



The Plague-Swam

A. H. Wratislaw

Polish

Advanced
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A Ruthenian having lost his wife and children by the plague, fled into the forest from his desolate cottage and sought safety there. He wandered about all day long; towards evening he constructed a booth of branches, lit a little fire, and fell asleep, wearied out. It was already after midnight when a mighty noise awoke him. He rose to his feet, listened, and heard a kind of songs in the distance, and accompanying the songs a sound of tambourines and fifes. He listened, in no small astonishment, that, when death was raging around, people were rejoicing there so merrily. The noise that he heard kept continually approaching, and the terrified Podolia espied a swarming multitude advancing along a wide road. It was a troop of strange-looking spectres that circled round a carriage; the carriage was black and elevated, and in it sat the Plague. At every step the frightful company kept increasing; for on the road almost everything was transformed into a spectre.

Feebly burned his little fire; a tolerably large firebrand was still smoking a little. Scarcely had the plague-swarm drawn near when the firebrand stood upon feet, extended two arms—the burning part began to glitter with two glaring eyes—it began to sing in concert with the others. The villager was stupefied; in speechless terror he seized his axe and was on the point of striking the nearest spectre, but the axe flew out of his hands, transformed itself into a tall woman with raven-black tresses, and, singing, vanished before his eyes. The plague-swarm proceeded onwards; and the Podolian saw how the trees, the bushes, the owls, the screech-owls, assuming tall shapes, increased the multitude, the terrible harbinger of a frightful death. He fell down powerless, and when in the morning the warmth of the sun awoke him, the vessels that he had brought with him were smashed and broken, the clothes torn to rags, the provisions spoilt. He perceived that no one but the

plague-swarm had done him all this mischief, and, thanking God that he had at any rate escaped with life, proceeded further to seek shelter and food.

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