



Palko

After a long hard winter, with heavy snow and keen frost, spring had arrived in all its beauty. No one greeted it with greater pleasure than little Palko Juriga. Like a bird escaped from its cage he set forth from the village, and started up the path that led to his beloved mountains. Life at school and in the little old house in the village during the long winter had been very confined. Even the windows of the houses, from autumn to spring had been stopped up with moss to keep out the cold.

Old Pablo Juriga, whose surname had been given to Palko, was neither his father nor his grandfather, but this had not kept them from loving one another, and Palko always called the old gentleman Grandfather. Palko's grandfather, Juriga, worked in the mountains during the summer months making flour sieves. There, away in the heart of the green hills, he owned his little hut which, after being cleaned each spring, had been his summer dwelling for nearly thirty years. At first his children had stayed with him, but, like the young eagles of the surrounding crags, they had flown far from the paternal nest. So the old man had formed the custom of choosing a companion from among those who came to cut wood in the mountains. The wood was in great demand, for many wood-workers arrived in the villages during the summer and they had need of it. Two years before our story opens, a man named Rasga, about the same age as Juriga, had come to share the hut with him, accompanied by a little boy.





Sunshine Country

His health, however, had broken down through rough work, and, perhaps, also by the severe climate of the mountains. He coughed constantly, and was unable to do much work. The little boy who had come with him attended him like a devoted son. He chopped firewood, gathered mushrooms, boiled the soup, and did what he could to make life easier for his aged companion. One day poor old Rasga took to his bed, and a few days later he said to Juriga: "My friend, you have no one in the world to take care of you, and this little boy is in the same condition. As for me, I am going home to die, and I do not wish to take the boy back with me, for I do not know of anyone there who will look after him when I am gone. Keep him here, for he will prove useful to you, as he has been to me."

"I should be glad to have him, but what will his parents say?" Asked Juriga, running his hand through his few grey hairs.

"Listen," said Rasga, having sent the boy to the mountainside to gather a few mushrooms, "this lad is not my grandson, as you suppose, and I don't even know if his parents are living. He came into the care of my dear daughter in a very strange way a few years before her death. Stop working for a minute, while I tell you his story." Juriga obeyed, and what his friend told him impressed itself on his memory.

"One day my daughter Anna was gathering mushrooms on the mountain, when suddenly she thought she heard the cry of a child. You know how timid and superstitious women are — they always fear the devil is trying to trap them — and so she paid no heed to the sound. But the child's crying continued. She herself had two young children, so she went into the densest part of the forest, where the





Palko

sound of crying came from, and there she found a little lad, about two years old, who ran sobbing towards her, almost blue with cold for he was dressed only in a little shirt. How he came to be in such a lonely place, and who could have left him there, it was impossible to find out, for the child knew only the one word, 'Mamma.' Anna took him in her arms and wrapped her shawl about him, dried his tears and gave him something to eat and drink, having a piece of bread in her pocket. The poor little fellow ate like a hungry dog, and then he slept the sleep of exhaustion in her arms. His hair and the little shirt were saturated with dew, a sign that he had passed the whole night in the forest without shelter.

"I have asked myself many times since, who watched over him and protected him from wild beasts of the forest? For there are many wild boars inhabiting that region."

"The children certainly have their guardian angels," said Juriga as tears came to his eyes.

For some minutes both men remained silent, thinking of the lost child wandering on the mountainside, perhaps finally sobbing himself to sleep on a bank of moss—alone, and far from his mother's arms.

"What happened after that?" asked Pablo.

"Anna brought him home to us, and, having recently buried a little one named Palko, she gave this same name to the foundling. Weeks and months rolled by and we could discover nothing about his parents. My son-in-law, at that time an excellent person of good habits, was agreeable to the adoption of the boy; but my daughter Anna died when Palko was about five years of age, and the new wife, who soon came to take her place, is not even a good mother to her own children —





Sunshine Country

so the poor little stranger came to be simply a ‘thorn in the flesh’. For that reason I, in a sense, adopted him myself, and sent him off to school with the idea of keeping him clear of the house, but he took good advantage of that opportunity, for by the end of the first winter he had learned to read. You can be sure of one thing, that is, that his parents, whoever and whatever they are, are persons of character and intelligence. I know very well, if I die, the people at my house will send him out to tend geese somewhere, and he will forget all his learning. So take him, friend Juriga! The lad will surely be useful to you. Besides, I cannot but believe that the day will come when his parents will come to claim him, and you will be able to say to them that he has been well cared for in my house—that what I had was shared with him, and when my grandchildren had to suffer from the bad temper of their foster mother, and when my son-in-law began to drink and be cruel to everybody in the house, I took Palko under my protection. ‘Tis well if they give thanks to God for protecting their son! I have never told Palko these things nor how he was found. I have never thought it wise to do so. Tell me, Juriga, will you not let the lad stay with you?”

“Indeed I will, friend Rasga, and I will send him to school. In the summer-time he shall stay here with me to serve his apprenticeship, and I will teach him to make sieves and wooden spoons, and then in the winter off he shall go to school.”

So Rasga took his departure after leaving the little boy in Juriga’s care. At first Palko cried bitterly over the departure of his grandfather, but Juriga took his place so well that Palko soon dried his tears and became his old happy self.





Palko

Now, as our story opens, another year-and-a-half have passed, and the old man and Palko feel as if they had lived together always.

Today, Palko has skipped on ahead, climbing the slope of the mountain instead of keeping to the path. He wants to sweep and tidy the hut before his grandfather arrives. The bundle on his back contains a change of clothing, a large loaf of bread, some onions, smoked meat and potatoes, and a bit of salt done up in paper. Besides this, there hangs from his shoulder a small bundle of his grandfather's tools; there is an earthen jug in one hand and his staff in the other. Palko marches on with a light step, for he feels as happy as a prince. A dented old hat tries to cover a mass of curly yellow hair, and a little dark red cape, bordered with blue, protects his shoulders; pantaloons of homespun cloth, a shirt with wide sleeves; carefully adjusted grass sandals, and a belt of black leather with bright brass buckles complete his costume. His great, dark-blue eyes are just now shining with joy. "O Liberty, Liberty, Liberty, how precious thou art!" It is an old song of Czechoslovakia—well he sings it, for his very being dances as the sheer joy of living pipes its lively rhythm.

"Hallo!" he shouts at the mountains, and back the echo comes: "HALLO! Hallo! Hallo! Hallo! Hallo!"

"You-ou! You-ou!" and Palko laughs happily as the echo throws back his laugh at him. Whoever would have believed that the mountains would give him such a welcome!

"Good-morning, son of mine. You here already?" said a voice from behind him. It was Liska, the woodcutter.

"Good morning, little uncle,"* said Palko,

(**a Slavic mode of salutation*)





Sunshine Country

stretching out his hand, for Liska was an old friend.
“I’ve come on ahead to get the hut ready.”

“It will be a miracle if the winter snow hasn’t knocked it down. Well, I must be getting on. See you later,” said Liska. “I’m away to the forest guard’s house.”

The higher Palko climbed the more numerous became the huts, and from many of the chimneys columns of smoke were already ascending—a sign that some people had already arrived in the woods. Other huts were but broken timbers wrecked by the snow, which still partly covered them. It was necessary to cross several brooks greatly swollen by the slowly melting snows, and the only green that showed on the mountainside were the pine and hemlock trees, for the rest of the forest had just begun to bud.

At last our young traveller has arrived at his destination, for there, at a turn in the road, is the hut—his hut and Juriga’s. How his eyes light with joy to find it undamaged in spite of the hard winter! Although built only of wood and clay, the humble little dwelling appeared to him a palace. Was it not his home? Besides, how wonderful to find it undamaged by the winter snows, just as they had left it in the autumn.

Grabbing a birch broom from a corner, Palko swept the floor and arranged the fire on the hearth in the centre of the cabin, with a bundle of firewood and some twigs to start it with. Then he put in their proper places all the things he had brought with him. This done, he ran to the spring and filled his jug from the crystal water that came out of the hill close to the hut.

“Well done, my son!” exclaimed his grandfather who, at that moment, entered the little dwelling.





Palko

Very soon Palko had his potatoes peeled and in the little three-legged pot which was boiling over the fire. "Prepare the stew, my son," instructed Juriga, "while I go after some dried leaves which I spied near here, and which will do well for a bed."

The twigs crackled merrily under the pot, illuminating the earnest face of the busy little cook. Into the water went salt, then a little butter, followed by a handful of cumin seed, then a few onions, and some slices of dry bread. Soon the feast was ready and off came the little pot from the fire.

"Grandfather! Grandfather, the stew is ready!" Palko shouted from the door.

"I'm coming, I'm coming, son of mine!" and soon the old man entered, carrying a heavy load of dried leaves in a great sack which he laid in a corner.

From his pockets he took two wooden spoons, and he and Palko were soon using them with very great enjoyment. You could not find the recipe for that stew in any cookery book, but to them it was as food for kings.

The feast finished, their soft rustic bed was quickly arranged. The sun at that moment seemed to poise itself just above the mountaintop, so the little boy and the old workman prepared to rest for a while. Palko threw an old sheepskin over his grandfather, wrapped himself in his little cloak, and before you could count fifty, they were asleep. The fire still burned in the middle of the hut, the smoke going up through a hole in the roof, mixing itself with the scent of the pines. Everywhere throughout the valley there breathed the atmosphere of spring, from the soil, from the plants, and from the trees.

In a few days the whole mountain began to teem





Sunshine Country

with life and animation. From early morning till late at night the sounds could be heard of the click-chop, click-chop of the axes, the crash of trees falling to earth, the swish of the great two-hand saws, the crackle of the branches as they broke and the thunder of the logs as the piles rose in the forest. Added to all this was the murmur of human voices. It would have been better that many of these should not have been heard at all, for coarse jests rose from many of these throats. Strange indeed that, in the midst of this beautiful scene of God's blessing, men should act like this!

Soon all the huts were filled with workers, many of whom appeared as if they were beings without souls, committing acts at times that placed them below the level of animals. There were, however, a few decent and worthy men, among whom were Liska and Juriga, although an oath would escape their lips once in a while.

But one person who inspired the greatest response among all that rough group of men was Palko, and as he was the only boy among them, he was considered a sort of common treasure so that it became necessary, in their opinion, to suppress an oath or unseemly joke when Palko came near. He was a great favourite, ever ready to help and do whatever might be required by any one of his many acquaintances, such as carrying water and acting as general man-of-all-work. He would gather strawberries on the mountain and distribute them to all his friends on the way back to the hut.

Juriga saw with pleasure this lovely trait in the boy's character, that toward everyone he met he showed the same simplicity and whole-hearted confidence, so that the old man used to apply to Palko an old Slavic





Palko

proverb: ‘Gentlemen were made to be gentlemen as the mountains were made to be mountains.’ He himself as a young man had been held in high esteem for the same frankness and openness of character, and even now he lived happily with his neighbours. As he himself said: “No one has ever been able to complain of my treatment of them, I never do harm to anyone. I greet them all alike with civility and courtesy; if any lack salt, cereals, butter, or tobacco, I lend him willingly, and I am taking care of this child purely out of love to God.” Juriga had never heard the story of the self-righteous Pharisee and, therefore, was more than satisfied with his own virtues.

