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The Battle of Simeun the Deacon

Petar Ko?i?

Stillness. Only the cauldron sizzles, and sometimes a spark bursts, then it scatters and goes numb as if in a rage. A heavy, suffocating smell of oil and incense wafts through the broken church windows and mingles with the tepid brandy odor that rises above the boiling cauldron.

Tell me, Mi?an – master Glišo shook himself as if in deep thought, he came close to the fire, shook his pipe out against his palm, then filled it again and threw in a hot coal... – Tell me, Mi?an, is there any way you can tell why Simeun didn't become a monk? You've been serving the monks for thirty years, so I think you'll know that better than any other. We can't say he's not knowledgeable, he is, brother, I swear to God, really, doubly, knowledgeable! There he has, at least, two loads of books in his monastery, and whichever one he opens, he knows what's in it, upon my soul, just like the Bishop of Sarajevo, without even counting this pot-bellied Likota from Banja Luka, who wears a hat like every Swabian šikutor ¹, may he be ashamed before Christ's face!

– I'm surprised by that too, people: what could have happened? – someone was heard saying from behind the tub, and then he yawned and shuddered.

– Eh, my brother, you say he is knowledgeable! He is educated for sure, but not everything is about learning either. Pass on that stick to me. Poke up those coals for me, Glišo!

– My heroes, I would say that brandy is mostly to blame for this.

– Actually, yes... maybe...really ... I don't know, – says Mi?an evasively.

– Brandy, Mi?an, brandy! Don't beat around the bush. My holy cross, he was not baptized with it but prayed like a Turk or wore a hat like a pot-bellied Likota, shame on him and may he be ashamed before Christ's face! .– if Simeun hasn't drunk so much brandy up till now that, if you put it in a trough, you could grind twenty bushels of raw oats with it!

– You, master, are always exaggerating! – Mi?an gets angry. Twenty bushels of raw oats! It's a sin to tell a lie!

-Don't be so sure, Glišo! – said the one behind the tub and yawned again. Others drink and have drunk as well, my dear. Silavestar of blessed memory, did he drink or did he drink, but they still made him a monk and an abbot and a priest too. What do you say, Mi?an?

-It's better that they do that than wear hats and hang out in Banja Luka with Swabian harlots like the pot-bellied Likota, shame on him and may he be ashamed before Christ's face! What kind of a bishop and priest of Christ is that! – Master Glišo shouted and spat contemptuously.

Mi?an looked at them darkly, thickly, then calmly, he continued as if with some sadness:

– Temper is his fault, temper! He will sit with you, talk to you, kiss and hug brotherly, then jump up and scream: “Stop! Keep calm!” and he will beat you up if he is stronger. Why he is like that, only God knows. And if we want to talk sincerely, to be honest, he has a soft heart and generous hands: he would give a person his last bite of food. There's no need to hide it, my brothers, that he also loves to lie a little when he talks about himself. But his lies, or his, I will say talks, do not harm anyone.

-No matter what he is like, he is ours! We love him.

From the other side of the church, hoarse voices were heard, echoing dully through the church, dispersed and quiet, and quiveringly they died out in the tops of the square belfry and the rounded dome.

– Here they are, upon my soul, cauldron! – Mi?an shook himself as if something bit his heart and he got up from the chair.

On the wall of the courtyard above the cauldron, the light of a candle flickered, then danced around the cauldron, until it scattered all over us as well. From above the altar near the fire there appeared Sopronija Luburi? Knežopoljac, vice-abbot of the Gomjenica monastery and Simeun Peji? Rudar, a deacon of Gomjenica. They had some kind of old cloaks on, lined with fox fur, and they carried long pipes. They walked and stumbled a bit, and a boy carried a thick wax candle in front of them.

– Good evening, founders and contributors to this holy monastery and to all the world!

– God bless you, our spiritual fathers! – everyone responded and jumped to their feet.

– Mother brandy! – someone whispered in the dark.

– You were arguing something about Simeun and the old monks, so we heard... We didn't feel like sleeping... and we came in order to... – father Sopronija's tongue tangled a bit.

– Don't sit on that bench, Simeun! – Mi?an shouted and held out his chair for him to sit down. A little while ago, we accidentally spilled a bit of mash, so, excuse me, it's wet.

-“He's not the driest either,” muttered someone from behind the tub.

– What are you saying about me? – Simeun acted as if he didn't hear what the one in the dark said.

– Really, no joke, what are you talking about my Simendaš², about my old hero and the defender of this monastery and our shrine³? – said Father Sopronija very gently, almost reverently, and they sat on the threshold of the basement. I like to sit on the threshold the most...

– Of the cellar! – someone added from the darkness.

– Who is constantly talking back and mumbling in the dark tonight?! – shouted Simeun, frantically jumping off the chair with brightly flashing eyes. By my holy table, tonight I will have to do battle with him like I did once upon a time with Asan-beg ?ek of Sana, and we'll see who has God and the luck of heroes on his side!

They could barely quiet him and keep him from screaming: “Stop! Keep calm!”

Mi?an poured a glass of brandy for both him and father Sopronija. They came from all sides for Simeun to tell them how he did battle with Asan-beg ?ek.

– Do you want me to tell you about it? Well, my children, Švabo ⁴ has poisoned the world, made it dirty and changed religion. Some kind of unbelief and curse entered the people. No one trusts anyone, so I'm afraid you won't trust me either...

– Yes, indeed, Simeun! The end time has come, I see. And the bishops have started to wear hats like šikutors and walk around the ?aršija in the daytime with the Swabian harlots, shame on them before Christ's face! – sighed master Glišo and spat contemptuously again.

After lengthy begging and reluctance, Simeun downed the glass and began:

– That was the first Sunday after the Austrian 'ccupation ⁵, and exactly a week before my rampage, if you remember, in Bronzani Maidan, when I scared the Maidanians a little in the old fashioned way and levied a few taxes. As you know, Austria had already come in at the time. The Swabian soldiers went out with one captain to Kadina Voda, pitched their tents, and they were quiet. Folks had calmed down a bit, but it still smelled of gunpowder, as they say. It went on like this for two or three days, until they shouted: “The Krajišnik Turks are coming to Banja Luka! As many as the leaves in the forest!” They say some will attack under Dervišaga Pozderac, across Poloj, then to Bronzani Maidan, and then across the villages down to Banja Luka; and others will – Mi?an, pour another glass for Father Sopronija! – And the others, under Asan-bey ?ek, will start from the Sana River up the Kozica, then they will cross at Tomin Most over the Gomjenica and attack the monastery. It is said that they will camp for the night there, have dinner, enjoy themselves, and then, just before dawn, when day and night divide, burn the church and head to Banja Luka. That's what was proposed and said at that time, and this is, my children and my Serbs, like a historical event.

Folks got very upset again. People began to hide their children and property. My brothers, it was like when a man lies down to sleep after great fatigue and is woken up in the middle of his sleep.

I, the deceased Partenija and Isaija went out into the courtyard, we're walking and looking across the Gomjenica and listening.

– What are we going to do, brothers? Should we run away? – Isaija said.

– What do you say, Simeun? – the deceased Partenija turned to me.

– I say, if you will listen to me: that we should hide away holy books, icons, crosses, vestments and everything that can be taken from the church...

– I agree with that – Isaija said. Then, he says, we could also hide somewhere.

– Well then – I continued, without even looking at Isaija, because I know what kind of hero he is – then let's gather some five or six hundred men, and let's defend this holy shrine ⁶ of ours from the damned Agarians ⁷.

We were talking, as Stanko ?akovi? ran into the courtyard:

– Krajišniks ⁸ are at the Kozica, he says! I hear gunshots.

– What are we going to do, brothers?! – Isaija was turning around like a gypsy in a cauldron, trembling like a rod and walking up and down the courtyard.

– What's the trouble? What are you so scared of? You are a monk. You have no children who will cry and stay hungry if you die tonight. “What are we going to do, brothers!” OK. We will sit, drink and talk like we did so far, until people gather, then...

– Simeun, you are always up to some kind of idleness! Your head is at stake.

– Your head is, I can see it without you telling me.

Isaija got scared, thought deeply, until something came to his mind:

– Shall we call the captain and soldiers from Kadina Voda to defend us?

– Woe to the one who is defended by others! said I like a shot, putting fire together with fire.

It's time for the livestock to come home. The sun is already setting. Gunshots are getting more frequent. The shot is getting closer and closer. Isaija mounted his horse and ran away to the captain at Kadina Voda.

– Your old ones ran away too, coward! – I shouted and fired a shot after him, then ordered the boys to call the people, then sat down with Partenija to have a drink. – Mi?an, pour one more glass for Father Sopronija!

“Pour, Mi?an, pour,” someone said from the darkness. You can pour one for Simeun too.

– May Father Sopronija be satisfied and honored, don't worry about me! – said Simeun. Draining the glass, he continued:

– The people gathered in the courtyard. Fully armed, they came to defend this holy church from the hateful Agarians. The late Partenija – I'm grateful to him even in his grave! – he brought out a whole barrel of brandy from the cellar, so that the people could relax a little and pull themselves together.

– Drink, my brothers Serbs! It's better that we drink than the Turks of Krajišnica and Asan-beg ?eko. Damned be his wife and the mosque spike!

And by God, the folks recovered nicely. Stanko ?akovi? took the gusle, drew the bow across it two or three times, and sang:

Every path mourns for a hero

Flat Azi? for the old Zalavar,

And Tramošnja for Tomo ?akovi?,

Gomjenica for Parto the Abbot,

And the hero Simeun the Deacon.

Skillful Stanko, may God preserve him, then he drags the string a little, and his throat matches it, so you would think he wasn't singing, but crying, sobbing, whining together with the string. I was overcome by a strong feeling, my eyes flared up like two live embers, and I screamed as much as my throat could:

– Stop! Keep calm. Asan-beg ?eko, damned be your wife! We will perish, brothers, we will all perish for this holy shrine⁹!

– We will all perish! – echoed through hill and mountain from five hundred throats.

– Glory to the people who will remember us like that when we die tonight defending the altar of Christ and the holy shrine from the hateful and honorless Agarians! – groaned the late Parthenia as if he had been stabbed, and his voice shook mournfully, and tears washed over him.

– Simeun, that is really something sad. Pour him a glass, Mi?an.

– Oh, people, this is crossed on both sides and it doesn't let you open your eyes! – Mi?an whispered grumpily and started to pour. – Miserable and cowardly I am, how can I face the elder's eyes tomorrow!

“Mi?an, pour one for me too,” Father Sopronija handed him a glass.

– True, Father Sopronija, that seems sad, but it is a sad story, as Simeun says, a historical event explains the one in the dark.

– Yes, yes, my children and my Serbs, my gray head went through many black and agonizing days defending this holy church from the merciless and godless Agarians, and this is also a historical event! – Simeun sighed deeply and held out his hand to receive the glass.

– Simeun, that is like a history! – Father Sopronija exclaimed softly and as if a little surprised, then drank the glass down.

– That's right, father Sopronija: exactly as you said, like a history, like one historical event, as our holy, Orthodox books say – confirmed Simeun, drank a glass, wiped his mustache, filled and lit his pipe, then enthusiastically continued :

– The people stand ready and armed. Weapons sparkle and squeal, and the glass passes from hand to hand. The Turks are getting closer and closer. Guns are shooting, they don't stop. My god, the gunpowder smoke from the sky to the black earth has crept in! You can't see anything, and the smell of gunpowder is stifling us. When suddenly the kettledrums were hit, the Turkish trumpet squealed, and the shooting stopped. Our sentry shouted from Tomin Most: “Hear! The Turks turned to Vilusi! They will probably spend the night in Donji Pervan!” “Follow me, brothers!” I

screamed like a...

– No, Simeun, for God's sake, brother! You will fall into the cauldron, God forbid! – Mi'an shouted in fright and grabbed him by the sleeve, because he was so engrossed in talking that he would have rushed into the middle of the cauldron, if he hadn't been stopped. Simeun flinched back a little, without being embarrassed at all, but continued even more enthusiastically and forcefully:

– Follow me, brothers! You who are baptized with the holy cross and whose ancestors left their bones for religion and fatherland in Kosovo, follow me! – I screamed like a lynx, and I was overcome by some kind of strong shaking and a fiery enthusiasm, and the clothes on me started to tear due to the great force.

– We follow you into the mountains and the water, our hero and our duke! – echoed from five hundred throats through the mountain.

The deceased Partenija quickly recited the military prayer and blessed the flag, then handed it over to Stanko ?akovi? with a blessing. Then he gave me confession and communion, and he just blessed the rest of the army and sprinkled them with holy water. I got ready in no time. Partenija gave me his body armor shirt, a general's coat, and the hat that he bought some years ago from some Prajz in Zadar, when he went to visit the unbelievers. First I put on the body armor-shirt – it wouldn't hurt to have it, I thought to myself – then I put on the coat, then the hat, then strapped on my saber, put my musket and short-barreled gun on, and jumped on a white horse. The horse snorted under me like an imperial steed, biting the bridle, rearing up on its front legs, and from the back legs sparks burst like heavenly lights. And when he blows through his nostrils – you won't believe me, brothers, leaves fly from the trees!

– We believe you, we believe you, Simeun! Why wouldn't we believe you? Pour him a glass, Mi'an.

– I don't want any! – Simeun pushed the glass away, because he had fallen into that inconceivable, fiery ecstasy when all the nerves tremble and flicker in blazing enthusiasm, when words burst forth vividly like sparks, and images line up with immeasurable ease, when a lie becomes a truth that one firmly, stonily believes in, and when an ordinary liar turns into a strange, enigmatic creature. – But, listen to what will happen now! – shouted Simeun and continued: We went. The whole army, the people went after me like, if you'll forgive me, sheep to a salt lick. At the mill, someone shouted:

– Stop! Who is it?

– Duke Simeun Peji? Rudar, deacon of the monastery of Gomjenica and his forces, – the flag bearer announced at the command. And who are you?

– Don't ask, just shoot! Can't you see that they are Muslims? – shouted someone from the army and fired a rifle.

– Stop, don't shoot! – I shouted. Stop, don't shoot! Follow good order and command! This is a Turkish force. Let us first ask them, brothers, what are they looking for here?

– What should we ask that for, curse their cross! – the deceased Belemez roared like a lion and

pulled out some kind of knife to butcher them all.

– Stop, don't cut! Stop, brothers, don't cut, because these could also be our people – something crossed my mind.

– Brothers, we are yours if you are Serbs – replies one of them, while his clothes are trembling as if he had caught a fever. I wouldn't say that you were Serbs, he said... What kind of a duke is that: he looks like a Swabian general... captain! Really, is that maybe the captain from Kadina Voda?

– What a captain, what ours, damned is your cross, I mean the spike of the mosque! – Belemez flourished his knife.

– Don't cut, Belemez, it's me... David! – shouted a small one, almost stuck to the ground.

– Is that really you, David? From a distance one would say that you are a real rear-guard soldier. By your christian saint's name, where did you get that clothing from? Oh, people, people! – Belemez is going around him surprised. He says, who would have thought that this was David Štrbac! This guy can turn into all kinds of different things. Oh Christ, true God!

– I'm not turning into it out of anger, but out of sad misfortune. Brothers, Asan-beg is going against the monastery! – sighed David, then turned to me: Hero and defender of our holy temple, your head will fall first. The Turks are angry with you and with Father Partenija, because word spread throughout the Krajina that you two were hiding around midnight every night and receiving some unfortunate dispatches from Montenegro and the Serbian prince from Biograd. And now it is being said again that the two of you some night in the darkest hours received four cursed and unfortunate dispatches from Vienna, in the middle of night. Everyone around the Sana believes that you brought the Swabs to Bosnia.

Just when David said that, a gun fired from Tomin Most, and a song was heard:

– Whore, bitch, Simeun deacon! Whore, bitch, Parto monk! I recognized his throat.

– There it is, on my soul! someone shouted. What kind of sentry is this? They reported that the Turks had headed towards Vilusi, but look what happened now.

– The guard was killed, it was their trap – says the clever David.

– Whore, bitch, Simeun deacon! Whore, bitch, Parto monk!

Have you prepared a place for me? – sings and squeals Asan-beg.

My blood started boiling. The clothes on me started to tear from some kind of compulsion and nastiness. I kicked the horse and shouted:

– You bitch, Asan-beg ?eko, Simeun is coming to get you!

The horse snorted under me like an imperial steed, biting the bridle, rearing up on its front legs, and from the back legs sparks burst like heavenly lights. And when he blows through his nostrils – you won't believe me, brothers, leaves fly from the trees!

We met. He's alone, I'm alone. I shouted as much as I could:

– Stop! Keep calm, whore bitch Asan-beg ?eko!

When he saw me, he got very scared, turned pale. The weapon fell from his hands.

– Get off, balija – I shouted and pointed my short-barrelled gun at him.

He got off and stood as if frozen, he was speechless with fear.

– Throw down all the other weapons you have with you!

He threw everything down.

– Get on, Turk! – I shout while still pointing my gun, – not my gun, but my mother. Get off, Turk, get on, Turk! Get off, balija, get on again, balija! Get off, Asan, get off again Asan! Get off beg, get on again beg! Get off, ?eko, get on again, ?eko! – I command, and he gets off and on.

– That’s enough.

– No it’s not enough. It just seems to you, Asan-beg, that it is enough, but it is not enough! I hit him between the shoulders with my gun and shouted:

– Let the asker get off, let the irregulars get on! Let the irregulars get off, let the imperial reserves get on! Let the imperial reserves get off, let the imperial cavalry get on! Let the imperial cavalry get off...

– That’s enough; that’s really enough! – shouted Asan-beg, he was sweating so he could hardly breathe.

– No it’s not enough, Asan-beg, it’s not! It’s before dinner, so you’ll eat better and sweeter. On one hand that is healthy, Asan-beg. – I hit him again with my gun and shouted: Let the cavalry get off, let the police get on! Let the police get off, let the pasha get on! Let the pasha get off, let the vizier get on! Let the vizier get off, let the valija get on! Let the valija get off, let the gazija get on. Let the gazija get off...

– That’s enough! People, help!

– It’s not enough, Asan-beg. What’s wrong with you tonight? Well, since you got tired, take that prayer mat from your bundle, spread it out and rest a little.

He spread out the mat and was going to sit down.

– Don’t sit down, Asan-beg! – I shouted, and hit him again between his shoulders with the gun. Well, I really don’t know anything, Asan-beg! You will rest better on the horse. Get on!

– It will be easier on the grass.

– It won’t, Asan-beg, it won’t. You shall ask me. I know that better than you. Get on! – I hit him with the gun on his back and Asan-beg got on.

– What is this tonight, for God’s sake?! Kill me, don’t torture me anymore. Just kill me! – begs Asan-beg. I forgive you for my blood in this world and in the next!

1. Austrian taxcollector. Swabian is a pejorative word for a German or Austrian man. ?
2. A pet name for Simeun ?
3. ?aba with a capital letter means Kaaba, the stone building in the center of Islam's most important mosque and holiest site. It can also mean to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca. In Ko?i?'s story, ?aba in small caps is used and is translated as shrine ?
4. Švabo is Swabian, a disrespectful term for Germans and Austrians as well ?
5. A deliberate mispronunciation ?
6. See footnote above. ?
7. A Biblical term meaning heathens ?
8. Frontiersmen or men from Krajina ?
9. See footnote above ?

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