

The witch and the hermit

By Mira Petrović

A man called Pietro had always lived a pious life. Known as a holy man, he spent his days in seclusion on the southern slopes of a famous hill in Split called Marjan. His mother wanted him to have a family, but she could not go against his calling. Other children she knew would run around the neighbourhood, or go swimming in the sea, but Pietro would stay in his room to pray. It was no wonder then that at the age of fifteen he moved to the hermitage caves, where he lived with other eremites, who had dedicated their lives to God and prayer.

He did not mind living in solitude. After all, every morning he enjoyed the view of the whole town of Split, surrounded by the Adriatic sea and the islands on one side, and nearby mountains of Mosor and Kozjak on the other. He felt at peace in the midst of Marjan, which was a spiritual haven for many citizens of this Mediterranean town. Those who wanted to express their faith would often go on a pilgrimage to the hill, where they would try to forget their troubles and ask God for help. Walking through the forest relaxed and invigorated them at the same time. They would listen to crickets chirping and birds humming, and they would pretend to hear the voice of God coming from the sacred soil.

Of course – in ancient times – Emperor Diocletian had a different idea. He built his palace fairly close to Marjan because he wanted to have enough space for physical exercise. However, Marjan was a vast area of dense pine forest and only a part of it was used as a recreational area. As you moved deeper into the forest, the terrain became more rugged and inaccessible, which is why this area of wilderness remained detached from the rest of the town, which kept burgeoning around the Palace.

The Hermitage Cave, in which Pietro lived, had been built into the southern cliffs of Marjan, just behind St Jerome Church. Saint Jerome is the patron saint of Dalmatia, who is believed to have lived in that cave and written his works there. This particular cave was not the only eremite dwelling on Marjan, but it was Pietro's favourite place in the world, both isolated and close enough to the Riva. Hermits lived there in poverty, mainly on charity and St Jerome Church was the place where they would collect food supplies. It also gave them the chance to talk to other inhabitants of Split, who would always ask them for advice.

One day Pietro heard a story of a young widow Lucia who had recently lost her husband in the battles with the Turks. A pilgrim told him the story while he was on his regular walks through the forest. Lucia had just got married and two months later her husband died. She did not have a family of her own and she was all alone. Pietro felt sorry for the girl and he wanted to do some good in the world. Since people visited eremites on their way to church and brought food with them, he decided to share his food with this poor woman in exchange for some chores she would do for him. It was common knowledge that he 'adopted' her and people praised him for such a noble act. She was twenty-five at the time and she was very beautiful. Pietro was only twenty-two. He did not talk much and he was socially awkward. He

wanted to make her feel comfortable and welcome. Contemplating misfortunes of others had always made him feel closer to God. He planned to tell her that God was there to protect her; to assure her that having faith in him was the only thing that alleviated our suffering.

When Lucia visited Pietro for the first time, she did not know where to stand nor how to behave. He offered her a rock to sit on and they shared some bread and cheese. He asked her about her husband, but she was not very talkative. In fact, she was really shy, afraid of saying anything except: thank you. She knew that she was just a simple girl and that Pietro was a man of God who had decided to take her under his wing.

Pietro, on the other hand, could not ignore her long hair and big brown eyes which spoke of sadness. He felt different in her presence, so he decided to steer clear of her. He became brusque and impatient whenever he was around her. He lost his inner peace and tranquil state of mind, which had always accompanied him in his life. This constant agitation became the source of fatigue, and Pietro did not know how to shake it off.

The interior of the hermitage was spacious, so he would usually hide behind a rock, vehemently immersed in long prayers while Lucia washed his clothes, prepared the meal and collected water that was dripping from a hole on the roof. She was quiet and meticulous and yet – her presence exasperated him immensely. After two or three hours she would go back home, and Pietro would be left alone in distress. He did not understand his emotions, which is why he found them baffling. He was convinced that Lucia had cast some devilish spell on his body and soul. He did not want to talk to her anymore. He fasted and prayed, but to no avail.

When Lucia came to visit one day, he grabbed her by the hand and started to kiss her. She managed to pull away and ran as fast as she could. Wait!, he shouted, but he did not chase her. It was a three kilometre walk from the woods to the centre of the town, and Lucia was faster than lightning. She felt alone and afraid. Terrified of her present and her future, of Pietro's actions and her helplessness. When she got closer to the Riva, she leaned on the wall and tried to calm her breathing. It was windy and the sea looked ominous. She longed for her husband. Suddenly, her fear turned into anger, her despair into fury.

That man is not who he says he is!, she told the city prince.

What are you saying?, he said, indifferent to her story.

He should be a man of God!, she screamed, but he ignored her silly accusation.

When they kicked her out, Lucia realised she had been a fool. Why would anyone pay attention to her words?

Pietro was furious when the news reached him. He paced back and forth around the cave, determined to have his revenge upon this common girl who had decided to disobey him.

During that period of the second half of the sixteenth century, there was a great famine and food scarcity in Dalmatia. People were exhausted from everyday struggles with the Turks who, after several violent attempts, finally occupied the Klis fortress. Hunger and plague ravaged the town of Split. There were only one thousand and eight hundred people left, only four hundred of them capable of using weapons. And as if their troubles were not enough, they were constantly exposed to unusual weather conditions. It rained all the time, and a strong wind would blow almost every day, which made the battles even harder to win.

In this state of utter hopelessness, strange rumours started to spread among the citizens of Split. People began to talk about outlandish women with burning eyes who ran across the fields. In the places where they were seen, peasants would find filthy marks every morning. Fertile land would turn into stones and sand. The peasants were terrified. They sprinkled holy water all around the contaminated land, they put crosses and amulets in hope they would protect them from this mysterious spell.

One gloomy Sunday Pietro the hermit came down from the hill. He walked briskly to the church of St Francis, which was located on the western part of the Riva. He told the people who gathered in front of the church that his maid Lucia had shared her secrets with him and described the ways in which she had made a deal with the devil.

The devil!, they repeated in terror.

Didn't I tell you the woman was crazy?, one woman said.

Crazy! Crazy!

The devil!

In no time, these believers turned into a fanatic crowd driven by superstition and fear. They were desperate to find a reason behind the misfortune that had befallen them. The siege of Klis, hunger, poverty, despair – no one was able to deal with so many hurdles anymore.

My dear people!, shouted Pietro.

No need to be afraid, he said. God is on our side.

On our side!, they yelled in unison.

Pietro used the commotion of the crowd and put a bug in people's ears. They spread the news. Some people rushed to collect spruce, others ran after the girl.

Soon they all met on Diocletian's Palace's Peristyle, in front of the Cathedral of Saint Domnius' bell tower. Several men carried Lucia, who was half naked and completely debilitated with fear. In front of them stood Pietro, who held a crucifix in his hand, praying to God to help him to free Lucia from her demons. But the demons were nowhere to be seen. Still, the poor girl insisted on her innocence in vain. When she saw the stake they had prepared for her, she fainted. Two burly men tied her to the branches. They had torches in their hands.

Suddenly, a doctor and astrologer named Roland stepped away from the crowd. He was highly respected in Split and its neighbouring towns. To everyone's astonishment he yelled: Free this woman immediately!, but the crowd refused to listen to him. They pushed him around and blocked the way so that he could not reach the woman. Roland realized that they could not be reasoned with.

Out of my way!, he yelled.

He bravely stepped into the fire and he untied the girl who found her strength again and ran away down the alley behind the baptistery. No one chased her because everyone was looking at Roland, whose robes had caught fire. In burning flames, he ran from the Peristyle to the Riva, down the stairs and through the Palace. Even though Roland could not swim, he jumped into the sea. Not a soul tried to rescue him and Roland drowned. People stared at the sea in disbelief. He had it coming, they murmured to each other and started to go back to their homes, desolated and dispirited. Pietro had already disappeared and they did not know what else to do but to go about their own business again. Roland's death was soon forgotten and nobody wanted to think about the doctor or Lucia any more. Conflicts continued and people were exhausted. There was no end in sight.

Lucia was the first and the only woman in Split accused of witchcraft. On that fateful day she disappeared, nobody knew where she had gone in search of peace and nobody went to look for her. Pietro, the holy man, left the hermitage on Marjan and tried to find solace in the Cathedral of Saint Jacob in Santiago de Compostela in Spain. He did not talk to anyone for the rest of his life and he lived in isolation. People in Split were eventually aided by the governor of Zadar, who sent a galley with biscuits and salt, munition and weapons. Nobody ever mentioned Lucia's name again. The girl disappeared from the town's history, at a time in which it was dangerous to be a woman, and to displease somebody more powerful than you by your mere existence – by not succumbing to the wishes of a man.