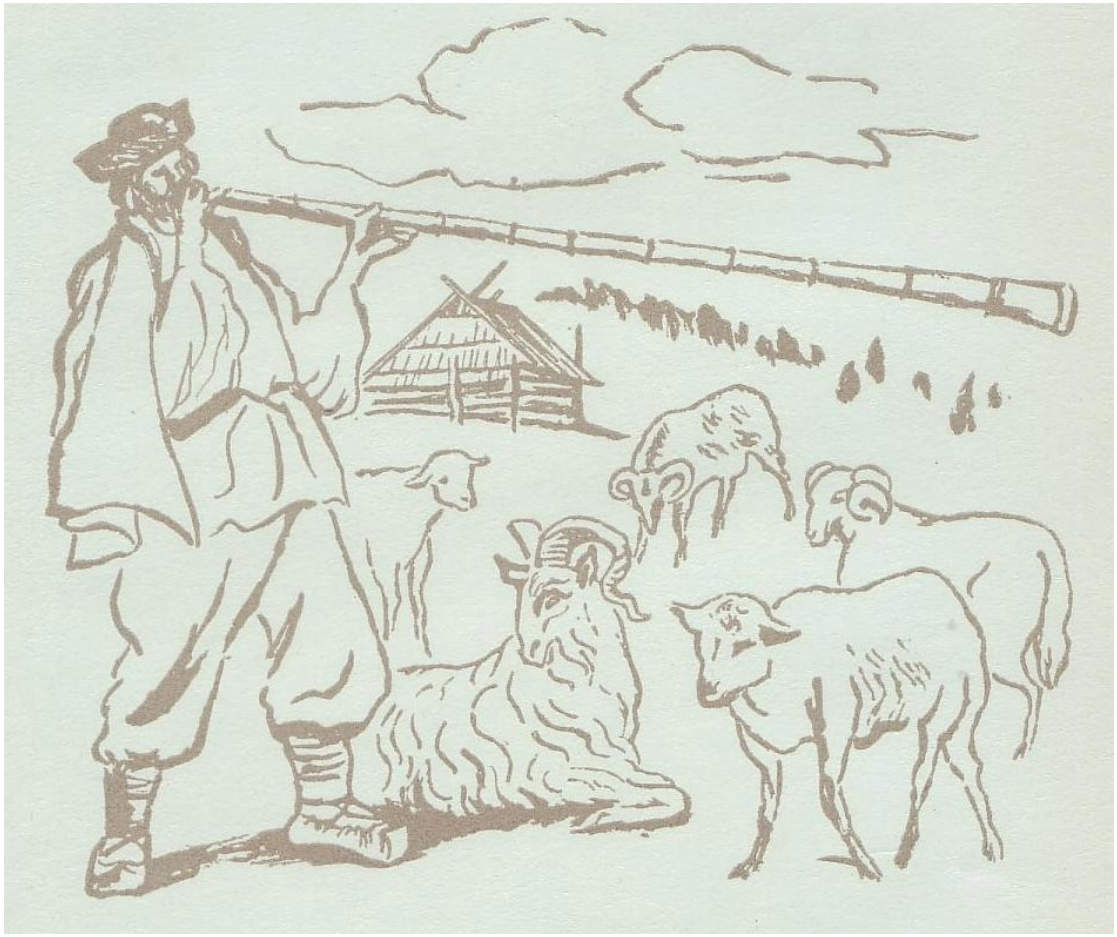
The Voice of the Mountain Horn



On the nights of judgement, from the beginning of time to this day, the three heralds, the thunder, the waterfall and the forest, take secret counsel together to fashion the mountain horn. According to ancient tradition the mountain horn is made in this way: ‘Take a piece of dry spruce stripped and uprooted by the lightning. Hollow it out into a tube and bind it closely and firmly with the bast of a birch taken from below a waterfall’.

The horn fashioned in this way is very long - nearly ten feet; but its tube is contained within a very small circumference and the mouthpiece is no wider than a finger. The birch-bark binding makes it so smooth that it shines. It is dry and very light, yet firm. It is charming, yet as haughty as a girl from the mountains. The uninitiated cannot play it, for it does not yield a note to them, not even a sound; it is compliant only to the chief shepherd who is in charge of all the other shepherds. Like living fire, it is composed of all things, of all the elements, and like fire it radiates them all back again. It binds together all living things, it binds life with death. It is the voice of the land and people of the Carpatho-Russian Highlands.

The horn sounds out for all holy day celebrations. During the midnight service on Christmas Eve, its voice resounds over the mountains, from cottage to cottage and

through the impassable snowbound forests; or it follows the carol singers as they climb the steep and narrow mountain tracks. But during the rest of the winter and during Lent it is silent. It remains silent until Easter when it sounds a joyous Alleluia and then, after that, when St George spreads green over the upland meadows, which during the winter have known only the step of the sluggish, hungry bear, staggering through the deep snows; when the avalanches sound like gunfire in the wild beauty of the cliffs below the summits, roaring out in honour of the spring. Then the horn sounds again. The song says that St George blows into the horn and when the echoes go flying through the forests, all the little birds are quickened to song.

Soon the flocks of sheep and the goats and the cattle come out from the villages below. Some of the cows are quiet and still, others a little frisky; for many of them have been reared from infancy behind a cottage stove. The bulls gaze from under their brows, morose, dangerous. There are horses of all kinds, whole droves of them - the mountain horses, mouse-grey, black, dun and striped, with eyes flashing fire, thin legs, powerful chests, broad necks, lean heads and thick exuberant manes. They all climb up from the villages to the upland pastures at springtime.

When they reach the alpine pastures all the flocks and herds mingle freely together; thousands of animals, together with the shepherds, the dogs and the grass. The chief shepherd takes no orders from anyone. From the moment when high in the mountains, standing in some rocky hollow, he sounds a note on the horn announcing the first drive up to the pastures, all private ownership is suspended. Whose is the upland? God's and the sheep's. Whose man is the chief shepherd? He and the flocks belong to one another, the flocks to the chief shepherd, the chief shepherd to the flocks. The horn binds them all together and sends out a stream of melody from earth to heaven.

All through the summer, day after day, the horns sound, calling the shepherds from the distant mountain pastures, from below the peaks, from the little meadows and corners of green that lie hidden amid the cliffs and chasms; calling them to food, to water and to night quarters. There is only one other voice that carries nearly as far: the voice of the upland enemy, the savage, terrible roar of the bear when he is driven from his victim or when he is wounded.

The voice of the horn is strong and carries far and yet it is as pleasant and sweet and reassuring as if a flute had sounded from behind the clouds above the peaks. Animals lost in the dense mists welcome that voice joyfully and hasten towards it - all beasts, from the smallest lamb, which can hardly stagger to its legs, to the bull dangerous to strangers and enemies alike. All the uplands make glad when they hear the horn, for it is their own voice; and they grow sorrowful when in the autumn, on the Feast of Mary the Mother of God, the peasants come up for their flocks and herds and the horn sounds for their scattering.

The peasants settle up with the chief shepherd and depart with their profit and their animals to their cottages or the winter byres on the edge of the forest. The horses, loaded with bright, clean wooden tubs filled to the brim with sheep's cheese and butter, or carrying packs, step cautiously along the paths down to the valleys. The cattle and sheep are split up as private ownership returns. The uplands are empty once more.

So once again the horns are silent for a long time - except when they perform one other, equally important, function; and this they have to do (such are the heavenly decrees) at any time of the year. When someone dies, the horns sound outside the cottage. Now they play a different note, the sound is drawn out in another way; they wail, yearning and mournful. Even so, there is in their call a note of mildness and of the grace of the sunny azure appearing from beyond a cloud above the dark mountain peak. If, as you ride past a mountain settlement of an evening, you see fires around a cottage and hear the horn's yearning sob, then you will know, as the song says, that 'someone has ended his song' on earth.

But now, as we follow the sound of the horn back into the past, it is not to hear notes of sorrow, but joyful, pleasant ones, heralding joyful and pleasant things. It is said that the hermit Onufry, who lived a hundred and fifty years and spent half of that in a cave in the forested cliff driving away spiritual dragons, still sends these joyful notes to cheer his fellow-men.

Adapted from Stanislaw Vincenz, 'On the High Uplands'