

A piercing silence, not a bird, not an insect. Somewhere beneath the trees, from the west, from the river, or perhaps the swamp, someone was coming. Part running, part lumbering, as if trying to break free. Shivers run down the back of my neck, my hairs stand on end. My brow is laced with cold sweat.

“...*detoribus nostris et ne nos inducas in tentatione, sed libera nos a malo,*” whispers Stefanek.

“Who’s there?!”

Silence. It’s coming. The horse kicks and whinnies again, as if it’s been poisoned with hemlock. Something is coming, ever nearer.

“Who’s there?!”

Again, nothing. As if mute, gliding faster and faster. I can see the outline of this horned thing more and more clearly, I squint in disbelief; the height of a man, and the physique, but a black body, horns protruding from its head, not like those of the devil, but those of a deer. A deer? What the hell? It can’t be an animal. A strange, unknown fear arises. The fog thickens, as if it were cream. The silence is broken only by distant sounds, shuffling, panting perhaps, broken branches, a splash of water.

I raise my Mauser to eye-level, I aim, but then I ask again, “Who’s there?”. All of a sudden, the creature makes a noise for the first time; it stops, and its spooky, animal roar tears through the fog, a roar in response. I pull the trigger, the bang of the shot disrupts the roar.

The creature falls. Something cries out – a cry both human and animal. I want to understand, but I can’t. At last, the cry dies down, silence falls again. Suddenly, like an explosion, a bustle of noises erupts: birds, animals, humans. I hear again everything I heard before. I look in disbelief at the place where I aimed my shot, at Stefanek, and finally at the sky. A moment later, the sun comes out, the fog dissipates, it even starts to get warm. But I’m shivering.

“Praise be, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit!” The peasant boy crosses himself again. He’s breathing heavily. “Fata Morgana, out to deceive us...”

“What Fata Morgana? You’re talking nonsense!” says Stefanek, indignant. “Just the devil trying to hijack us.”

He’s breathing heavily too, as if he’d been suffocating. He’s gulping, gasping for air.

“A nymph or evil spirit,” replies the peasant with the air of an expert. “It’s twelve o’clock and here we are by a dead tree.” He crosses himself again.

“You didn’t look like such tough guys then.” I put the rifle on the back seat. Perhaps the peasant was drunk, but Stefanek? I don’t understand what happened here. But I go to see what I shot. Must be a deer. What else could it be? I wade thirty metres into the tall grass, my feet sinking into the soft earth. Just a bit further. Nothing there. Not a single sign of any creature. There’s a small pool of water, but it can’t have fallen in there and drowned. So it was a mirage, a Fata Morgana. But I saw quite clearly, both horns and something like talons. And it was standing on two legs. If they were talons, surely it can’t have been a deer, although anything’s possible in Polesie...

Excerpt translated by Kate Webster



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**PAWEŁ
RZEWUSKI**

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j.dabrowska@wydawnictwoliterackie.pl

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Paweł Rzewuski is a philosopher and a historian. He has collaborated with the magazines *Kronos* and *Teologia Polityczna*.