

Children in the Storm

By Emilian Glocar

An icy wind and a black night closed in on the deserted mill in the Bosnian hills. The wounded fighters who had found shelter here were slowly recovering and now awaited the coming of Spring. But Spring would not come. An ugly blizzard raged around the mill and the pond was frozen solid. Out beyond the garden, wolves howled all night long. The band sat around the fire.

Young Nikola strummed a small stringed instrument and one of the wounded men hummed in tune. The wind whistled in the chimney. "This will be a cold night," the old leader said between songs, "tonight we'll have to feed the fire properly. You, Nikola, you'll have to bring in some more logs so that the fire'll last until morning."

The young man stopped his strumming and was on his feet. Without a word he went out and in a little while brought in an armload of birch logs from the milling-room.

"Those will be enough to last until morning," the leader said, and looked at the youth: "Tonight you'll tell us your story. Tonight it's your turn, little one."

The seventeen-year-old Nikola, who was called little one by the leader, stopped stacking the logs and got up again. He stood over the fire for a long time, as if he were hesitating, as if he were pondering, as if he did not know how to start his story. Half of his body was lit up by the flames, the other half was shrouded in darkness.

"Well, begin once, little one," several voices urged, Nikola smiled bitterly, tossed back his unruly hair and began:

I'm going to tell about what happened to my younger brothers and sisters. Why talk about myself? I got out with three light wounds, and now I'm here with you, and safe. When the war broke out I was just fourteen. I had three brothers and three sisters. Two of the brothers were twins and they were so strong and handsome that the whole family was proud of them. My sisters were just as beautiful, and they looked most like my father. Their eyes were blue and their hair light and soft, and when they went to church on Sundays and the sun shone, their

heads gleamed like gold. We boys were like my mother, who was dark and black-eyed.

The enemy rushed into my part of the country like a storm. I wasn't at home when it began. I was at the monastery of St. George with my uncle, who was abbot. Our monastery stood on a hill and we had a good view over the whole countryside. We never expected it to come so soon. But it gathered and broke with the swiftness of a cyclone. One evening the ground to the west was all aflame. That was a bad sign. I spent whole days in the monastery tower, keeping watch and reporting everything I saw to my uncle, the abbot.

All through the countryside villages were burning. The children and women ran into the woods and the men took their stand. Terrible tidings kept coming to the monastery. No one believed them. No one believed that the enemy could be so cruel to children and to women. But to be ready for every emergency my uncle ordered the monastery to prepare to defend itself. That very evening the first group of fugitives reached the monastery. They confirmed all the stories. The monastery was full of unfortunates, children's crying was heard on every side. And disaster came closer and closer. I stood in the tower and counted the burning villages. Borovice flamed up. Then it began in Lipovane and those were already neighboring villages that belonged to the monastery.

My uncle stood beside me in the tower and anxiously looked out over the country. "Tomorrow it's our turn boy," he said. "Go and tell the other monks to gather for council right away." I called them together and the council began. Three of the brothers proposed to close the gates, take the women and children into the chapel and welcome the enemy with gunfire. But my uncle the abbot didn't agree. He reasoned this way, and said to the monks:

"If there were no children here, I should be with you. We'd take our stand at the gates and defend our threshold just as they did in the old days and lay down our lives if need be. But we have so many children here; we mustn't anger the enemy uselessly with a futile defense. We'll go out to meet the enemy face to face at the monastery gates. We'll go out in our chasubles with our banners and with all the children and we shall supplicate in the name of those innocent children. We shall beg not for our lives, but for theirs."

They discussed for a long time after that, but finally my uncle's suggestion stood. And the next morning dawned a beautiful day. The sky was without a cloud and the sun shone like gold. Mothers were washing their children at the monastery cistern. They combed their hair and plaited red ribbons and flowers into their braids. They were getting the children ready to meet the enemy.

I stood in the tower and watched the enemy's advance. Dust rose up far in the distance; they were drawing near. I had orders to ring the bell as soon as the procession of monks and children started out. Everything was ready. The children, who had no idea of what was going on, let themselves be lined up by their mothers. But the older ones were as restless as kids when they sense the knife. My uncle and the brothers left the chapel in their chasubles, the older ones took up the banners. From far off you could hear the throbbing of the motors, but in the tower the bell was still silent. That was my concern.

The golden chasubles of the monks gleamed in the sunlight, but their cheeks were pale. The terrible moment drew nearer. I mounted the steps in the tower and I heard the words of my uncle:

"Now, children, cross yourselves and with the help of God . . ." At that moment I pulled the rope and the bell tolled in the belfry. And then it came. I'll never forget it, not to my dying day. I can't even think of it without feeling all my strength leave me.

The roar of the motors suddenly stopped. I looked out of the window. They formed a half-circle and right afterwards there was a terrible rat-tat-tat. They were shooting their machine guns into the crowd. I gave the bell rope one pull and then left the bell to swing alone; I stood fixed at the window. I saw a lot of children. Like a flock of little white sheep they ran shrieking through the field, but they didn't run for long. They fell and huddled in the grass. Over to the right I saw an old man from Lipovane raise a banner with both hands. But he raised it in vain. The cries of the children died down, everything seemed muted, only the shots crackled. And over all that, was the blue sky without a cloud and God's sunshine. In a second I was down from the tower in the courtyard. At the open gate lay a heap of those whom bullets had stopped as they fled back to the monastery. I ran through the yard to the little gate in back that led to the woods. I looked back once more. A woman was dragging two children to the gate. But she never got there. She was hit, she reeled along for a few more steps until she finally sank down with the wounded

children on the heap near the gate. I waded across the brook and ran away to the hills like a coward. I say like a coward. That was the first cowardice of my life, and I think it was the last, too. I ran from that terrible place like a madman. I closed my ears to keep out the cries of the children and the ringing of the bell. That followed me all the way, although it was quiet in the woods. Only the birds sang and somewhere a waterfall roared.

I didn't watch the road, I rushed ahead as long as my strength lasted. I wanted to get home as fast as I could. I was afraid for the others, especially my sisters, whom I loved the most. I groaned all the way, but I never stopped except to pull the thorns out of my feet. Darkness caught me at the top of Bear's Hill. I collapsed with fatigue and long into the night I put compresses of dew-soaked grasses on my feet which ached and burned. Away down below there was a broad red glow in the sky. It was my monastery.

I awoke towards morning. The eastern sky was red, but the forest was still quiet. As if everything had died, nothing moved, nothing made a sound. I buried my face in the dewy grass, to cool my eyes and moisten my mouth. I felt that I was feverish. But I got up eagerly to continue on my way towards home. But no. I sank down to the ground with a cry.

My legs wouldn't hold me up. I looked at the sores which I had forgotten overnight. What to do? I looked around. I love the forest and I have never been afraid there, but there on the top of Bear's Hill all at once a strange uneasiness seized me. There was such a terrible green silence there. The shadows stretched out like strangling tentacles. How to get from here into the valley? I asked myself. I'll wait until the sores on my feet heal, until the swelling goes down, I answered myself, and then all at once I realized that in those few days I might die of hunger, for I had run away from the monastery without a crust of bread. I caught hold of a spruce tree and tried to pull myself to my feet. It didn't work. I fell back into the grass, sick with pain. I started to call. I kept on calling until I was hoarse. I heard nothing but the echo which rang against the rocks. Then my voice refused service. I wheezed and my throat ached. Meantime the sun rose, and its broad beams fell through the branches of the evergreens. But the quietness seemed to grow more terrible. What if wolves should come, what would I do? How would I fight them off? My knife flashed into my thoughts and quick as lightning my hand went to my belt. I felt happy because I felt my knife in the sheath at my belt. One of my uncles had brought

me that knife from a fair. But my happiness did not last long. I realized that with only a knife and sitting down I couldn't very well fight even one wolf, let alone a whole pack. And once more that frightful quiet of the wood spread around me and desperation grew in me. I started to cry and I called on God and on my mother. I don't know how long it lasted, but after my crying something in me was relieved and something hard and resolute filled my soul and my heart. I got a new idea. I would crawl to the valley on my hands and knees, and there the shepherds would help me. I tore my shirt in two, bound up my injured feet, and crawled from the top of Bear's Hill down into the valley. I crawled until morning came, and then I couldn't move any more. Fatigue, hunger and exhaustion did their work. My arms, shoulders and breast were nothing but bruises and scratches. Along the way I lost blood. True, I had no real wounds, but drop after drop flowed from every scratch along the way, I fainted, and that is how the shepherds found me, and before night they brought me to my own home.

When I awakened, my mother was bending over me and crying quietly. Behind her in the room stood my grandfather and the wives of my uncles. Evening was closing in, and through the windows of my room I could see a crimson sun-set. My mother called out in her joy and flooded me with questions; "What happened to you, my dear?"—like every mother, she begged, she coaxed. "What happened in the monastery? Tell me, dear, what terrible thing happened?"

I felt that I could not speak, and so I motioned to her with my hand to put her ear close to my mouth. And then I told her in a whisper:

"Mother, something terrible happened, something that can't even be told. They killed many, many children."

"Where did they kill them?" my mother asked tensely and bent her head again to hear my reply.

"At the monastery gates."

"I don't hear, darling," my mother said, and with an effort I repeated:

"In the meadow at the monastery gates."

"Leave the boy alone, he's exhausted," grandfather reminded my mother, and then he asked her: "What was he whispering to you?"

But my mother didn't answer. She covered her face with her hands and ran out of the room into the yard.

In a few days I was all right again. My blood, was good and the wounds healed over soon. We didn't even call a doctor. It wasn't necessary.

Meantime the storm rolled from the west toward the east. People kept on hoping that it would spend itself and that the enemy would be content with cities and leave the villages in peace. Rumors spread through the countryside which could not be believed. And that is how it happened that people kept on hesitating to do something about defending themselves. But the storm swept on to the east. Our farm stood alone on a spur of the mountain. You had to go through the woods to get to the nearest village. One evening a horseman rode into our yard. He reined in his foam-covered horse and asked for a glass of milk. After he had drunk he said to my father and uncles: "See to it that you get deep into the woods as soon as you can. Take the children away today." So saying he mounted his horse and galloped on.

Besides my father and grandfather, my uncles lived on the farm. There were five of them. Three of them came home from the war two weeks after the capitulation and two never came home. Our farmyard is surrounded by a stone wall and stands like a fortress in a strategic place. Besides that, our armory was full of weapons. Of course, there were some ancient weapons there, which had belonged to our ancestors, but with such you could have done nothing against an enemy who advanced with machine guns. There were also excellent rifles which my uncles had brought home after the capitulation, with plenty of bullets. The armory was in the front of the house, in the big room right under the holy ikons. That evening, after the departure of the unknown horseman, my father and uncles looked over the weapons, and decided not to leave our homestead. They had enough ammunition, and they could repulse every attack. Why drag the children over hills and through forests? The savage enemy hordes would pass over like a spring storm and everything would quiet down again. That is what my father and uncles believed and that was their decision. They paid for it.

It came suddenly. That very night. My youngest uncle was standing watch. Our dogs lay at his feet. All at once they got restless and right afterward there was the rumble of motors at the curve in the road. And before my uncle could awaken the others, the enemy was at the gates. The night was bright as day, and the roofs of our farm-

buildings lay in the full light of the moon. The dogs howled terribly, as if they got the scent of death. My aunts bundled up the children and carried them into the back room where the cellar door was, and where not one bullet could strike. The children woke up and, when they heard the firing, bothered everyone with crying and questions. I was the oldest of them, and counting my uncles' children, there were seventeen of us. Then the first bombs fell. The enemy was trying to level the gate. My uncles had not anticipated bombing. They could defend their homes and their wives and children against machine guns, but bombs came over the gates and over the wall into the yard and threatened everyone. I saw my grandfather crumble to the ground without a sound, and right after him my youngest uncle.

"There are too few of us," my father said, and turned to me. "Go and tell mother and the others to run to the woods with the children and take the path through Zoban to Dubovice."

I ran across the yard to the house. Bullets whistled around my head. Soon as she heard my father's order, mother went and got the children. My aunts ran out into the yard and called their husbands. I saw my father get up and chase them back to the children. In that instant he spun around. I ran to him. He got up on his knees and said, "Well, so I got it." His face was drawn but he recovered at once and started to shoot again at those who were dragging the fallen gate into the yard. "Go," he said, and stroked my hair. "Go and take the children to safety, and your mother and the other women too. You're the oldest man now." For the first time he was speaking to me as if I were a grown man, and as he did so he fired at the enemy. "You're fourteen years old and that's a good age," he reminded me, as if he were driving me away. "Go along. I'll hold out here with Uncle Nikola. Uncle Dane just fell, but don't tell her." He was thinking of his wife.

I got up from the ground, and then I had the idea of bringing him bread and water. I saw that he could not move from the spot. But my father shook his head. "Hurry up and lead the children away and take the cows along. I won't be needing bread and water any more. It won't be so long now." Those were his last words. After that he didn't look around at me again and gave all his attention to his rifle. I ran into the house. There was bedlam indoors. "Quist in Heaven, Holy Mother," wailed the women, and called out the names of their husbands and children at the same time. My mother cried, "Take each other by the hand, children. Nikola, take the children away," and while I was leading out a whole column of children who held one

another by the hand, there was still confusion in the room. "And where is my Jan, where is my Vera?" one outcried the other, and hugged their babies. "Milice, take a pail for milking, and at least two mugs," my mother called. "Oh, God, we forgot the bread. ..." I heard many voices behind us, but I did not look back. Behind myself I drew a chain of my younger brothers, sisters and cousins. I was going towards the woods, which seemed frighteningly dark as we drew near. Then my mother and the other women overtook us and I went back for the cows.

My father was still kneeling at a corner of the house and shooting. But I could see that he could hardly lift his gun after each shot. The shed started to bum and all around, the white light of the moon mingled with the glow of the fire. It was terrible. I quickly untied the cattle and led them to the woods. They turned their heads towards the burning barnyard and balked a little. I coaxed them as best I could and finally, they came along without any trouble. At the crossroads from which the way led through the woods across Zoban to Dubovice, my mother and the rest were waiting for me. The children were herded together and their teeth were chattering. The women were looking anxiously down from the crossroads to where our home-place was now in full blaze. "Let's wait for our husbands here," some of the women said. I knew that all waiting would be in vain. I knew that they would never come. Not my father nor their husbands nor any of our faithful dogs. I knew it well, but I didn't want to say anything and so I only repeated my father's orders: "My father said that no matter what happens we must get to Zoban with the children before midnight." My mother confirmed this and said we should go on. But the youngest wife wouldn't get up. She said that she and her child would stay and wait for her husband. For a while we tried to persuade her to come and when it did no good we set out through the woods without her. We turned back for her several times, we called to her, but it did no good. She stayed sitting there with her child and stared down at the fire which was devouring our homestead.

The trip through the woods with so many sleepy children and the cows was awful. The children kept falling down from tiredness and they cried. The cows seemed to understand what was going on, lifted their heads and lowed into the night. We were lucky that the moon was shining and that we could see the road; otherwise half the children might have been lost along the way. And what would we have done if there had been wind and snow? Then we never would have reached Zoban. The weather was beautiful, cool in the woods, to be sure, but not so bad. We carried the youngest children on our backs, or however we could. Well, about

midnight we got to Zoban. A cross stands there and we pitched camp around that cross. The children were shivering but we couldn't help them; we didn't have anything to build a fire with. And so the children. dropped off to sleep under the wide heavens.

And now* I'm coming to the end of my story.

I could almost say that in the village of Dubovice the thing that happened at the monastery gates was repeated. We got to our relatives' farm just at noon. My mother's brothers were standing in the yard just leaving for a town meeting. The whole village was revolted by the terrible news which came to them from all sides. The head men of the village were in council.

The children gulped food from a common dish while my grandmother's tears poured over them. Meantime my mother's brothers returned from the meeting and ordered that we should be prepared to flee to the neighboring village of Lesane. Lesane was a big village which had promised protection to the villagers of Dubovice, provided they all moved over there, where they could all defend themselves together if need be.

But the people of Dubovice hesitated and put off their moving to the next day. And that is how the terrible thing happened, which I shall not forget to my dying day.

That very night, a little after midnight, the alarm rang. "Fire, fire!" voices cried, but there was no fire. The bell was calling people from their sleep because the enemy was rushing through the valley to the village. The horseman who brought the terrifying news stood near the bell, and when it was quiet for a moment he put his hands around his mouth and cried with a terrible voice into the dark: "Get up. . . . Get up quickly. . . . Save the children. . . . Hitch up the horses, go to Lesane, they're coming to meet you. Get up, get up, the murderers are just beyond the hill, the settlement on Black Rock is burning. . .

Then the bell rang again. By then my mother's brothers were leading the horses from the stable and hitching them to the wagons. The skies were cloudy and it started to rain. Around a lantern, hung on a post over at the right, our poor children huddled. Again, there was that crying and shouting of the little ones, just like the night before. But crying did no good. My mother's brothers threw the children into the wet straw in the wagons and drove out of the yard. There was a crowd of wagons and cattle already gathered around the bell tower, around which the men

quickly ranged themselves while some of them carried the banner out of the church.

Then the mayor shouted to the crowd: "Now, brothers, slowly and in order. Our neighbors from Lesane are waiting for us at the crossroads at the Green Cross. So—and now with the help of God let us set out."

The bell kept on ringing. Whips cracked, wagon wheels scraped, and the sad procession moved. Just as we got out of the village there was a cloudburst. The children huddled together in the wet straw, streams of rain struck us in the face and poured down our necks, the horses floundered in the mud, the men urged them on, the cows moored sorrowfully and someone in the back wagons was singing a hymn.

The rain did not slacken. But no one cared, no one paid any attention to the downpour. The procession was drawing near to the crossroads, where our neighbors from Lesane were already waiting for us under the Green Cross. Their lanterns shone in that darkness and that storm like saving lighthouses. When the first wagons arrived, the welcome started. The mayor of Dubovice with tears in his eyes embraced the mayor of Lesane and cried, "Brothers, brothers, we won't forget this as long as we live. One is God, one is Jesus Christ, and one is Mother Mary."

And the mayor of Lcsane, one Pavlek Miskina, a tall, bony man, answered: "We shall not forsake you, we shall protect you, here you will be in safety. "

He never finished. The sound of motors started on every side and right after that, streams of light whipped over the horrified crowd. We had been ambushed. There was a terrible silence and right afterward and even before anyone could cry out, the rattle of machine guns started. The enemy was shooting at us from three sides.

What happened afterwards at those crossroads under the Green Cross can not be told in words. In the blinding light of the reflectors I saw how the horses reared up on their hind legs and how the tall body of the mayor crumbled. But the machine gun against which he had turned was silenced. His example was followed by others. In a few minutes between the enemy and ourselves there stood a wall of overturned wagons, and the bodies of both men and beasts. The shooting slowly stopped and the lights of the reflectors turned in another direction. The enemy moved away.

It was quiet for a long time. People got up from the mud and crawled out from under the wagons. But many of them did not get up. Among them were my beautiful twin brothers. They had been sitting side by side holding each other around the neck. The rain slowly stopped.

“Jesus Christ, son of God!” some woman cried out, and right afterward someone shouted in a terrible voice:

“Where is justice, where is God? Beasts, brutes, murderers of innocent children!”

As if the dams of despair had broken, there was a sudden outbreak of the wailing of women who sought their children in the dark and mud; many of them were bleeding, many of them, already cold.

“Lights! Where are the lights? Make a fire under the cross.

For Christ’s sake, make a fire!”

Voices rose on every side. Someone really tried to make a fire, but in vain. There were new cries, pleas to bring some dry things from the wagons. That waiting for fire was some- thing terrible. For fire, for light, which would reveal the full face of the tragedy -which had just taken place.

At last a fire blazed up under the cross. I saw Christ stretch out His arms over this unhappy crowd. I left my dead brothers and sat down next to the wounded. We waited for morning. "We were waiting for dawn, when the people from Lesane would come to help with their doctor.

The women tore up shirts and bandaged the wounded, so that they would not bleed to death before morning. A lot of them were scraping mud from the wheels and using it as a pack for bleeding wounds. My fair-haired little sister was shot through the leg, and the bone was splintered. She kept asking me if she would be able to walk, if she would still be able to jump and run.

“Why, of course you will!” I told her, and assured her that her leg would be well.

“And supposing they cut off my leg, like they did to my godfather from Doly?”

“You’re so young, baby, a new one would grow for you,” I lied, to calm her.

“And why didn’t a new one grow on our godfather from Doly?”

“Because they cut it off when he was grown up.”

“And how does it grow—all by itself?” she asked again. “The doctors have a powder, and they sprinkle it on your leg and a new one grows.” I thought this up, in order to set her

mind at rest.

“And where are the doctors with that powder?”

“In a faraway land, baby. In Russia, and in America, where our father was before the war. You remember how he used to tell us about that country.”

“And when will the doctors come with that powder?” she asked anxiously.

“Soon, baby.”

“But when it’s so faraway?”

“They have fast boats, and airplanes, and they can be here before you sleep twice,”

That quieted her and she fell asleep. I held her hand and I

could feel her fever rising. Her lovely hair was pasted to her forehead with rain, and her cheeks flamed like roses.

Dawn broke over the woods.

The sky was overcast, and a cold wind blew from the hills. Wagons started arriving from Lesane. Dr. Julije Kolar sat in one of them. He was known all over the countryside—a doctor who loved the people.

Those who could stand on their feet, got up. Mothers said his name and comforted their wounded children. When the cart came up to the cross, the driver reined in, and Dr. Julije stood up and looked over the sad scene. His white coat flapped in the wind. He was quiet a long time; he was pale, and when he saw that multitude of slain people and beasts he asked the crowd:

“How many dead and how many wounded?”

After these words began the sobbing and wailing of the women.

“Stop bawling!” cried Dr. Julije. “Bawling won’t help! Count the wounded, first the children and the seriously wounded.” They counted and his face paled with agitation. All at once he caught his head and said, “Dear people, I don’t have enough bandages for that many wounded. Bring the badly wounded over here.” He

rolled up his sleeves and jumped out of the wagon. A fire was burning at the foot of the cross and water was already boiling in a big kettle. After that Dr. Julije did not talk. The ones he treated were carried back to Lesane in the wagons, while others took away the dead. He worked without a word until noon. Sweat stood out in drops on his forehead. When he finished his work he washed his hands and set out for home on foot. That very night Dr. Julije Kolar took his own life. He shot himself through the temple.

We buried the murdered children in a common grave at the crossroads under the Green Cross. That same evening we went back to my mother's birthplace, and were surprised to find it untouched.

I did not want to be the witness of more sorrow, so I welcomed the first opportunity to join the partisans, to avenge the death of innocent children, and defend those who remained. They accepted me and gave me a task at once: I was to lead the horses which were loaded with munitions. They asked my mother if I could join them. She stroked my hair and said:

"All of our men have been killed. You are the oldest man of our family. Go, and God go with you."

I kissed her hand and went away with the first partisans. I was then fourteen years and three months old. The rest you know, and so my story is ended.