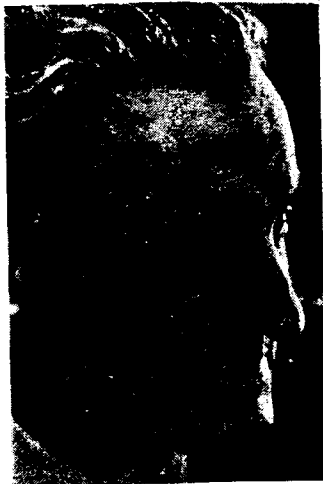


#3

PETAR SEGEDIN — Born at Zrnovo on the island Korčula on July 8, 1909. His short stories and novels as well as his articles have always caused public discussions by their critical openness. He is a member of the Yugoslav Academy of Arts and Sciences. He has been awarded several prizes for literature and some of his works have been translated into other languages.

Works: *The Children of God*, a novel, 1946; *The Lonely Ones*, 1947; *On the Road*, a travel book, 1953; *The Dead Sea*, short stories, 1953; *Essays*, 1955; *On the Same Road*, 1963; *Orpheus in a Small Garden*, short stories, 1964; *The Holy Devil*, short stories, 1966; *Words about Words*, essays, 1969; *The Black Smile*, a novel, 1969. He is the author of several radio and television plays.



PETAR SEGEDIN

Holy Devil

ON THE LEFT HAND slope of the valley that led down to the sea nestled a tiny stone cottage decorated with an almond tree. Two little windows and a door between them yawned black and empty. The slope opened onto a narrow white strip of beach immediately beyond a small dense grove of holm-oaks and a few rows of vines. The cottage stood out to one side too high up in fact for the white beach to be visible from the doorway, but it had a clear view of the blue triangle of water enclosed by mountains sloping down to the open sea. In front of the cottage was a little yard of beaten earth, and immediately below it, in the very bottom of the valley, vineyards.

March was nearly over and yellowish-green shoots were beginning to show on the vines.

Just beside the trunk of the almond tree, in a warm patch of sun, an old man was sitting, beside a simply constructed lathe, sharpening an old half-rusted axe. The grindstone was being turned by a small boy of about nine years old, kneeling opposite the old man, who had a thick growth of short grey beard. His clothes were worn-out, threadbare and patched. But the hands holding the axe, which was jumping about on the uneven grindstone, were strong and covered with wiry hair. The child was turning the handle attached to the stone feebly and annoying the old man whenever it fell out of its notch. But silence had settled over the whole area above the old man and the boy; only occasionally would a vague lapping sound reach them from the sea below, so that the old man's irritated voice reigned solely over the whole valley. The child said nothing, completely occupied as he was with the rickety handle, obviously trying as hard as he could to keep it in its notch and turn the stone evenly. When he succeeded in doing this, and the handle stayed for some time in its socket, he could feel how it pleased and satisfied his grandfather. But he was afraid of looking the old man in the face. If part of his attention wandered occasionally from the handle it fixed on the axe and on the old man's strong, hairy hands. The unfortunate thing was that it was precisely then that the handle slipped out of its notch... He knew that, but could not resist occasionally glancing at the axe, particularly to see the brilliance that the stone was giving it begin to spread along it, but also his grandfather's enormous, cracked thumb at the very top of the blade. It was that thumb in fact that was the most interesting thing: he had never felt until today how terrible and strong it was, and how much more terrible because it was cracked.

But the old man was becoming irritated and even angry:

»Watch what you're doing, for God's sake!«

The axe was old, and blunt, and was only just beginning to gleam here and there under the lathe. They would have to go on sharpening it for a long time still: they both knew it, and the old man was growing impatient, while the boy became more and more profoundly silent. But it seemed that the child was getting into the way of it, and the old man calmed down, the work began to go smoothly so that in the clear morning air of the tree-covered valley the steady voice of the lathe could be plainly heard: tsss... tsss... tsss... Otherwise nobody. When the patch of sun shifted so far that the old man could feel the shadow of the almond tree on his back, he stopped the work, pushed the lathe into the middle of the sun patch and, without standing up dragged the old wooden log under him up to the apparatus, and the boy crawled on his knees alongside the grindstone without a word, and in a moment the steady sound could be heard once more: tsss... tsss... tsss... They had already moved twice following the patch of sun and they had not spoken a single direct word. Finally silence settled over everything: a familiar, clear silence. After a time the soft sound of a slow human tread could be made out between the rhythmic whispers of the lathe. Both the old man and the child heard it at once, but only the old man could stop the work, and he did so. He turned towards the valley where the narrow track wound: the boy immediately copied him. And there, coming down the valley,

along the narrow path, was a man holding a tightly tied goat beside him. The old man immediately looked away from the man coming towards them along the path, but the new arrival seemed far more interesting to the child and it was only when the old man said morosely: »Hmm, Miko the Shepherd!« that the boy turned away, taking the words to mean what they really meant: »Get back to work!«

»Hmm, Miko the Shepherd!...« he repeated when the grindstone began to turn again.

For the first time the boy felt a certain relief: he had caught a warmer note in his grandfather's voice. This gave him courage and, as the lathe was turning steadily, he said himself:

»With a goat...«

»With a goat,« replied the old man with undisguised scorn, and then added: »A buck, a buck, not a goat!«

His words sounded at once somehow wearily superior, so that the boy no longer dared to reply, but he looked round to see Miko the Shepherd and the animal better, which naturally immediately caused the handle to fall out of its notch. Surprisingly enough the old man did not take any notice; he waited calmly for the boy to replace the handle—and the work began again. Again came the steady: tsss... tsss... tsss... and in between more and more distinctly the footsteps of Miko the Shepherd and the jumping and stumbling of his strong, self-willed goat. The old man and the boy applied themselves to their work, and it began to go smoothly and steadily until they heard a bleating voice behind them:

»God be with you...«

But as no-one replied at once, he raised his voice, which really did resemble a bleat:

»God, God be with you!... Here I go with my buck always alone, and you keep sharpening and sharpening all day long...«

The old man lifted up the axe, turned the blade towards the sun, frowned examining it, and answered without looking at Miko the Shepherd:

»Yes, I keep sharpening...«

»And I'm taking my scallawag!...« bleated Miko the Shepherd, stopping beside them.

The boy gazed at the goat. The whole place was filled with the animal's acrid smell. And the boy felt that a strange, unfamiliar world had suddenly begun to be present... The goat had skittishly tensed its muscles, leaning up against Miko as though it were challenging all present with some invisible power, but it changed its stance immediately: it raised its head, bleated dully and jerkily, trembling all over, then wrenched its master to one side with extraordinary strength. The child was terrified and stepped away from the grindstone and his grandfather greeted his alarm with an unfamiliar muffled laugh, and was joined at once by Miko the Shepherd's bleating chuckle. The child looked from one to the other and felt himself alone... Neither grandad nor Miko the Shepherd had been on his side!

Its head bent, with its dirty, wispy beard and yellowish hairy muzzle, the goat was standing calmly, stretching the short rope that tied him, occasionally bleating tremulously as though it wanted to say something scornful about the company surrounding it. And when

Miko the Shepherd pulled the rope tighter, the goat stood up on its hind legs, bent its head further and butted him. Miko the Shepherd was skittish at avoiding its blows so that the fight turned into a game. Then the boy laughed out loud. It was clearly the laughter by which one escapes from fear, but only for a moment, before the fear grips one again. His attention was particularly drawn by Miko's face, which was glowing all over with a kind of oily laughter and seemed puzzlingly dangerous to the child. It could be said that what had created this situation which was all of a sudden so strange and so unusual.

»I'd like to do it here, inside...« said Miko the Shepherd, in a voice full of laughter.

»No! No, not here! Up in the sheep shed...« replied grandfather quite serious now.

Miko the Shepherd set off staggering: now he pulled the goat, now the goat him. And in a moment they disappeared on the steep path up the slope behind the cottage. The old man and the boy applied themselves once again to their task. The goat's smell still filled the air: the child thought that that was annoying grandfather because his hands grasped the axe more tightly now, and his other thumb, the broader, coarser one, had come up beside the cracked one, and the two together looked even more terrible than ever. The child now looked more closely at his own hand on the grindstone comparing it with grandfather's and his fear grew stronger in him: his solitude increasingly acute. And the work simply would not go right: the handle kept falling out so that grandfather finally turned furiously on him:

»Has the buck bewitched you, in God's name?!«

The boy pulled himself together, gathered all his attention and somehow the work began to go better. Once again a deep silence reigned, broken only by the regular sound of the grindstone: tsss... tsss... tsss... But it did not last long and from the hill above came a muffled broken bleat... Fear and alarm once more overcame the boy. Then they heard a dull blow, followed by a second and a third, accompanied by the animal's deep, broken and distorted bleating. There was a short pause. The boy sighed with relief. But soon they heard again the muffled, dull blows accompanied by the animal's distorted pained cries...

»Hmmm... He's begun!« muttered grandfather and, lifting the axe from the grindstone, began to look first at one side, then the other, holding it towards the sun. The blows which were now coming regularly from the hillside became less frequent, but still accompanied by the animal's distorted bleat.

The boy could not contain himself:

»He'll kill it...«

»No, no he won't... He's spaying it...« then, as though questioning the child, he went on: »you know, so that it won't be a buck any more...«

The boy felt they had begun a more direct conversation and asked:

»Why?«

»Turn the handle!« the old man replied curtly. They set to work: now the regular swish of the grindstone was no longer the only sound to be heard, it was interrupted by the dull blows and the torn, already painfully helpless response of the animal. Finally grandfather spoke:

»Your grandmother is marrying her son, and it's needed for the feast...« The old man spoke from somewhere far off and talked of his wife as of a stranger, who was the boy's grandmother but nothing to him, and he did not wish to speak of his son as his son.

The child was silent. His grandfather's words only increased his isolation, and now the already less frequent painful-helpless bleating firmly established his fear and insecurity: something extraordinary was happening today!... He said nothing and wished he could disappear in the silence. The old man was looking at the axe again: it was really beginning to gleam properly now... To satisfy himself that the work was going well, he ran his cracked thumb over the blade. When he had put it back on the grindstone, his voice too seemed to tremble:

»Eh... Now it'll cut well and no mistake... First we'll have the old almond in front of the house down...«

»Why the almond?« The boy was startled. He had grown fond of the tree: he used to pick its fruit and clamber in its branches, and he boasted about it to the other boys.

»Then the holm-oak in Vučja! And the pines in Smrč. One, two... A good axe by God, and sharp now too...« Grandfather became very enthusiastic raising first one and then the other side of the axe to his face, then running both thumbs over its blade and a strange elation began to gleam in his eyes. And from up on the hill came the ever more painful, dark and torn bleating of the animal, always following the dull, now infrequent blows. The boy felt that grandfather's delight had been somehow caused by that stricken voice, which rose out of the silence and then sank back into it. This consciousness began to be a kind of obstacle to his thinking: as though it really was not possible to think any further... But he soon got over this obstacle and it was as though he had discovered something new in the world! Ah, yes, that was what this world was like!... His hand had already grown used to holding the handle and now he could look more freely at his grandfather's hairy hands, his cracked thumb and bearded face. It all looked suddenly different, more remote and hostile.

»It'll cut the pines well... Ahaa... And then we'll prepare the wood properly! And that priest Jerko will be able to look at himself, now in one side, now in the other... Ah, yes, Jerko, my friend, this arm is not as feeble as yours! It still knows how to do things as it should. Ah yes, by God!... Ha, ha ha...«

The boy was turning the handle almost mechanically and watching the old man, observing his irritation, and felt how remote from him he was becoming, how unfamiliar. And this feeling loosed in him an insecurity he had not known till now. And, up on the hill, the animal cried ever more painfully, hoarsely, helplessly. At last the blade began to gleam more brightly in grandfather's eyes. And as if in some way connected with this gleam a soft woman's voice was heard from far up the valley, melting in the joy of its song:

»Oh, my hawk, fly high for me,
For love is deep, deep as the sea...«

But the song stopped as soon as it had begun — as though it had never been. The boy listened and the handle fell out again... The old man was furious, he threw the axe down on the ground and shouted at the boy:

»Admit it, holy devil, you were with her...«

»Oh, come on, Jure!«

»You should be dealt with like the buck...«

A racket started up in the cottage. Miko the Shepherd rushed out of the dark doorway and waddled off along the path up the valley with a comic, waddling run. Yelling, grandfather ran straight out after him, grabbed the axe and, staggering as he ran, shouted:

»Stop the buck! He should be spayed, by Christ, hold him! Stop the buck, stop the holy devil...«

The boy got up and ran behind the cottage, terrified. Holy devil, holy devil rang in his ears and his despair became still greater. A »holy devil« had come, that is why things were as they were... Hiding in a bush, he began to sob. He knew that a devil could not be holy, and there, it had happened... Ah, so that was the world! Suddenly he knew.

His grandfather must be coming, judging by the approaching swearing... and sure enough, he finally returned to the cottage and calmed down. The boy then dragged himself out of the bush and crept up to the cottage. The lathe and the handle thrown down beside it were still there, but the axe had gone.

Dusk was gathering fast, but it was still quite easy to see. The child sat down beside the wall of the little house, immediately opposite the lathe. His sobs shook his chest: only he and the wind in the almond tree could be heard. But suddenly it was all broken into by loud snoring from the cottage. The boy listened: the snoring became deep and muffled. Then he felt that the world had become completely empty... In a little while it would be night. His hand in his pocket came of its own accord upon his little knife and the thought that would save him burst on him: ah, grandad is asleep, and I can sharpen my knife as he did the axe! This idea dispelled his fear. He got up, knelt by the grindstone, fixed the handle in its place and began to turn the stone with one hand while he held the blade of his knife against it with the other. He could see his own thumb on the blade. Then the sound came, irregular and barely audible: tsss... tsss... But the loud snoring drowned it all. It lasted only a short time, and the child thought he could hear the stifled, broken croak again, the moaning from up on the hill... He listened, stopping the grindstone. No-one, only the snoring from the cottage and the wind in the almond tree... Or was there?!... Was that not the same voice?! The Holy Devil! — broke on him and he clearly felt that it was already dark around him. He threw down the knife and pushed the grindstone away and dashed towards the cottage, shouting:

»Grandad, grandad!...«

He rushed into the cottage, and touched grandfather's head and the arm on which it was resting on the table. He tightly squeezed that hand, familiar again now. Grandfather shifted, muttering, sleepily raised his head and murmured:

»Ah, ah, what's happened, eh?...« And, as though everything that had happened and was happening had suddenly become clear to him, he laid his head down on his hands again, muttering: »Nothing, nothing, I know, nothing has happened, I know...« And sank once again into sleep, snoring noisily.

The boy stared at the door, expecting him, the holy devil, with his terrible eye, to appear. Listening like that and scarcely breathing,

he felt his hand, the one that had been turning the grindstone, gripping his grandfather's terrible, cracked thumb. And that gave him courage...

And outside night had already fallen, slowly wiping away all things: the cottage, the almond tree, the grindstone with its handle, and the valley. The heavy smell of the animal was still in the air... There remained only the rare murmur of the sea, coming from down below in the already dense darkness below the cottage.

»That's right, nothing, nothing has happened...« whispered the boy and that thought began to shine clearly in his mind.

Translated by Celia Williams

»Go and tell him it's enough, in God's name...«

The boy was taken aback, and, not understanding at first what it was all about, stood staring at the old man, expecting some terrible ill from the events around him... The old man looked at him still more furiously and shouted:

»Up there! In the hut! Tell him!«

The boy jumped up and dashed up the side of the hill still not grasping what it was about. He approached the low shed quite mechanically, as though drawn by the animal's already half-dead croaking, but he did not dare go right up to it. And then, as though he had suddenly realised what grandfather meant, he called out:

»Uncle Mikula, uncle Miko...!«

Silence. A long silence; so long that the boy was frightened... Only a strange moving and fidgeting in the little hut. And then finally Miko the Shepherd came out, bending right over, his face red and shining. When he saw the boy he broke into a broad smile and looked at him enquiringly.

»Grandpa says it's enough now...«

»What?!«

»It's enough...«

»Ah, enough... Yes, it is, it is, enough. I'll just rub his sore places with oil and vinegar...« mumbled Miko the Shepherd going back into the stone shed as though he were talking to someone who had been working with him at something up till now. Then the animal began to cry again in its hoarse croak, which the boy's ear could scarcely catch. The child did not stir: everything had grown dark around him... At last Miko the Shepherd appeared, bending in the doorway and called him:

»Come, come and see him, my scallawag, he's a different man now... But watch out, because... he's awake...«

The child was overcome by real panic because of that face and that voice, and because of that narrow, low doorway which concealed darkness and a fearful sight from which the dull pained croak was still coming, barely audibly. Only when Miko the Shepherd had gone down the hill to the cottage, where grandfather was waiting for him, did the boy dare approach the dark opening. But he still did not go in... A sombre, motionless silence filled it now. But a strip of light falling through the broken stone-tiled roof revealed the sight nonetheless! The goat was lying stretched out on the floor by the wall and the child felt that one of the animal's eyes was staring at him with a terrible look... The Devil! He jumped as though scalded and ran down towards the cottage and grandfather.

Miko the Shepherd and grandfather were already talking loudly. The boy went up to the cottage door and leaned in the doorway. In the halfdarkness, grandfather and Miko the Shepherd were sitting at an old, dirty table, drinking wine from old, stained glasses. It all smelt of the animal lying up there in the low shed, quite voiceless now. Grandfather was draining glass after glass, laughing out loud and teasing Miko the Shepherd:

»You stink, you randy old buck!«

»I've rubbed him well with oil and vinegar, so the best of luck to you!« replied Miko the Shepherd calmly.

»Oil and vinegar, eh?... Vinegar, too! Ha, ha, ha!...«

»Uh, why not?«

»And you sleep with your wife and her sister, you holy devil! You're nothing but an old buck yourself!...«

»Well, in three days, if he's not all right up there, you call me...«

»Why aren't you drinking, holy devil?«

»I'm drinking, I'm drinking...«

»What a stench, you infernal monster!«

»The buck's alive in me, and how; yours is quite dead now!« he chanted turning his whole self into an obsequious, greasy smile.

The old man frowned, grasped the table with his heavy hands and shook it, shouting:

»And with your wife's sister, holy devil, eh?...«

Miko the Shepherd's sly, sharp eyes laughed, watering helplessly, and his blunt little hands fumbled round the dirty glass that was still full of wine. He looked closely at the old man who had quite abandoned himself to his drunken fury.

The child felt that something terrible must have happened somewhere, and he was now feeling the spray from it, splashed as by some sea. And everything was changing around him: grandfather and Miko the Shepherd seemed different people, unfamiliar. He could never have imagined them like this. Something caught in his throat unexpectedly. But neither grandfather nor Miko the Shepherd was there for him to turn to. They were drinking, shouting waving their arms. The wine and some unknown force had carried them away. And the boy moved away from the door and sat under the tree. He looked round to see whether there was anyone who could free him from this terrible loneliness, but there was no-one: the first gentle dusk was falling and a cool breeze was bringing everything to life, slinking almost unheard along the valley, whispering in the vines and above him in the branches of the almond tree. Immediately beside him, on the ground, stood the old lathe with the handle, which he had been turning until a short time before. And the apparatus absorbed all his thoughts for a while. And there, by the door, leaning against the wall, was the axe, already fixed into its new handle: the sharpened blade gleamed in the twilight. He remembered how his grandfather had lifted it to his face. And it suddenly seemed like a strange being, which was going to cut down his almond, holm oak, pines and prepare all the wood for Jerko the priest. Then he heard the drunken noises in the cottage clearly: grandfather was shouting and trying to get something from Miko the Shepherd, something to do with Jerko the priest in fact... But the glimmering axe blade caught his attention again: the steel shone as though it were smiling... All the same, something was missing here! He turned and began to look around the yard for something he had forgotten, but he could not find anything. Then he suddenly realized: the creature up there in the shed, the creature who had looked at him with its terrible eye... Frightened he turned towards the valley where Miko the Shepherd had come from, and he felt he could see the goat proudly and defiantly resisting him, Miko the Shepherd, tensing his muscles and bending his big dirty head with its yellow eyes which looked nowhere... »How is it possible,« thought the boy—once that, and now this!« But then the shouting in the cottage became bawling:

»You did, you did, admit it!« grandfather was yelling.

»Come on, come on, Jure, don't be crazy.«