddenly there was a roar, a dismal howl. A long, drawn out howl, an inhuman howl... The horses gave a jerk. I was almost thrown out... they ran on, heaven knows where, apparently straight on across the swamp. Then something cracked, and the back wheels of the carriage were drawn down. On feeling water under my feet, I grabbed the coachman by the shoulder and he, with a kind of indifference, uttered:

"It's all over with us, sir. We shall die here!"

But I did not want to die. I snatched the whip from out of the coachman's hand and began to strike in the darkness where the horses should have been.

That unearthly sound howled again, the horses neighed madly and pulled. The carriage trembled as if it were trying with all its might to pull itself out of that swamp, then a loud smacking noise from under the wheels, the cart bent, jolted even worse, the mare began to neigh! And lo! A miracle! The cart rolled on, and was soon knocking along on firm ground. Only now did I comprehend that it was none other than me in my own person who had uttered those heart wrenching howls. I now was deeply ashamed of myself.

I was about to ask the coachman to stop the horses on this relatively firm ground, and spend the night there, when the rain began to quiet down.

At this moment something wet and prickly struck me in the face. "The branch of a fir tree," I guessed. "Then we must be in a forest, the horses will stop on their own."

However, time passed, once or twice fir tree branches hit me in the face again, but the carriage slid on evenly and smoothly – a sign that we were on a forest path.

I decided that it had to lead somewhere and gave myself up to fate. Indeed, when about thirty minutes had passed, a warm and beckoning light appeared ahead of us in this dank and pitch-dark night.

We soon saw that it was not a woodsman's hut and not a tar sprayer's hut as I had thought at first, but some kind of a large building, too large even for the city. In front of the building – a flower bed, surrounded with wet trees, a black mouth of the fir tree lane through which we had come.

The entrance had a kind of a high rooflet over it and a heavy bronze ring on the door.

At first I and then the coachman, then again I, knocked on the door with this ring. We rang timidly, knocked a little louder, beat the ring very bravely, stopped, called out, then beat the door with our feet – but to no avail. At last we heard somebody moving behind the door, uncertainly, timidly. Then from somewhere at the top came a woman's voice, hoarse and husky:

"Who's there?"

"We're travellers, dear lady, let us in."

"You aren't from the Hunt, are you?"

"Whatever hunt are you speaking of? We're wet through, from head to foot, can hardly stand on our feet. For God's sake let us in."

The woman remained silent, then in a hesitating voice she inquired:

"But whoever are you? What's your name?"

"Belaretsky is my name. I'm with my coachman."

"*Count* Belaretsky?"

"I hope I am a Count," I answered with the plebeian's lack of reverence for titles.

The voice hardened:

"Well then, go on, my good man, back to where you came from. Just to think of it, he *hopes* he is a Count! Joking about serious things like that in the middle of the night? Come on, off you go! Go back and look for some lair in the forest, if you're such a smart fellow."

"My dear lady," I begged, "gladly would I look for one and not disturb people, but I am a stranger in this area. I'm from the district town; we've lost our way, not a dry thread on us."

"Away, away with you!" answered an inexorable voice.

In answer to that, anybody else in my place would have probably grabbed a stone and begun beating on the door with it, swearing at the cruel owners, but even at such a moment I could not rid myself of the thought it was wrong to break into a strange house. Therefore I only signed and turned to the coachman.

"Well then, let's leave this place."

We were about to return to our carriage, but our ready agreement had apparently made a good impression, for the old woman softened and called us:

"Just a moment, wayfarers, but who are you, anyway?"

I was afraid to answer "an ethnographer", because twice before after saying this I had been taken for a bad painter. Therefore I answered:

"A merchant."

"But how did you get into the park when a stone wall and an iron fence encircle it?"

"Oh! I don't know," I answered sincerely. "We were riding somewhere through the marsh, fell somewhere through somewhere, we hardly got out... Something roared there too..." Truth to tell, I had already given up all hope, however, after these words of mine the old woman quietly sighed and said in a frightened voice:

"Oh! Oh! My God! Then you must have escaped through the Giant's Gap for only from that side there's no fence. That's how lucky you were. You're a fortunate man. The Heavenly Mother saved you! Oh, good God! Oh, heavenly martyrs!"

And such sympathy and such kindness were heard in those words that I forgave her the hour of questioning at the entrance. The woman thundered with the bolts, then the door opened, and a dim orange-coloured stream of light pierced through the darkness of the night.

A woman stood before us, short of stature, in a dress wide as a church bell with a violet-coloured belt, a dress which our ancestors wore in the times

of King Sas, wearing a starched cap on her head. Her face was covered with a web of wrinkles. She had a hooked nose and an immense mouth, resembling a nutcracker with her lips slightly protruding. She was round like a small keg, of medium height, with plump little hands, as if she were asking to be called "Mother dear". This old woman held tremendous oven prongs in her hands – armour! I was about to burst into laughter, but remembered in time how cold and rainy it was outside, and therefore kept silent. *How many people even to this very day keep from laughing at things deserving to be laughed at, fearing the rain outside?*

We went into a little room that smelled like mice, and immediately pools of water ran down from our clothes onto the floor. I glanced at my feet and was horrified – a brown mass of mud enveloped my legs almost up to my knees, making them look like boots.

The old woman only shook her head.

"See, I told you it was that scary thing! You, Mr. Merchant, must light a big candle as an offering to God for having escaped so easily!" And she opened a door leading into a neighbouring room with an already lit fireplace. "You've had a narrow escape. Take off your clothes, dry yourselves. Have you any other clothes to get into?"

Luckily, my sack was dry. I changed my clothing before the fireplace. The woman dragged away our clothes – mine and the coachman's – and returned with dry clothing for the coachman. She came in paying no attention to the coachman being quite naked, standing bashfully with his back turned to her.

She looked at his back that had turned blue and said disapprovingly:

"You, young man, don't turn your back to me. I'm an old woman. And don't squeeze your toes. Here, take these and dress yourself."

When we had somewhat warmed up at the fireplace, the old woman looked at us with her deep sunken eyes and said:

"Warmed up a bit? Good! You, young man, will retire for the night with Jan at his quarters, it won't be comfortable for you here... Jan!"

Jan showed up. An almost blind old man about sixty years of age, with long grey hair, a nose as sharp as an awl, sunken cheeks and a moustache reaching down to the middle of his chest.

At first I had been surprised that the old woman all alone with only oven prongs in her hands had not been afraid to open the door to two men who had appeared in the middle of the night who knows from where. However, after seeing Jan I understood that all this time he had been hiding somewhere behind her and she had counted on him for help.

His help would be "just grand". In the hands of the old man I saw a gun. To be exact, it wasn't a gun. "A musket" would be a more correct name for the weapon the man was holding. The thing was approximately six inches taller than Jan himself, the gun barrel had notches in it and was bell-shaped at the end, the rifle stock and butt stock were worn from long handling, the slow match was hanging down. In other words, the item's rightful place was long ago in an Armoury Museum. Such guns usually shoot like cannons, and they recoil on the

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Uladzimir Karatkevich

An award-winning writer, poet, playwright, journalist and screenwriter, recognised as having conceived the Belarusian historical novel, Uladzimir Karatkevich was a writer in love with his native land. It was Karatkevich who famously imagined Belarus as “the land under the white wings”.

A professional linguist and passionate archaeologist and historian, Karatkevich excelled in converting the rich history of Belarus into works of fiction. A renowned figure at his peak between the late 1960s and early 1980s, Uladzimir Karatkevich continues to be regarded as one of the greatest representatives of his country's literary tradition.

King Stakh's Wild Hunt tells the tale of Andrey Belaretsky, a young folklorist who finds himself stranded by a storm in the castle of Marsh Firs, the seat of the fading aristocratic Yanovsky family. Offered refuge by Nadzeya, the last in the Yanovskys’ line, he learns of the family curse and terrible apparitions that portend her early death and trap her in permanent, maddening fear. As Belaretsky begins to unravel the secrets of the Yanovskys, he himself becomes quarry of the Wild Hunt, silent phantoms who stalk the marshes on horseback and deliver death to all who cross their path. He must uncover the truth behind the ghostly hunt to release Nadzeya from her fate and undo the curse that hangs over the marshes.

A jewel of Belarusian classic literature, *King Stakh's Wild Hunt* is one of Karatkevich's most critically acclaimed works that also inspired a 1979 film adaptation. Based on an ancient European legend, this suspense masterpiece taps into the imagery of the country’s rich cultural heritage to offer both a haunting piece of gothic intrigue as well as a profound meditation on the destiny of the Belarusian people.

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