

WEIRD CRIMES

No. 4. *Swiatek, the Beggar*

By SEABURY QUINN

THE landlord of the Silver Axe was on the verge of nervous prostration. Half an hour before a messenger had brought tidings of a great English milord whose coach had broken down a scant ten miles from the hamlet of Polonyja—even now the wealthy foreigner (were not all the English fabulously rich!) and his servants were making their way as best they could along the forest road, and the Silver Axe was the first inn they would pass on their journey to the town of Dabkow.

The winter of 1848 had been cruel to the inhabitants of the lordship of Parkost, in Austrian Galicia. The peasants, who got their meager living by hewing down the tall fir trees and floating them down the Vistula to market, had been sorely plagued by deep snows and frozen streams. Disease and lack of fodder had depleted their small supply of livestock, and the taxes of the landed proprietors of whom they held their hovels and little garden patches had been heavier than usual.

In these circumstances, there had been few coppers to buy beer and fewer silver pieces to buy wine at the tap room of the Silver Axe, and the landlord's purse had suffered in consequence. Now, when May had come to drive away the lingering frosts of winter, and the menfolk had gone to their summer work of resin collecting, came word of the wealthy *Englander*, dropped into the landlord's inn like the purses of the good Saint Nicholas into the laps of the dowdier maidens—and there was naught with which to prepare a feast for the unexpected guest.

Chickens had perished on their roosts in the biting winter frosts, one of the pigs had died of the cholera and the other had been taken by the Imperial tax collector in lieu of unforthcoming coin; only the ducks remained.

The ducks! That was the solution of the problem. The landlord would regale the Englishman with roast duck. "Come, come," he called to his bustling

hausfrau, "make haste; kill me our three ducks. We must have them roasted to a turn, with pickled fish and watercress and the best of our wine for the rich *Englander*. Ah, 'twill be a meal fit for the table of a duke! Doubtless our guest will reward us with a gold piece, mayhap two!"

Followed such an agonized squawking as never before was heard in all duckdom, as the landlady and her assistants ran a dignified and much scandalized drake to his doom. But of the slaughtered drake's harem no sign was to be found. Search high, search low, no frightened "quark!" gave testimony of a cowering duck hiding from the axe. Time pressed, the Englishman drew nearer wit' every passing minute, and only one duck lay waiting to grace the table for the famished foreigner and his hungry servants.

A trembling stable boy ran to tell the landlord. The landlord tore at his hair and beard, calling freely and impartially on all the red-and-black-letter saints in the calendar to witness his misfortune. He also cursed the stable boy who brought him the evil tidings. But most of all, most horribly, most blasphemously, he cursed the unknown miscreant who had robbed him of his ducks and of the profit he would have made from the Englishman.

"What misbegotten descendant of an unvirtuous wild pig would do this thing to me!" the landlord questioned of the unanswering forest wind. "Who would steal from me? Do I not attend regularly at holy mass and give liberally to the poor? Do I ever turn beggars from my fire—"

"Ah—!" The landlord ceased his curses and put on his hat. The rehearsal of his charities had turned his thoughts upon beggars in general, and from mendicants in general his thoughts had turned upon the neighborhood beggar in particular.

Scarcely a stone's throw from the Silver Axe stood the hut of Swiatek, the

beggar of Polonyja. Summer and winter this old man was to be seen squatting at the church door, his long, white beard falling to his knees, as he held forth his wooden basin and whined, "An alms, an alms for the love o' Christ, kind friends. Give to the needy, and the Lord will reward you. Alms, alms for the love o' God!"

The landlord cherished no love for Swiatek. On more than one occasion he had caught him in the act of pilfering from the Silver Axe's none too plentifully stocked pantry, and on more occasions than one he had proof he had suspected him of thievery.

To be sure! Who would have been more likely to make away with the so precious ducks than this whining mendicant who, though strong and hardy as any man his age in the forest-bound circle of Tarnow, preferred to eke out an existence on what he could beguile from the pockets of honest laboring-men.

The landlord peered up a stout cudgel and set off for Swiatek's hut. "Has the rogue stolen my ducks," he muttered, "I'll write the Eighth Commandment on his thievish hide with this." He brandished his club menacingly as he neared the beggar's door.

The strong and savory odor of roasting flesh greeted his nostrils as he crept nearer. Swiatek, the beggar, the man who lived without work, was preparing a meal of meat, while the great English milord must go hungry and the worthy landlord of the Silver Axe unrewarded!

"Villain!" the landlord shouted, bursting through the door. "I have caught thee red-handed. I will teach thee to steal ducks from honest men while their guests cool their heels in hunger!"

Swiatek stepped back quickly from the fireplace over which he had been bending, at the same time stuffing some object about the size of a duck out of sight beneath his peasant's blouse.

In a trice the furious landlord had him by his venerable white beard, shaking

him as a terrier does a rat. Back and forth the inn-keeper shook the beggar, berating him as only a man whose good fortune has been suddenly snatched away can.

The half-roasted piece of meat which Swiatek had all this time clutched to his bosom beneath his loose blouse slipped from his grasp and fell rolling and bumping to the floor.

It was the severed head of a fourteen-year-old girl.

HORROR-PARALYZED, the inn-keeper stared at the grisly thing. Catching his breath in short, panting sobs, Swiatek slunk into a corner of the hut. Next instant, with an inarticulate cry of mingled rage and fear, he made at the landlord, a butcher knife brandished in his skinny hand.

The knife flashed forward for a stroke; but the swish of the in-keeper's oaken cudgel was followed by a heavy thud. Swiatek, the beggar, sank to the hut's earthen floor without a cry.

As fast as terror-spurred messengers could summon them, gendarmes from Dabkow came to Polomyja and hustled their prisoner to jail.

All along the route Swiatek cried out like a trapped forest-wolf, flinging himself repeatedly to the earth and attempting suicide by trying to swallow clods of road-clay and stones. His captors choked these from his throat with no very gentle hands. Austrian gendarmes were never noted for tenderness toward their prisoners, and the already-proven crime of this felon was not the sort to inspire them with an extra amount of courtesy.

The prisoner was taken at once before the Protokol (committing magistrate's court) and remanded to prison pending an investigation. Gendarmes were sent to search his dwelling, while others scoured the forest-country for witnesses.

In Austria, as in Germany, courts and prosecutors were not hampered by refinements of evidence such as those in vogue in Common Law countries. Everything which had a bearing on the case in hand was eagerly sought and brought out at the trial, regardless of whether it was hearsay or not. Even rumor was listened to on the odd chance it would throw light on the case, the judges deciding what should receive consideration in influencing their decision.

For this reason, the agents of justice brought into court a considerable number of witnesses, whose stories, while in-

admissible under British or American law, were, nevertheless, of great interest.

The residents of the lordship of Parkost in the vicinity of Polomyja were, for the most part, wretchedly poor. They were woodcutters who tilled small garden patches in the intervals between their logging work. Each held his house and farmlet by a sort of villein tenure—that is, he paid no money rental, but was bound to work a fixed number of days each year for his landlord. This scheme of payment by labor, while it might at first glance seem the fairest treatment of people whose stock of cash was always scanty, was really one of the contributing causes of the peasants' poverty, since the landlords invariably exacted labor from their tenants at times when the tenants' own crops were ripe for harvesting, or when the cutting of timber would prove most remunerative.

Nevertheless, in spite of their poverty, the villagers had always a ready hand for those who besought their charity, and witnesses who had transacted business with Swiatek, always to the latter's advantage, were numerous.

One of the first to testify at the hearing was a peasant woman who, some two years before, had taken compassion on the old beggar as he crouched at the church door and bidden him come to her cottage for food. He had at first appeared reluctant, asking her if she could not give him a copper instead; but when she charitably insisted on his sharing the Sunday meal with her and her good-man, he assented.

They pressed such food as they had upon him, but he seemed strangely lacking in appetite. While he ate a little bread, he turned from the meat pie they offered with what seemed to her like repugnance.

After dinner, when the master of the house presented the beggar with a pipe of tobacco, he became more genial, recounting stories of his adventures upon the road and amusing the children with a few tricks of simple legerdemain.

One child, a chubby little girl of nine or ten, attracted the old man's attention particularly. Swiatek felt in his pocket and produced a ring consisting of a piece of colored glass set in lead foil. This he presented to the child, who ran off delighted to show her companions.

"Is that little maid your daughter?" he asked the housewife.

"No," she answered. "she is an orphan. There was a widow in this place who died, leaving the child, and I have taken her into my family. One month more will not matter much, and the good God will bless us for our charity."

"Aye, aye," agreed Swiatek. "The orphans and fatherless are ever under His peculiar care."

"She is a good little thing, and gives us no trouble," the woman resumed. "You go back to Polomyja tonight!"

"I do," the beggar answered. Then, as the little orphan ran up to him: "Ah, you like the ring, little one? It is a beautiful thing, is it not? I found it under a big tree to the left of the churchyard—who knows, there may be dozens more in the same spot?"

"You must go there, after dark has fallen and turn round three times. Then say 'Zoboi.' Look among the tree roots, and you will surely find more rings."

"Come!" screamed the delighted child to her playmates. "Let us go to look for rings."

"Nay, nay," Swiatek cautioned. "You must seek singly—one at a time—or the charm will not work."

The children scampered off to the wood, and Swiatek flung his cloak about his stooping shoulders.

"You may thank me for ridding you of the children's noise for a time, at least," he laughed as he opened the door to leave.

HE left the cottage, walking rapidly, not going down the road, but among the somber evergreens which reached nearly to the front door.

An hour later the woodcutter's children returned, out of breath with running. The little orphan girl was not with them.

Vaguely, incoherently, as terrified children will, they told how she, braver than the rest, had gone alone beneath the shadow of the fir tree where rings were to be found; how she called out the word "Zoboi!" lustily, then how a startled scream had suddenly checked, like the ceasing of a night bird's cry when the bullet strikes its mark. They told, too, of a monstrous form, like that of a cloaked and bearded man, half distinguished through the gloom, and of hurrying footsteps sounding fainter and still more faintly through the underbrush.

"It was a wolf," the woman said, crossing herself piously. The talk of the cloaked and bearded man she set down to childish imagination.

Several school boys told how one of their companions, a boy named Peter, had loitered behind his fellows one day after school. They saw him leave the path, they thought they saw him talking with a man wearing a long cloak and having a white beard, though they could not be certain of this. One thing was sure. Peter was never seen again.

*See article III of this series, *The Magic Mirror Murders*.

A wealthy Russian Jew told of the loss of his servant maid, a girl of thirteen. One night she left his house on an errand. When she failed to return he became uneasy and set out to look for her with a lantern. Her footprints were plainly marked in the light snow; it could be seen where she left the road, wandering into a copse of fir trees. Here other footprints—much larger and heavier—joined hers. For a time the two trails went on together, then, at a spot where the trees were so thick no snow had drifted down upon the brown carpet of pine-needles, all trace of the girl and her companion was lost. At any rate, the girl was never seen again.

The gendarmes sent to search Swiatek's cottage returned with staring eyes and bated breath. In a chest, neatly trussed up, like a fowl ready for the spit, they had found the legs and thighs of a half-grown girl—the child whose head Swiatek had attempted to hide when discovered by the landlord of the Silver Axe. Beneath the earthen floor of the hut they had found cups and parts of clothing sufficient to account for thirteen children and a young woman.

The witnesses disposed of, Swiatek was summoned before the magistrate. For a time he stood dumb before the court, not touched with remorse for his hideous crimes, but paralyzed with fear for himself.

With the notes of the testimony before him, the magistrate commenced interrogating the prisoner, but wordless moans were the only replies his questions evoked. At last, by accident, the beggar's lips were opened.

"You must have been insane to commit these acts," the judge remarked.

A crafty look, a gleam of hope, came into the prisoner's little eyes, for, ignorant though he was, he knew the law forebore to punish those whose misdeeds were committed while insane.

"Your Excellency has said no more than the truth," he replied. "I was, indeed, a lunatic when I transgressed so terribly. But now, your Excellency, I am restored. I pray you, let me depart hence. My reason is returned, and I will sin no more."

"Tell us first how you came to do such savage and unchristian acts," prompted the judge. "It is necessary that our records be complete before we dispose of the case."

"Disposing of the case" was a phrase capable of more than one interpretation; but dread of punishment and overwhelming hope of freedom led Swiatek to place the most favorable construction on the words. Smiling amiably at the magistrate, stroking his patriarchal beard as

he talked, he related one of the most amazing criminal histories ever heard in a court of law.

Three years before, during the bitter winter of 1846, he had been hastening through the forest to his cottage in Polomyja, just as the sun was setting. The frosts which set in early in autumn had held steadily, and the countryside had suffered greatly. Responses to his whine for alms had been few and small, and he was near to perishing with cold and hunger. As he neared the village he came upon the still-glowing embers of a small Jewish tavern which had burned down that morning, and paused to warm himself beside the smoldering ruins. Creeping nearer for extra warmth, he noticed the charred remains of the tavern's keeper, who had perished in the flames.

The scent and sight of the roasted flesh so worked upon his hunger that he was unable to resist tearing off a bit of flesh and tasting it.

As the horrid morsel passed his lips he became, to quote his own words, "as it were, a ravening wolf."

Rending, tearing, even growling in his throat like a brute beast, he satisfied his hunger, then stuffed his beggar's pouch with material for another horrible repast.

Suddenly, the enormity of his act struck him. Flinging the pouch with its grisly load from him, he ran pellmell down the road until exhaustion compelled him to stop.

As he sat upon a wayside stone regaining his breath, the desire for another meal like the revolting one he had just completed began to steal over him like a drunkard's craving for drink. Battling with his conscience, yet yielding, he retraced his steps, recovered his pouch and hastened home.

From that night he had never eaten any other meat. Bread and vegetables he had accepted from kindly disposed peasants who pitied him, but their offers of meat filled him with an almost uncontrollable revulsion.

The little orphan girl whose disappearance had been testified to by her foster parents was his first victim. He had killed and eaten her as unconcernedly as another peasant would have butchered a calf or pig.

Freely, as the magistrate questioned him, he admitted murder after cold-blooded murder and cannibalism. With a complacency which brought a shudder of horror to all who watched, he rolled back his sleeves and loosened the collar of his blouse that the court might see how sleek and fat he had grown upon his frightful meals.

"And now," he concluded; looking expectantly at the magistrate, "I have told you all, your Excellency. Surely you will let me go!"

"Inhuman monster," the judge replied, "out of your own mouth you have condemned yourself. No madman could have told his tale so reasonably. If there be any justice in the Empire of Austria, you shall die upon the scaffold, and the public executioner will hang his head in shame that his duties force him to lay hands on so vile a wretch as you."

Screaming with terror, Swiatek was dragged back to his cell, for his terror-palsied legs refused to bear his weight.

Next morning, when the turnkey of the jail made his tour of inspection, he found that justice had been exacted.

Swiatek, the beggar, had hanged himself to the bars of his prison window.

This is the fourth article of a series that Stribny Quin is writing for WEIRD TALES. The fifth will appear in an early issue.

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