

Soviet
Ukrainian
Short 
Stories



Soviet Ukrainian Short Stories

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**Оповідання
українських радянських
письменників**

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This collection consists of twenty short stories by major Soviet Ukrainian authors, among them works that have become classics of Soviet Ukrainian prose and those of writers of a younger generation.

The stories comprising this book will show the reader many different aspects of life of the Soviet people, their ideals and aspirations. Through the prism of their artistic vision, the authors present scenes of the struggles of the Soviet people in the October 1917 Revolution, in the Civil War, and against the nazis in World War II.

The diversity of subjects and styles makes this collection interesting and informative for the English-speaking reader, enabling him to get a fairly good idea of life in Soviet Ukraine of today.

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Andriy Holovko

(1897-1973).

PILIPKO

His eyes were as blue as cornflowers in the rye. Over them, in wisps from under a ragged cap, hung fair hair the color of ears of rye.

That was Pilipko.

He wore a shirt and a pair of rough homespun pants patched over and over. For his family were poor peasants. Peeping from behind a fence with broken palings was their cottage, also patched and worn. Back of it, right up to the meadow, lay a kitchen garden so small that a chicken would scarcely have room to move about.... So it had always been, so it remained now. Beyond that, in the steppe, they had a piece of the landlord's land (given the family by the Poor Peasants Committee set up after the Revolution) where now the rye and spring wheat rippled and quietly whispered — sh... sh.... But would it be harvested? Civil War was going on. The *haidamaki** and the German invaders were ravaging the region, confiscating everything and turning things back to the old ways....

Today they came even here, to Mikhnivka.

Pilipko and the other herd-boys watched it all from the hill where the cattle were grazing. At first they saw swirls of dust rising on the road. They looked harder and made out soldiers marching, line after line. The village in the valley was silent. But suddenly the church bell rang out, and a shot cracked from beneath the willows; then another, another... All hell broke loose. The enemy lines spread out in a chain through the steppe and moved in, closer and closer.... Sometimes a group would lie down in the rye. Then machine guns would sharply chatter and volleys of gunfire roll. Again on their feet, the enemy began closing in.... This lasted a long time. It was dusk when they got to the outskirts of the village, to the mansion, to the meadows. Because of the willows, the boys could not see

* *haidamaki* — soldiers of the Ukrainian nationalist counter-revolutionary units during the Civil War

what happened afterwards. They heard only a long drawn-out scream which echoed through the steppe. The shooting grew less. At times, the sound of shots flew from the village, then beyond it, and farther, farther away....

Pilipko sighed.

"So our men are in retreat," he said sadly.

His friend Danylo looked at him silently, and also gave a sigh....

Late that evening, the boys turned homeward with the herd. They rode their horses slowly through the dust and were silent — depressed. Occasionally, a boy would swear at a cow who wandered into the wheat.

"Better for you if you'd croaked before this night! Aha, so the road's too narrow for you!"

And the whip came down — crack, crack.... Again they were all silent.

On both sides of the road, the grain rustled its green waves. Rippling... rippling....

As they passed the mansion, Pilipko was first to notice a German in a blue uniform at the gates, and the yard inside was full of wagons with people darting about.

"Look!" he cried. "Maybe that's their headquarters."

The rest flashed quick glances, but said nothing.

"They're collecting contribution," someone remarked. "The same thing happened in Pisky. A lot of people were shot and everything was confiscated. So all the landlord's property would be restored."

Pilipko's eyes flashed.

"The devil they will! Not here," he threw out, with a toss of the head. "Let them try! When Hritsko dropped in with some partisans the other night, he said 'We'll give the Germans such a trouncing, they won't look back till they get to Germany.'"

All the same, he frowned. His eyes sought out his cow, Liska, with a look of pity. 'Maybe they'll take you away, too,' he thought. The Committee had given her to them only last year from the landlord's herd. And now the former owner would get her back.

Pilipko was silent all the way down the village street. And the boys were silent, listening to the clamor that was going on in the alarmed village. Dogs barked madly all around. A patrol galloped past and disappeared in the steppe.... In the dusk, people crept noiselessly through the kitchen gardens and past haystacks looking for a place to hide. Somewhere a scream of pain disturbed the silence

of the night — somebody was getting beaten up, while a woman and children cried aloud.

Pilipko's heart turned cold. And when they passed the bend in the road from where he could see his home, he stole a quick glance at it. There were no lights. The little windows of the shabby cottage stared out at the street in dead silence. And the yard was just as quiet.

The boy jumped from his horse and opened the gate. Then he put the horse in the stable and tied the cow to the manger. His mother entered quietly with a pail and began to milk the cow while Pilipko held back the calf. He spoke to his mother only when the milking was done and she patted the cow with a sad look.

"What are you worried about, Mom?" he asked sadly. "Maybe, they won't take the cow."

She looked at her son with sorrow.

"Oh! They're sure to take her." Then she added as they started for the cottage, "If it were only that. Remember, our Hritsko's with the partisans. And these people are very strict about such things."

She quietly walked towards the house, with Pilipko following her as softly as a shadow.

It was dark inside. A few men sat in front of the stove, smoking cigarettes and talking softly. At the creak of the door, they at once broke off but, seeing their own folk enter, they relaxed and resumed the talk.

"We have to make a break for it!" said Mikita Horobets (Pilipko recognized his voice). "Or we'll all be shot, as sure as two times two is four. Didn't you hear what happened in Pisky? Took them out to the clay pits and killed them all. And burned the houses of those they couldn't find."

The cottage was filled with silence. Pilipko's mother sighed in the dark and the children whimpered.

Then Pilipko's father spoke up.

"I'm not going to run anywhere," he announced, taking a drag or two on his cigarette. "Let them shoot me! If I run and they burn the house down, where will my family go? Begging... along the roads?"

"They won't burn it."

"Who gave them the right to do such things?"

Everybody spoke at once, gesturing angrily.

"Well, they can turn everything back the way it was. But to burn, and kill.... What for?"

"And fine sons we have," continued Pilipko's father,

with bowed head. "Get their fathers in a mess, while they hide in the forest."

Mikita Horobets grew excited.

"Don't talk like that, Yavtukh," he said and, leaning closer, began telling them that yesterday the partisans near Fedorivka fought the Germans and *haidamaki*. They lost about fifty men and then retreated to the forests and, the minute they passed Vitrova Balka, hid in the ravines. Only seven versts from here. Just let them know, and they'll attack — then our enemies will disappear like smoke."

"Oh, sure... let them know, when the guards won't let anyone get out of here. They'd kill you if you tried, and might even burn the whole village as well."

Again they fell silent: only the cigarette tips burned red. One gleamed brighter and for a moment lit up the shabby room and the gloomy figures surrounded by cigarette smoke.

The outside door slammed and a woman ran in, out of breath, and stopped on the threshold.

"Is Mikita here?"

"What's happened?" answered Mikita, and stood up. They all got to their feet.

Hands covering her face, the woman sobbed that someone had been terribly beaten up and taken to headquarters. She was almost out of her mind with grief, and wailed aloud.

Then Mikita gripped her hands hard and hissed: "Quiet! They might hear..."

Everyone hurriedly left the cottage. Pilipko watched them through the window as they slipped farther away into the dark, through the kitchen garden to disappear among the tall weeds.

It grew quiet in the house. Outside, the barking of the dogs drew nearer and screams were heard. Pilipko's father listened a long time. Then he started walking back and forth for a minute, and finally sat down at the end of the table. He put his calloused work-worn hands on the surface and laid his head upon them. Everything was still. A fly buzzed in a spider-web near the wall-shelf. Pilipko's mother sobbed by the stove, crouching so low she seemed shrunken. Pilipko's hands were shaking, and his throat felt as if a noose were being pulled tight around it. But he did not cry. He stared piercingly into the dark at the gray figure sitting at the end of the table.

"Dad, maybe you also want to run away?"

His father raised his head and looked at his son. But it seemed as if he didn't hear him. Suddenly, he jumped up from the table.

"Here they come!" And he froze in the middle of the room.

Outside, they really heard the tramp of feet coming along the street. They turned into the yard, passed the window. Somebody began banging at the door and yelling.

"Open up! We know you're hiding in there."

"Use your rifle butt!"

They banged even harder at the door. It creaked, and flew open.

Into the house burst a few Germans and *haidamaki* with a clatter of arms.

"Where's the head of the house?"

"I'm here," answered Pilipko's father, hoarsely.

"Well, you're the one we want," said one of the *haidamaki*, and went over to the door. "Give us a light!"

Pilipko's frightened mother lit a kerosene lamp without a chimney and carried it to the table with shaking hands. Sitting on the plank-bed, Pilipko stared at the strangers, trembling all over like a frightened animal. Now he could see his skinny, white-faced father standing in the middle of the room surrounded by Germans and *haidamaki*. Two of them stood at the door, as rigid as stone. Then one approached his father and thrust a gun before his face.

"Speak only the truth. Where's your son?"

"I don't know." Pilipko's father shrugged. "Probably where other people's sons are. He didn't tell me where he was going, and I didn't ask. So I don't know."

The *haidamak* ground his teeth.

"Aha, so you don't know!"

He nodded at another man, who drew the ramrod from his rifle. Then he turned on Yavtukh: "Now we'll loosen your tongue," he threw out, with an evil look.

Pilipko's father stood with bowed head. Suddenly, with a yell, the *haidamak* swung the ramrod... And something terrible began. His father let out a scream and fell like a log. One man sat on his head while another beat him with something that gleamed. The blows fell, and fell. His body writhed and twisted; hoarse cries burst from his mouth and a pink foam. Pilipko's mother shrieked and tried to get through to her husband, while the children wailed in the corner.

It went on for a long time. Suddenly, Pilipko's father lay still. Then the beating stopped.

"Let him come to," said one and turned on Pilipko's mother. "What are you roaring for? D'you want to get it, too?"

Then Pilipko's mother appealed to them, sobbing through her tears, addressing them as 'sons', wringing her hands and looking into their eyes pleadingly.

"Stop it! Stop it!" they howled at her. "Hand over your weapons! Open up your chest!"

They dug into everything, searching, but finally gave up in disgust.

"They're utter beggas. Nothing worth taking," growled one, angrily, slamming the chest shut with a curse.

Then he went over to Pilipko's father and booted him hard in the side.

"Get up, you lazybones! Stir yourself!"

Beaten and bloodied, gasping, Pilipko's father got to his feet with a groan. Pushed from behind, he tripped, and staggered to the door.

"Get on, get moving, lazybones," urged the *haidamaki*.

The door banged shut. It was quiet inside the house: the only sound was the fly still buzzing in the spider-web. Feet tramped by the window, went through the yard and out into the street.

Pilipko's mother ran after them, crying, wringing her hands. The boy also wasted no time, and ran out of the house. They overtook the guards and the prisoner outside the gate. Pilipko's mother caught one of the men by the sleeve and pleaded with him. But he answered angrily and, pressing his rifle butt against her breast, suddenly pushed her roughly away. She staggered and remained behind. Pilipko went on alone. The *haidamaki*, escorting the boy's father, caught up with another group of convoyed prisoners and joined them. They walked on silently and some way behind, like grey shadows, followed the relatives of the arrested. Time after time, the *haidamaki* in front would turn and yell at them to disperse and shoot over their heads. The followers would stop for a moment, but then continue.

Soon they reached the landlord's mansion, now the German headquarters. The sentry on guard at the gates challenged them, and was answered.... Then they all passed through the gates which slammed shut behind them.

The followers, including Pilipko, were in despair. One woman, who had wailed aloud all the way, flung up her hands and rushed towards the wooden fence, cursing. Shots coming from the pasture near the windmills seemed to stun her — she froze suddenly in her tracks and listened.... Another volley.

“They’re shooting the prisoners,” said somebody and, frightened, moved back into the dark. “Run for it!”

Full of fear, all the rest ran after him into the safe dark.

Pilipko arrived home breathless from running. He peered through the window from the street. All was quiet. His mother sat on the plank-bed, head uncovered, weeping and staring blindly into a corner of the room. The children were sprawled out near her, asleep. Kalina, his sister, lay with her head on her mother’s lap. ‘They’re asleep,’ he thought. ‘But what’ll happen when they wake up?’

Pity for them made his heart ache. The boy clenched his teeth. ‘I must be quick!’ In a flash he was in the stable. He hustled around, and soon after led out the horse. Listening all the while, he walked him stealthily through the kitchen garden, through the potato patch, and out into the meadow. There he stopped, and took a long look around: first on tiptoe, then crouching near the ground. He closed his eyes and listened carefully. All was still. He grabbed the horse by the mane, stepped lightly on its knee and was up in a flash. Jerking the reins, he moved into the hemp. After that came the osiers and the aspens in the meadow. Again some bushes....

Pilipko kept a sharp lookout, so he wouldn’t lose his way. Over there was the Horobets’s orchard and he had to pass it to reach the steppe. As soon as he reached that, he was free and away....

Suddenly, a figure leaped to meet him out of the dark.

“Who’s that?” came a yell followed by the click of a breechloader.

The horse reared and shied away. Though Pilipko went cold with terror, he jerked at the reins and kicked his heels into the horse’s flanks.

“Gee-up!” And he galloped into the steppe....

Something exploded behind him and a bullet whistled past his ear. Another explosion came, and dogs began to bark. But the farther he went, the quieter it became. Pilipko heard only the hoofbeats of his mount and the rustle of the grain, and he simply flew — bending flat against

the horse's neck, kicking with his heels and slapping the reins.

At last he stopped. The horse had lost his wind and was all in a lather of foam. Pilipko was breathless, too. He drew a long breath of the bracing air of the steppe, and then one more.... He took off his cap and began to listen, looking around on all sides. All was quiet. Only the steppe... the night... A quail could be heard calling in the fields of grain, and fog was creeping up from the river. There was the bitter smell of wormwood. Silence and peace ruled everywhere. For a minute it seemed to the boy that it really was quiet here, and peaceful. As if he had only brought the horse out here to graze at night.... But then he came to his senses — the horse was still covered with sweat, and behind him in the meadow shots had really burst out. And before that, the volleys of gunfire had cracked from the pasture near the windmills....

Again he listened, and began riding slowly through the rye, carefully looking around. Where was he? On one side, the moonlight flooded a high gravemound.

Riding closer, Pilipko looked at it attentively. It was the Rozkopana Mound. That meant he was not far from the road. From here, to escape, he must turn left and then go past the willows in the gully. When he reached the road, he set his horse at a good trot and kept a sharp watch ahead, so he would have time to avoid running into one of 'their' mounted patrols. In half an hour, the windmills on a hill loomed ahead. The boy slapped the horse into a gallop. As he neared the ravines, green orchards began to appear and sleepy whitewashed cottages. All around lay silence.

Racing down the village street, Pilipko suddenly pulled up. 'How shall I find my uncle's place?' (His uncle on his mother's side lived here in Vitrova Balka. Last year, Pilipko and his father had paid him a visit while returning from the market. The cottage was old and dilapidated, and nearby grew tall aspens set back from the street.) 'Apparently, this one,' thought Pilipko. The aspens quietly rustled above a fence. 'Here's the house.'

He rode into the yard and rapped at the window, without dismounting.

"Uncle, uncle.... Come on out!"

The cottage was silent. Then a plank-bed creaked and somebody padded through the house. A bearded face was pressed against the windowpane.

"Who's there?"

"It's me... from Mikhnivka. Pilip. You know me... Come out," the boy said, hurriedly.

The figure in white, silent, stood at the window. Then turned and vanished into the darkness. After a minute, the door opened and Pilipko's uncle stood on the stoop.

"Amazing... What are you here for?" he asked sleepily. "On horseback... and in the middle of the night!"

Pilipko swiftly began to explain. About the coming of the *haidamaki*, about his father and the people taken to the mansion. Many of them, up to thirty souls, had been arrested. Some had already been shot in the pasture. And finally, he could not hold out — he sobbed.

"So I ran away alone. The partisans are somewhere about, near you, in the ravines... they must come to the rescue..."

He looked eagerly at his uncle. "You must know — where they are. Take me there!"

His uncle smoothed out his tousled hair and thought a moment, looking gloomily down. Suddenly, he raised his head and nodded.

"Right away," he whispered.

He ran to the stable and led out his mare. Outside the gate, he looked all around vigilantly, mounted, and tore up the street like a whirlwind. Bareheaded he was, still in his white underclothing. And Pilipko rode after him at a bounding run, gripping the horse's mane with both hands.

Beyond the village, again came the rustle of grain and the smell of wormwood. They went at a fast gallop. Under some willows, they suddenly slowed down and turned left, riding down into a valley wrapped in a blue-gray fog. Here bushes and trees appeared like chimerical blotches. The branches caught at the boy's feet, lashed his face.... This went on for a long time. Right to the edge of the river. Near a bridge, they were suddenly stopped by three men in long overcoats, armed and mounted. They were questioned. Pilipko's uncle told them everything. Sometimes the boy put in a word. The men grew excited. Their eyes sparked like threatening fires under frowning brows. Leaning forward on their horses, they eagerly listened to the sorrowful recountal, occasionally raising a threatening fist. One of them, in a black hat, looked hard and long at Pilipko.

"So you're from Mikhnivka, eh?" he asked.

"Sure I am. I'm Yavtukh's son."

"And you came all this way to bring the news?" His eyes flashed, he pulled the reins and the horse reared up. Using his whip, he wheeled and shouted over his shoulder.

"Follow me!"

The bridge rattled under the hooves. They flew into the forest.

Through the thickets among the trees, campfires were dying down. Near one sat a group of partisans, smoking, warming themselves. Pilipko, his uncle, and their leader dashed up to them. The horses snorted in fright at the flames. The partisan in the black hat rose in his stirrups and shot twice in the air.

"On your feet!" he let out with a stentorian roar that flew through the woods.

People quickly surrounded them, and the forest came alive.... Ah, how many there were — partisans! They formed a tight circle around their commander and voices questioned from the crowd.

"What's up?"

"What's happened?"

"What's it all about?"

Again the commander rose in his stirrups and yelled at the crowd.

"*Haidamaki* are in Mikhnivka!"

The crowd froze. And he continued.

"This young feller-me-lad flew like the wind to bring us the news. He saw them torture the poor, shoot their prisoners in the pasture. And the same fate awaits all the villagers if we don't chase the Germans out of the village. By dawn!"

He was silent. But the crowd roared, shook their fists and shouted threats.

"Lead the way!"

"Let's go!"

"We'll show them they can't get away with it!"

"Let's go!"

The commander raised his hand, and everybody was quiet. Then he gave the command.

"Mount up, boys!"

The crowd of partisans broke and ran. They mounted their horses and made ready for battle. A few minutes later, they were riding through the trees. They crossed the bridge and galloped like the wind up the slope and into the steppe....

It was growing light when they passed through Vitrova Ravine — the cocks were crowing; here and there from behind the fences and through the windowpanes, eyes stared at the hooves flashing by on the street. Beyond the village, they slowed down so as not to get too tired before battle. Pilipko rode beside the commander, who kept throwing him questions on how many Germans there were, where they were stationed. The boy told all he knew. His eyes stared with alarm into the distance where the sky was already beginning to glow red. 'Oh, if only they weren't too late!'

When they got to the Rozkopana Mound, they stopped. They spread out on both sides of the road and moved on right through the fields. Pilipko was ordered to remain behind. Though he turned and rode back, all the same he didn't obey and decided to follow them.

At first they moved at a slow trot but when they saw the windmills they broke into a gallop and flew like a whirlwind. There was silence, except for the pound of hoofbeats echoing through the steppe and the rustle of grain... Suddenly, from the village came a shot and the chatter of a machine gun. At that moment, from hundreds of throats burst a reverberating shout and the partisans raced on brandishing naked sabers over their heads...

Pilipko was swept after them, and shouted too. Though he did not realize it, nor feel that he was part of this yell. Suddenly, something burned him and he began to sway. The same moment something struck his head and afterwards thundering hooves flashed before his eyes. And vanished. In their place, the rye-ears bowed down and quietly swung, and the blue cornflowers looked into his eyes. And the clamor grew and grew. Then a red wave rose and hit him, drowning everything — the cornflowers, the ears of rye, and him....

The partisans pushed the Germans from the village. In the early morning, when the sun peeped over the meadows, it was liberated. Here and there, bodies lay strewn around — both Germans and partisans — dressed in blue, in plain overcoats and in gray armycoats. They lay near the mansion and on the pastures. How many of them died! Lives snuffed out like sparks flying in the air over the steppe.... They lay in the rye, too, beneath the softly rustling ears.

Beyond the meadows in the pasture lands, the battle still reverberated. A crowd of people wound their way past the mill. They watched and waited with frozen hearts: who would win?

A troop of Red cavalry suddenly flew over the hill like a torrent, broke up the enemy lines, embroiled in battle and rolled through the steppe. Farther and farther away....

A happy sigh rippled through the crowd. They talked. Some smiled. An old woman went up to one man, her old lips mumbling. Yavtukh, Pilipko's father, his pale face all black and blue, smiled at her.

"Our men, granny, ours are winning," he said. "Oh, how they're riding them down."

The old woman crossed herself, and looked at the steppe with half-blind eyes.

With happy cries, the boys — the younger ones — came running from the meadows.

"They're on the run!"

"Oh, our men made it hot for them!" they cried happily, their eyes burning with pride. And one rubbed his nose on his sleeve, and nodded his head. "Oh, they beat hell out of them! And of our men — Karpo is dead and Skalenko and a few others. They're lying over there under the willows.... And the partisans are coming back."

It was true. The partisans were returning for a rest — winding their way in from the meadows in small groups, exhausted. The horses they rode were sweating and some had manes splashed with blood. Blood was on the coats and armycoats of the partisans. Their faces were caked with dust, but sparks glinted in their eyes.

The crowd surrounded them. People pressed in close with cries of joy and shining eyes. They stroked the horses' necks, fingered the stirrups. Mikita, pale and cruelly beaten by the *haidamaki*, pushed through to them.

"Well, what wonderful fellows you all are!" he cried in admiration, and a warm smile lit his bruised face. "We thought we were done for. And then you came — like a bolt from the blue..." Excited, he gazed at the young faces of the partisans and at their horses.

The crowd milled around, noisy, talking....

"You saved us...."

"We already thought we wouldn't live through it...."

Then one of the partisans stood up in his stirrups and raised his hand.

"The cursed devils would have killed you!" he shouted,

“if it wasn't for one of your youngsters. He got to us about midnight right in the forest. ‘The Germans are in our village. Save us!’ he cried. So we hit the saddle!”

His eyes searched through the crowd, swept over the children. Possibly looking for the boy. While the crowd began talking, wondering, asking: ‘Who could it be? Whose boy was it?’

Suddenly, they fell silent — Yavtukh's wife came running up the street. Her face was all in tears and locks of hair hung down from under her kerchief. As she reached them, she burst into wails of bitter grief. Yavtukh stepped out of the crowd.

“What's wrong? What's happened?” he cried in a worried voice.

“Our boy's gone... Pilipko!” Again she wailed aloud. “He wasn't home last night. Early in the morning, I went to the stable and the horse was gone. I thought he took it out to the pasture. Then later, when the Germans retreated, the horse came running home all in sweat with blood on its mane... He's been killed. My son.... Killed!”

Pilipko's mother was in despair, and the women crowded around to comfort her. The men talked gloomily together. The partisan leader leaned down from the saddle.

“What did you say? What's his name? Pilipko? That's the boy. He rode with us as far as the Rozkopana Mound, and when we went into attack — maybe he was killed then.”

He called out to his boys and, whipping their horses, they followed him out of the village to search the steppe. Pilipko's mother ran after, wailing; his father — pale and limping after the beating — followed slowly. The crowd poured out of the village also. The search began. Before their eyes, the green grain rocked in waves, whipping their legs. Stumbling, Pilipko's mother ran through the rye and the partisans, on horses, formed a chain and spread out. Now one stopped, and waved his hand. The rest ran over to him, dismounted, and bent down. Nothing could be seen because of the tall rye.

“They've found him!” yelled the crowd.

“Look, look! They're carrying him.”

Two partisans led the way slowly out of the rye, carrying their small burden. Others led their horses along the border paths. Pilipko's mother ran up and reached her child. And the wind carried her wailing over the rye.

The sad group came closer, closer.... The crowd whispered in excitement.

“Well, what’s up? What happened to him?”

“Is he alive?”

“He’s alive! Only wounded in the head.”

A sigh of relief caught everyone. They stood on tiptoe, looking big-eyed at the boy the partisans carried. They held their breath. Blue eyes looked at them — eyes like cornflowers in the rye. His fair hair was the color of the ears of rye, and blood ran down his pale face to drip on his shirt — the shirt that had been patched so much, over and over again.

1923

Translated by Thomas Evans

THE RED KERCHIEF

Oksana was happy: her mother had cut a piece out of some woven cloth and dyed it red with a special powder. And it became a red kerchief.

When the girl drove the cow home from the steppe at dinnertime, it was hanging on the fence to dry. Just inside the palings, red hollyhocks grew in great profusion — and you would think one of the large petals had fallen on the fence. Such a beautiful kerchief it was!

The young girl smiled when she saw it. Quickly, she drove the cow into its enclosure and ran over to the kerchief. She reached out her hand — it was still wet. Well, that was nothing! It would finish drying on her head. She would put it through the mangle. Happy, she took the kerchief off the fence. Today was a holiday — her grandpa would take the cow to the pasture after dinner, while she and the girls went swimming in the landlord’s pond.

“Oh, how red it is! It hurts my eyes to look at it!”

She ran skipping into the house. Here, too, it was festive. All slicked up. Near the stove, her mother had pulled the pot off the fire and was ladling borsch into the common bowl. Grandpa was finishing a pipe near the doorway, and her father sat on the bench. There was silence. And in this silence, she could hear a humming

sound, as if sunbeams were passing through tiny windows like strands of yarn through warp threads. Or maybe it was only the flies buzzing on the windowpanes? Ah, what a weaver — to take the steam from the borsch and the blue smoke from Grandpa's pipe, and weave all this into woof of the ringing silence.

Her grandpa knocked out the ashes from his pipe against the stoop and raised his eyes to his granddaughter.

"Oh, a young lady already! With that on your head, grazing cows is beneath you! Maybe you let the cow get into the buckwheat?" he finished with a shout.

"Why should I? Am I that stupid?" replied Oksana. "Besides, there's plenty of grass left among the stubble."

Actually, he wanted to say more. Yes, I take the cow out to graze while you go gallivanting with your girlfriends. As for shouting at her, he only did it by way of a joke. It was just his way.

"Did you watch out for the shocks of grain?" asked her father, bringing up an old question.

Inwardly Oksana shrank: she remembered that last week their cow had scattered about a half a shock of grain belonging to their neighbor Halushchikha, and Uncle Musiy, her husband, had raised quite a row over it.

"Keep your eyes peeled and see it doesn't happen again," continued her father.

But Grandpa interrupted him.

"Speaking about the shocks of grain, son, it's very likely Denikin has given out an order for us to give part of them to the landlord."

"A fine way of putting it — 'part of them'. Two-thirds are his," replied her father.

"Wha-at?" Grandpa even jumped up from his chair. "The devil with him! He didn't do any seeding, or mowing. He goes wandering abroad for a year, and the minute he returns he comes down on you for two-thirds."

"You can't do anything about it, Dad. They're in power now," answered her father.

Then Oksana's mother broke in, still standing by the stove.

"And that Musiy, before you bat an eye, will get all his shocks for himself. Halushchikha says he wheedled the landlord so much that he promised not to take anything from them."

"Yes, but not every one will kowtow to the landlord like Musiy does," put in Grandpa.

"Oh, no," said Father. "Apparently, the reason is not the kowtowing itself. For the landlord's not big-hearted or fool enough to give away shocks of grain, not for any amount of bootlicking alone."

They sat down to dinner around the small table in the entry-hall. Silently, they took up their spoons and ate, each buried in his own thoughts — Father about the shocks, and maybe Grandpa and Mother, too.

Oksana's only thought was to get dinner over with quickly, then run outside and go to the meadows with the girls. Through the open outside door, she could see the garden with yellow sunflowers bending over the fence and the sparrows flitting among them, chirping away. Farther gleamed a patch of poppies and beyond that the green veil of the orchard. And she knew the meadow was on the other side. A maze of paths crisscrossed through the grass, like ribbons between the trembling aspens. Go along one, and you easily get to the landlord's pond where pussy-willows and osiers hang over the water.

Suddenly, down the street came the drumming of hoofbeats and riders flashed by with whooping cries. So fast, the dust settling down was all that was seen.

"Cossacks, I guess," said Mother.

"Why are they always on the go?" wondered Grandpa.

But Father frowned so that a deep furrow creased his brow.

"Their end is near. They aren't the first to come — the Germans and *haidamaki* were here before them. Afterwards, both crawled away with their tail between their legs."

Oksana looked out of the door. Beyond the fence she saw Mariyka come out of Uncle Musiy's house and run towards the meadow. She called after her.

"Mariyka! I'll be right with you."

She rose and put on the red kerchief.

"Well, I'm off, Mom." Then she spun round and hurried through the gardens towards the meadow.

The girls followed the path that went between the aspens past the many gardens — Mariyka leading and the rest behind.

Oksana called out to them, so they stopped and waited for her. When she reached them, they all surrounded her and admired the kerchief.

"Oh, how lovely! Is it specially dyed?"

"Of course."

"It's very beautiful. If only it doesn't fade."

They were going to the pond. Was she coming? There was Fedorka, picking cucumbers in the family garden. They would ask her to come, too. So as they passed by, they called out to her.

"Come here a min-ute!"

Fedorka straightened up and stood looking at them silently. Then she dumped the cucumbers she had gathered in her skirt and, careful not to step on the creeping runners, she joined the girls.

"Come swimming with us," said Oksana.

"I don't want to." Fedorka shook her head.

"Why not?"

"Just because."

Fedorka's sad eyes looked thoughtfully away. Perhaps she was thinking of her father, who had had to leave home to hide from the Cossacks.... Or maybe she was thinking about seeing the landlord's family, who had moved back from town yesterday. But she said nothing. The girls were insistent and Oksana even pulled her by the hand.

"Come, let's go."

A faint smile touched only Fedorka's lips as she followed the girls.

The pond was not far away. They crossed part of the meadow, then a ditch — the fence that was once there had disappeared long ago — and finally stopped at the pond under tall willow trees. Sloping up from the water, the orchard began and through gaps in the trees you could see the red-brick mansion.

Mariyka was first to undress and jump in the water.

The others had already begun undressing when, suddenly, a small bowlegged puppy ran out of the orchard and rushed at them with shrill complaining barks. Presently, two ladies appeared from behind the trees, and after them at a run hurried the landlord's son in short knee-pants.

The girls were struck dumb. The ladies were only a few steps away. The girls could see the yellow face of the older lady twist in a grimace of disgust, and heard her cry through thin lips.

"This is simply terrible! There's no saving us from them even here. Get out of there, you nasty girls! Quickly! You're dirtying everything up. Go away!"

The puppy yapped and got in the lady's way, nearly tripping her up. The girls grabbed their clothes and were

away like the wind, while the osiers crackled behind them. Across the ditch, they stopped to catch their breath among the tall sunflowers. Only here, Fedorka put on her skirt. Then she popped her head out of the sunflowers and, making faces, mocked the lady.

“Oh, oh! How terrible!” she screamed. “There’s no saving us from them even here! O-oh! my lords and ladies — for three, one pair of pan-ties!” she added, as rudely as she could.

All the girls joined in. Popping their heads over the sunflowers, they screamed shrilly, teasing the old lady. She lost her temper and threatened them, shaking her blue parasol. The young master shouted insults, then grabbed a stick and threw it at them. But it fell short.

“Give your Pop one on the noggin!” shouted one of the girls, picking up a clump of earth and throwing it at the boy. The rest did the same, laughing. Mariyka was the first to stop.

“That’s enough. Let’s go, girls!” she called. “The law’s on their side, and we might have trouble over them. Let’s go!”

They ran through the sunflowers, past the gardens and up the street. They had already reached the fence when Oksana, running ahead, suddenly stopped and looked round at the girls with big eyes.

“Look, the Cossacks are taking some people away. See there!”

The girls crouched by the fence and stared into the street with frightened eyes.

A horseman galloped by. The dust raised by the hooves hung like a curtain over the whole street. Yet you could see that a crowd thronged along it. Mounted Cossacks rode on both sides with drawn sabers and in the center walked five villagers. They had no hats, walked with downcast heads, heavily dragging their feet, silent. All you could hear was the drumming of hoofbeats.

The girls held their breath. One of them sighed. Then Fedorka peeked over the fence and gazed with sharp eyes. All of a sudden, she gasped as if she could not get enough air, and a piece of the wattle fence cracked beneath her grip.

“They’re taking Dad away!”

She turned white, staring after the cavalcade moving down the street. Nothing could be seen now: the dust hid everything. They heard the mansion gates creak open,

swallow the crowd and again creak shut. Along the street the dust scattered, as if in fright, and sweeping far beyond the village vanished in the tall weeds.

Weeping, Fedorka ran home. All the girls were upset and went their ways.

Mariyka and Oksana also started home, following the familiar path running among the aspens past the gardens.

"Is it true, Mariyka," of a sudden asked Oksana, "that the landlord said he wouldn't take any shocks from your father's harvest?"

"I don't know," answered Mariyka. But remembering that she really had heard something at home about it, she added, "Maybe he won't take any. What about it? Anyway, I don't know."

Oksana had to turn off here. Mariyka went straight on, while Oksana crossed the potato patch towards her house. She walked slowly and, in spite of herself, fleeting recollections passed through her mind: now, the angry lady with her blue parasol; now the crowd in the dusty street. She remembered Fedorka, too — white as a sheet and with such scared, frightened eyes.

And her heart ached.

Grandpa was out in the steppe with the cow. The gate into the cattle-pen was wide open. She saw her mother talking with a neighbor on the doorstep, in the sun.

Oksana ran up to the women and told them about the prisoners she had seen in the street. They had seen the arrested, too. They were all from Katsaivka except one — Semen, Fedorka's father. He had gone there to hide, and was caught with the others.

Oksana was depressed. Even the kerchief that lay in her lap looked as if it had already faded. She remembered that once her grandpa (this was before the Cossacks came), after a meeting at the logs just outside their yard, had told Semen in front of everybody: "Good for you, Semen! A poor man, and you stand up for the poor. Good for you, son," and the old man had clapped him on the shoulder.

Her grandpa's head was already gray, and wise too. Did he know what had happened?

She felt sad, and her heart ached.

The girl ran into the little garden to water her irises. But nothing could raise her spirits. Their neighbor had gone home, and her mother was going to take a nap. How depressed she felt here! Then she got an idea — and darted

out of the yard. Crossing the stubble field, she made a beeline for her Grandpa who was grazing the cow beyond the grave-mound near the buckwheat.

She stayed there till evening. At sunset, she returned home with her grandfather. Now she felt more cheerful and went to bed with hope in her heart: her grandpa had said the prisoners might be released.

The next day Oksana got up early, before sunrise just as always. She at once guessed by her grandpa's face that something important had happened. He winked at her in his comical way and smiled happily.

"Well, now catch the wind in the field if you can. Our fellows got away."

"Who?"

But the next moment Oksana herself guessed who. Her eyes sparkled.

"And Fedorka's father?"

"Him, too. They all got away. They dug a passage under the stable wall. The guards heard something, but too late: they were already on the run. The guards started shooting like hell. But night is a kind mother. Try to catch them now!"

The old man's smiling eyes told the girl how glad he was that the prisoners had been so lucky. He looked at his granddaughter, at her shining eyes, and smiled even more.

As happy as her grandpa, Oksana drove the cow into the steppe.

Until noon, she minded the cow with the other girls by the shocks. They played jacks with stones, and embroidered. Then some boys joined them and began playing jokes: throwing away the stones or teasing the girls in other ways. One snatched off Oksana's red kerchief and started playing a "Revolution" game. The girl grew angry — for the kerchief might get torn. The other boys did not care. Only thanks to Mariyka did Oksana get it back. After that, they broke away from the rest.

The girls drove their cows beyond the grave-mound. They sat down near the shocks and began to embroider, while the cows grazed on the grass-grown stubble.

All around there was silence. All you could hear was the far-off ring of a scythe. Someone was late with his harvesting.

The girls bent over their embroidery and began humming a melody. From behind the shocks a ray of sunshine fell on their canvas fabric. It sparkled on their needles and turned the red cross-stitches into gold.

"Oh, how beautiful! Just imagine, Mariyka, if our thread was truly like that — real gold!"

Oksana leaned back and looked at the embroidered fabric in admiration. Then she glanced aside — a calf was in the buckwheat! And not at the edge of the field, but in the very middle.

"Oh, you wretch! Won't I give it to you!"

She jumped up and ran to bring it back, getting all tangled up in the tall, thick buckwheat. Suddenly she stopped, as if stunned — at her feet lay a man dressed all in white. He was bareheaded and he stared at her with eyes like dark orbs. Neither said a word. Then the dark orbs warmed to life.

"Are you scared? Don't be afraid, child, I won't harm you." He smiled wryly, as if in pain. Oksana trembled all over but did not move. The man continued: "Is there anyone else close by?"

The girl looked all around, but saw nothing except the shocks of grain and the steppe.

"No, nobody's here," she answered.

"Well, that's a blessing."

He fell silent, but his eyes studied the girl carefully from top to toe. Then he said: "I see your clothes are patched. Your folks are poor, I suppose?"

"Yes."

Again he was silent. Then he leaned on his elbow and spoke in a whisper.

"Listen then, I'm hiding from the Cossacks. But don't tell anybody, or they'll kill me. D'you understand?"

Oksana nodded. Then he asked if she had any water with her. Yes, she had some in a bottle in her bag. She looked around: there was nobody to be seen. She dropped into the buckwheat like a little quail, and handed the bottle to the man. He put it greedily to his mouth, and drank it all. Then he put the bottle on the ground, smiled at her, and spoke with a note of pain in his voice.

"I hope you'll be happy when you grow up. See, I'm already feeling better. I've been here since last night, and all my insides were on fire. And there was no dew. I thought I'd burn to pieces."

Oksana grew bolder.

“How do you happen to be here?”

The man said nothing for a minute.

“We escaped last night,” he said, at last. “Yesterday, we were caught and brought to this village. The Cossacks locked us up in the landlord’s stable. They would’ve shot us all if we hadn’t dug our way out under the wall. Look!”

He showed her his hands, all covered with dirt and blood.

“That’s what we dug with! We really had to sweat over it. The nights are short now. There wasn’t a minute to lose. And by dawn we had to get at least as far as the steppe. Well, we made it. The guards heard us, though, and began shooting. But the night was dark, and we scattered in all directions — try and catch us!”

He had been running across the stubble, he told her, when something hit his leg and he fell. He crawled on, and it began to get light. But he had lost too much blood and his strength ran out. So he crawled into the buckwheat here, to hide....

“D’you happen to know whether everybody got away? Was anyone killed?” he asked.

“Nobody was killed.”

“So they all escaped. D’you know if they’re still searching for us?”

“Oh yes, they are. When I was home for dinner, I heard people saying that the Cossacks rode even to Katsaivka to look for you. But they didn’t find anybody. My grandpa said they might as well try to catch the wind in the field.”

“Oh, if it wasn’t for my leg. But I can’t even budge. And my hiding place here is no good either. It’s only a patch of buckwheat in the bare steppe. But I’ll manage somehow. I’ll stay here tonight and all day tomorrow. Then I’ll crawl towards the forest — that dark strip over there.”

Oksana tried to cheer him up.

“Maybe they won’t find you. And when I come back tomorrow, I’ll bring you some food and a full bottle of water.”

The man smiled and stroked her blonde hair with a hand caked with dirt and dried blood.

“My dear child, it’ll be good if you bring something to eat. But don’t say anything about me in the village — not a word to a soul.”

“Of course I wan’t. Do I look that stupid?”

She got up, for it was already dusk and the last rays of the sun, slanting across the white buckwheat, had turned it as red as blood. She started away, but stopped to say in a low whisper, "Don't be afraid. I won't tell."

Only then did Oksana drive the calf out of the buckwheat, but she was in no hurry to return to the shocks where Mariyka was sitting. She went slowly, on purpose, to give herself time to get over her excitement. Mariyka even had to call out to her.

"What were you doing out there in the buckwheat?" she asked, when Oksana approached her at last.

"Nothing," answered Oksana, disconcerted.

"Don't play the fool!" said Mariyka, staring at her friend. "What did you find there?"

Oksana caught her breath. Hardly able to restrain her excitement, she simply shrugged. Then she thought of an excuse. "I dropped my needle and it took some time to find it. Lucky for me it was threaded."

"Your needle?" Mariyka's eyes narrowed. "Then what are you blushing for?"

"I'm not blushing a bit! What are you digging your hooks in me for? Just like a burr. You're always doing it."

Mariyka blew up.

"So that's what you think of me! I'm not a friend of yours any more, but a burr." She broke off, insulted. And took up her needlework again.

Oksana also tried to embroider, but nothing went right. Her fingers were all thumbs. After a long depressing pause, Oksana made an attempt to make up with her friend.

"Forget it! Let's drive the cows home, Mariyka."

"You can, if you want," answered Mariyka coldly.

'Oh no!' thought Oksana. 'I'm not such a fool. That's just what you're waiting for, maybe. For me to leave, so you can follow my tracks in the buckwheat.' At the very thought, she was pierced through with fear. So she waited patiently until Mariyka got up first and started for home.

Sometimes, the girls walked side by side; sometimes, at a distance. But all the way they did not exchange a word.

The silence began to weigh heavily on Oksana. She felt sorry for her girlfriend. Really, Mariyka had taken offence over nothing. But her depression vanished whenever she

thought of the man in the buckwheat. For then her heart brimmed with satisfaction that she had kept her promise to him not to tell a soul.

They were nearing the village when Mariyka suddenly broke the silence.

“So that’s what you’re like, Oksana. And you call yourself my friend!”

“What d’you mean — ‘like what?’” cried Oksana happily — happy because Mariyka was talking to her again.

“Certainly not like a friend. Because real friends don’t keep secrets from each other.”

“But I’m not keeping anything secret.”

“Don’t lie. You must think I’m a fool. But I saw absolutely everything.”

“What’d you see?” Oksana even stopped walking.

“Everything. I saw you looking all around, then you took the water-bottle out of your bag and crouched down in the buckwheat. Who did you give it to?”

Oksana was dumbfounded. ‘It’s all up!’ the thought struck her like lightning. It was no use trying to deny the accusation now. And she did not know what to say. She stared at Mariyka with horror-filled eyes, then suddenly hid her face in her hands and burst into tears.

Mariyka had never seen her friend in such despair. She was at an utter loss. She tried to comfort her as much as she could, but it was no use. Oksana cried so hard, she heard nothing. She quieted down only when Mariyka finally cried: “Will you stop it! People are coming.”

The girls waited silently till a few men with scythes passed them. Then Mariyka reproached Oksana softly.

“You silly fool! What are you so upset about? As if I’d tell anyone. Who is he, anyway?”

There was no reason for Oksana to keep her secret any longer. She told Mariyka about the man in the buckwheat and related all her talk with him.

“But remember,” she warned Mariyka, when she finished her story, “not a word to anybody. Or they’ll kill him!”

“I wouldn’t think of it!” exclaimed Mariyka fervently.

They agreed that tomorrow they would drive their cows to the steppe together. Mariyka would also take along some food for the fugitive. With this question decided, they parted.

Oksana arrived home with a mysterious look on her face.

Her grandpa, sitting on the *prizba* * smoking his pipe, looked at her with narrowed suspicious eyes.

"Oh, so you've got yourself in another mess?"

"No," denied the girl, nervously, and dropped her eyes. But she thought to herself: 'Grandpa's one of us. Should I tell him?' She hesitated and then told him everything she knew about the man hiding in their buckwheat field.

Her grandpa grew thoughtful, musing. Then he told Oksana to keep mum about it — not a word to anyone.

But of course — didn't she understand? If it got out, they'd kill him. She did not even tell her parents. But Grandpa must have, for when the family sat down to supper, her father questioned her.

"So, what did you see in the buckwheat?"

Oksana went cold all over.

"Come on, my girl," said Grandpa. "After all, we're not strangers here, are we?"

She told them the whole story: about finding him in the field, what she said to him, and what he looked like. "He's wounded in the leg. His pant-leg was torn off up to the knee and his leg bandaged, and all in blood. He couldn't move yet. Said he'd stay all night there and another day, then crawl towards the forest."

Her father pondered a while.

"All right," he said finally. "No more talk about him."

He left the house right after supper. Night came, and everybody went to bed — but he was somewhere outside.

Oksana could not sleep. She stared into the darkness and listened anxiously. A storm was blowing up. At first, there came only a hollow rumbling in the distance, but it died away. The aspens outside the window rustled their leaves as if in alarm. Some young lads passed along the street, singing. Their young voices sounded mournful and soon softly faded away.

It grew very quiet. Suddenly, a bright flash lit up the inside of the house, as if someone had struck a light, and an explosion rang out over the meadow as if a cannon had gone off. The windowpanes rattled. There was another flash, and a peal of thunder over the steppe. The storm began. A gust of wind swept by the house. For a moment it stopped, as if caught by the trees in the orchard, then broke loose and dashed on. From outside came the sound

* *prizba* — earthen projection around village houses just above foundation level, often used to sit upon

of heavy rain. Thunder crashed and crashed, and lightning lit up the dark house from time to time.

The girl's mother prayed and crossed herself. Oksana buried her face in her arms and lay quiet. Her mind, like a painter's brush, drew a picture: night in the steppe, thunder, and the man in the buckwheat with nothing on but his shirt and torn pants. All around stretched the steppe — bare and silent. The picture was in color. Then it began to fade, or maybe it was blurred by the rain. The colors changed to gray. Then she saw only the shocks of grain like dark blotches....

She fell asleep.

The creak of the door made her start. Ah, it was Father! The house was dark and quiet. Thunder rumbled far away. The leaves of the aspens by the window wearily whispered.

Her father undressed and lay down on the plankbed. The house was silent. But Oksana could not sleep. She heard her mother say, "Why are you back so soon?"

"Nothing came of it," her father answered in a tired voice. There was a pause. Then he continued in a whisper. He and Hrytsko had just driven out of the village, when they had the bad luck to be stopped by soldiers. 'Who are you?' they asked. 'Where are you going in the middle of the night?' The soldiers turned them back. They were lucky to get off so lightly. 'We wanted to bring some sheaves home before the rain,' they had said. So the soldiers let them go.

"What's going to happen now?" asked Mother.

"We'll try to get there tomorrow. In the daytime."

"In the daytime? What are you saying!" cried her mother, anxiously.

"It's safer to do it in the daytime than on a night like this. The village is full of soldiers. Maybe in the morning they'll leave. We'll go in a wagon for rye and bring him here in the sheaves."

Oksana listened attentively. She even raised her head and turned an ear towards her parents. Her father heard her move.

"What's the matter, Oksana?"

"Who are you talking about, Daddy? Who are you going to bring here?"

"You know who." His voice grew tender. "Go to sleep, my dear."

For some time, silence reigned in the house. You might

think that everyone was asleep. But then Oksana's father leaned on his elbow and said in a low voice, "Oksana, are you asleep yet?"

"No, Daddy. What's the matter?"

"Did you tell anyone else about it, except us?"

"No, oh no," she replied hurriedly, feeling her face burn with shame. 'It's a good thing they can't see my face in the dark,' she thought.

"Why, what's the matter?" she asked again.

"Oh... nothing. Now go to sleep."

She turned toward the wall, but continued to listen carefully. Maybe Father would say something more about the man in the buckwheat.

"Musiy went to the landlord," said Father, after a long pause. Mother was silent. He continued, "And you say he begged the landlord not to take his harvest. He just went to work off his debt."

"Work off his debt?" repeated Mother in surprise. "At night?"

"In the daytime he listens to what people say and at night runs to the landlord to make his daily report!"

"What are you saying!" exclaimed Mother indignantly.

"You heard me!"

As soon as Oksana got up in the morning, she asked her mother, "Has Dad gone yet?"

"Well, he has, my dear, but not there," answered Mother with a sigh. "Hrytsko was ordered to transport something for the soldiers with his wagon. And not only Hrytsko."

"What'll happen now?" asked Oksana, anxiously.

Her mother tried to pacify her. Once her father had said he'd do something, he would keep his word. He wouldn't leave the man in the lurch. He had gone to Katsaivka to see his relatives and borrow a wagon from them.

"Meanwhile, my dear, you take the cow out to the steppe. I've got some food ready for the refugee."

Oksana's grandpa came in. He gave the girl his tobacco pouch: maybe the man smoked.

"Be careful!" he told her.

"As if I wouldn't be!"

Oksana let the cow out into the street. As she passed Halushchychka's house, she called out to Mariyka to come, as they had arranged the night before. But it turned out that Mariyka was not going right away.

"Mother won't let me go," she said, as if looking for an excuse. "She told me to let the cow graze in the garden till noon. Says it's too wet and cold in the steppe."

"Yes, it is," said Oksana, and added with emphasis, "but somebody else is not only cold right now, but hungry as well."

Mariyka realized what she was hinting at, and lowered her eyes. Then she asked, "Are you taking him something?"

"Of course."

Mariyka had control of herself now, and raised her eyes.

"I got a bundle ready for him last night, too. But when Mother found out...."

"Your mother found out?" cried Oksana, as white as a sheet. "You told her?"

"She saw the bundle and kept after me. I had to.... Oh, I really got it! They even whipped me."

"What for?" said Oksana, surprised.

"If Denikin's soldiers find out that you took food to an escaped prisoner, my parents told me, they might even burn our house down. Oh, Oksana, be careful!"

Oksana's heart turned to ice at Mariyka's words, but she did not let her friend see that she was afraid. She shrugged, and replied with pretended carelessness.

"Well, that's if they find out. But I'm not the fool I was. I won't act like I did yesterday. I'll be a hundred times more careful!"

She spun on her heel and ran after her cow.

There was not a single soul in the bare steppe. Here and there, cows were grazing among the dark shocks blown into disorder by the stormy wind. Near the brown patch of buckwheat, Oksana saw a man with a scythe, probably cutting barley.

What bad luck! He was quite close to the buckwheat. She could not pass him unnoticed — to give the refugee food. Oksana was overcome with sadness.

She drove the cow to the usual place and stopped beside one of the shocks, thinking. She looked at the reaper. Of course, he would notice. What if she went into the buckwheat, and he got suspicious and followed her. 'What are you up to?' he would ask. Now, it would be better to wait a bit. Maybe he would sit down for a rest or begin sharpening his scythe.

She still stood beside the shock, holding her bag and the bottle ready in her hand. She could slip into the buckwheat, pretending she was chasing a quail. She would give the man the bundle and then run back. She would wait till the reaper reached the end of his barley patch, and turn. His back would be toward the buckwheat.

She glanced aside, and her heart chilled. From the grave-mound, three riders were coming at a gallop. Straight for the patch of buckwheat.

'Are they really coming here, for him?' she wondered.

The riders rode up to the reaper and began circling around him, probably asking questions. Then one gave a yell and galloped — 'Oh, my God!' — right into the buckwheat. First, he rode along the edge, then out into the middle. 'Oh, he had stopped!' Then he waved his hand and called out. The other two rode towards him.

At that moment, Oksana felt as if a ton of bricks had fallen on her head. She slipped slowly to the ground, covered her face with her hands and, like a frightened quail, hid her head under a sheaf of grain. She was shaking all over.

It was very still. This lasted one second, maybe a minute, perhaps longer. Suddenly came a crack, as if someone had lashed out with a whip. Silence. And again — crack! Then the Cossacks swept past the shocks, as if caught by a whirlwind.

Oksana, still all of a tremble, was afraid to look. At last she found enough courage to glance out from under the sheaf. The steppe was clouded over. Perhaps she only imagined it was? Cloud-shadows soundlessly wandered across the stubble, as if in despair. Now they began gliding faster. Faster yet.... Ahead of them, like three ravens, the Cossacks flew low over the steppe as if trying to intercept the swift shadows. And behind the Cossacks, the buckwheat lay flat — trampled down by the horses' hooves.

The girl held her breath as if she were listening. She seemed to hear her father's voice: 'Musiy went to the landlord. To work off his debt.' Came her mother's voice, all surprise: 'Work off his debt?' Then Father's voice again. 'In the daytime he listens to what people say and at night runs to the landlord to make his daily report!'

"Oh, God in heaven!" she cried aloud, in despair. "It's all Musiy's doing. His! His! He found out everything from Mariyka.... Oh, what have I done!"

Her hands grasped the ends of her kerchief, torn off in her agony. Then she slowly wended her way into the buckwheat, dragging the kerchief behind her. She stopped. There at her feet, the man lay on his back. There was a dark spot just above his brows, and a pool of crimson beneath his head.

A mist of tears shook before her eyes. She stood with drooping head. Then she leaned over the cold body and covered the refugee's face with her red kerchief. She stood a moment longer, head bowed in mourning. Then she quietly tiptoed out of the buckwheat....

Like an apparition, she walked across the stubble field, looking straight before her with wide unseeing eyes. Farther, farther.... She was only a small figure in the vast bare steppe. Now and then, the racing cloud-shadows brushed her with their black wings, and flew on ahead. The vast steppeland seemed to ring. And the dark blue horizon, embroidered with beams of the rising sun, gazed mysteriously into her eyes: as if expectant of a new day.

Stepan Vasilchenko
(1879-1932)

THE GUELDER-ROSE BRIDGE

Golden lights glowed all about the hall. Through the wide-open doors came the tramping of boots. The delegates to the congress entered.

With unbuttoned shirt collars revealing their hairy chests, they flowed into the hall in an impetuous stream straight from a meeting, faces still red from arguments, eyes dull or sparkling with nervous energy. Finishing their passionate discussions on the sly, they took their seats without really understanding where they were hurrying to or why. Only after the choir lined up on the stage did they realize that there was going to be a concert.

The "Internationale" thundered forth majestically, and in the well-lit hall, the delegates could see that rows of village women were standing bashfully before them with garlands of periwinkle.

My gaze was riveted to a woman with a joyful, energetic face and youthful eyes flashing with unextinguishable golden sparks. How many times had I glanced her way with utter indifference — but now I was busily trying to remember where I had seen her. Some faint memories began to stir in my tired head. When our eyes finally met, she gave a start, and she blushed all the way to her ears. She greeted me with those remarkable eyes of hers as if to say: "What's the matter, don't you recognize me?" Finally, she couldn't bear it any longer, raised up a bit, cupped her hands around her lips, and said something to me in a strained whisper across the rows of heads...

"Shhh! Shhh!" angrily hissed the people around her, and so blushing red as a peony, she sat back down like a schoolgirl who had been chastised.

"Who in the world is that?" I wondered. But then from the stage rushed out a whirlwind of sounds — a whirlwind of grief and sorrow that overpowered all:

*Harness your horses,
Coal black steeds, forsooth.
Let us race like the wind
To catch up with the years of our youth.*

And the steeds of the whirlwind lifted us up on their wings and carried us off into the foggy nether reaches of the song.

I immediately forgot about the woman I couldn't quite place, but her eyes with their merry gold sparks floated somewhere in the fathomless expanses around me. They flew with a glow that made them young again... Two mountain peaks loomed far off in the distance. Like a joyful vision, the horses, all decked out in scarlet ribbons and flowers, swayed from side to side, appearing from behind the mountains in a sort of magical wedding train with red poppies and banners ablaze in the sun! There was music, the sound of tambourines, and laughter.

The vision was transformed into a dream gentle as a breath of air: it was as if I were approaching the riders. My heart was beating wildly. I asked: "What manner of men are you?" They laughed and replied mysteriously and enigmatically: "Surely you know us. We are the years of your youth whom you have overtaken on your coal black steed!" I took a closer look and saw that indeed, the best man was wearing the gray hat I bought years ago in Glukhiv, while the curls poking out from under it are just as frizzy as mine.

I looked at the bridegroom and saw my comrade Marko. I turn to the bride, and she seems familiar, too. I've seen those eyes before! Not long ago... Somewhere around here...

I started and turned quickly to where the woman was sitting. I moved so fast the chair creaked under me.

The same merry glance with sparks of gold, and now flecks of melancholy, met my gaze. There was a look in them as if she wanted to ask: "Now do you remember who I am?"

Our meetings were truly star-struck, as can happen only in youth... In the seconds between two verses of a song I had travelled over almost the whole of the Ukraine and almost to the ends of the earth...

* * *

I remembered everything as well as if it had been the day before. We were in the thick of those troubled times. Storm clouds gathered in the distance. A droning sound reached my ears from somewhere in the clouds. The autumn was approaching, and with it, untold numbers of terrible, unforgettable events. At the time, I was a student

at a teacher's college after having worked for several years in a public school. This final refuge for teachers was located in a city that was always severe and silent as the grave. But then in this quiet submissive barrack, the air was unexpectedly filled with the noise of meetings and the rumbles of protests. Finally, there was a strike, and I was thrown out of the college. With a light heart and no regrets whatsoever, I left those gloomy walls behind me. The autumn was cool and clear; I bought myself a gray hat, and cut a sturdy walking stick from a pear tree in the college garden, then I set off on my way.

First I decided to visit a comrade and fellow-villager, Marko, a graduate of our college, already a teacher in a country school some distance away. I thought it might be helpful to get his ideas on what I should do next. I had planned to go by train, but all rail traffic was held up unexpectedly, so I had to walk. It was a long way to Marko's, but the journey was a carefree one, and not at all difficult. People everywhere were so sincere, warm-hearted, and trusting — over the whole route, I was given a lift here, a place to spend the night there, or a hot meal whenever I was in need of one. A few days later, without either noticing it or feeling even the least bit tired, I found myself in the village where Marko was the schoolmaster.

Night was falling, and the room was dark with only the reddish glow from the stove to light it. There in the straw-filled corner illuminated by the motley patches of light, the old man had his seat.

I greeted him and asked where Marko was.

"Sorrows and woes abound, my son. It's three months your friend Marko's been in prison!" The loquacious old man began to tell how and why he had been arrested.

"What a spectacle it was, my boy! They came and nabbed him right at his own wedding! Dragged him out of the church, they did!"

"You mean to tell me he's married now?" I said in surprise.

"Yes, and a fine marriage it is, what with him cooling his heels in prison and her hiding out on the farms all around — they've already come after her, too, you know."

"Is she a teacher, too?"

"That she was. Just came 'round this fall. But it looks like her teaching days are over and done with now. All the pupils have done run off. And all the folks roundabout

is afraid to go anywhere near the school house, 'cause they've already took in a couple of peasants that was seen goin' by there a bit too often. It's done got awful borin' in these parts without no school. Mighty like a desert."

When the flames in the stove blazed up, I could see the remaining traces of the search: the walls had been hacked open, the bookcase had been broken into, and there were heaps of books and papers on the floor.

"There's not a soul here but me. Sometimes that school-marm pops in for a visit. She sits with me a while, and then she's off again goodness knows where."

I thought I heard something: the door to the hall thudded shut.

"Just as I suspected. Natalia Andriyivna herself!"

Now I would get a look at her and see what kind of woman Marko had found for himself.

The door creaked, and cold air blew into the room from the vestibule. Then we heard her hearty voice:

"I hear we have a guest."

Something quite like a large lunar moth flitted into the room; it was joyful and excited. The room was too dark for me to see her face. She didn't even say hello but rather cried out happily:

"I don't know whether to believe it or not, but I heard that all the political prisoners had been released from the city jail. There have been demonstrations, meetings and all sorts of banners put up to protest the repressions! Lots of exciting things are going on!"

"How do you know?"

"Some people who'd been to town today told me. If what they said is true, all our boys will be home by tomorrow."

They conversed as if they were blood relations.

I was caught up by her excitement. There was something extraordinary about the sound of her voice, but just what it was, I couldn't say.

She took off her coat as she talked, asking me casually:

"And where are you from? Are you a teacher, too?"

I answered briefly, aware that she wasn't really paying attention to what I was saying. She couldn't possibly be interested in me at such a time.

Then suddenly she gave a start, and her hand got caught in the sleeve of her coat which was only half off.

"Did you say you were in Glukhiv not long ago?"

"Yes, I just came from there."

"Were you at the teacher's college?"

“Yes...”

“Did you happen to know...”

There was a note of warmth in her voice, of warmth and concern... I grew more and more anxious without knowing why.

“Did you happen to know a fellow-villager of mine, a childhood friend...” And to my great surprise, I distinctly heard my own name.

I rushed over to her and gazed into her face.

“Tasia! Is it really you?”

She moved toward me in surprise.

“Who are you?” Then she shouted: “Oh, look! It’s you! We got a letter saying you’d been arrested. How on earth did you get here?!”

Suddenly I remembered our last meeting.

“No. First you tell me where you disappeared to the time you came to see me at my old school in the middle of that terrible blizzard.”

“Where I disappeared to?” Peals of laughter filled the school room. “You probably thought I was a ghost, didn’t you? Well?”

Actually, it had been rather a weird meeting. I guess I should begin from the beginning, many years ago.

* * *

We were in our last year at the village school... It was autumn and we were in the school orchard. They let us students go there along with the late autumn winds after all the fruit had been picked.

The sun went down.

Along the dead end path that ran by the high fence, standing there like a sentry, strolled the grown daughter of our teacher, the village beauty Marusia. She was wearing an old dress, draped in a patched shawl, sad and pensive, the personification of early autumn. It seemed to us that her whole figure was cloaked in mystery, something secretive of which we had heard only the beginning.

The three of us were sitting there: Tasia, myself, and Marko, my friend and rival both in school and with respect to Tasia. She was telling us conspiratorially that Marusia was planning to go somewhere in Siberia with her fiancé. Furtively she read us a Russian translation of the “Marseillaise” — she had copied it from Marusia.

Marko was very critical of Marusia's intention: "He got what he deserved, so let him serve his sentence. What the hell does she have to go traipsing all over creation after him for?" And when he heard the words: "We don't need any fetish or idol..." his eyes got big as saucers and he blushed to his ears. He didn't let her finish reading: "Tear that nonsense up. I don't want to listen to trash like that!" He put his hands over his ears and ran away.

He sat down some distance away from us, opened a book, and began cramming for a test.

Tasia and I sat by ourselves and talked to our hearts' content.

Tasia was to leave our little village soon, and we dreamed aloud of our future meetings... If we didn't meet in exile, then we'd meet in that cheerless country school where I would someday be a teacher.

Marko circled around us, book in hand. The edge of his cap had fallen down over one ear as if on a man drunk with grief. But he just repeated the text stubbornly and energetically. And at the same time, he managed to keep an eye on us. He would occasionally tear his gaze away from the book and throw us piercing, worried glances. He had noticed something curious and dangerous.

Tasia had always had a vivid imagination, and now it was at its most expressive. Blushing, she drew a picture of how somewhere in a distant, miserable little schoolhouse far from home sat a young teacher, all alone and homesick. It was already night, and there was a blizzard. The window was white with snow, and the wind howled horribly like some wild beast...

Tasia's voice grew deeper and her eyes clouded: "...Suddenly, through the wailing of the storm, he hears someone tapping on the window: 'Let me in!' a voice cries."

I knew who was supposed to be waiting there, but at the same time, I was waiting for this guest with such excitement and impatience that I could hear my heart pounding...

Then suddenly Marko appeared...

It seemed he had disappeared entirely, but finally he could bear it no longer, and at the most interesting moment, he turned up as if he had sprung from the bowels of the earth. And there he stood, impudently screwing up his disconcerted eyes.

"I already know what's going to happen next. Do you want me to tell you?"

Tasia fell silent and frowned. Then she shook her head scornfully and angrily.

"You should be ashamed of yourself for eavesdropping like that! You little sexton, you!" She teased him by calling him a sexton because he sometimes served at the altar in a brightly colored surplice.

We walked to another corner of the orchard and sat down on an old half-rotten bench. We waited a little while, then resumed our interrupted conversation:

"You hear a tapping on the window: 'Let me in!' 'Who's there?' 'A guest from afar!..' 'Have a look, Grandfather, and see who's knocking on our window so late.' The old man goes to see who it is, and someone bundled up warm and covered all over with a light powder of snow enters..."

We were so carried away by our dreams that for an instant, we interrupted them to ask: "What if it were really to happen like that?!" We wanted terribly for it all to come about just that way and promised to try with all our might to make it all come true down to the last detail!

"Let's shake on it!" and we fervently squeezed each other's hands. Quietly, her heart pounding, Tasia continued: "...bundled up warm and covered all over with snow..."

Once again, literally as if from the depths of the earth, Marko's face again appeared from out of the bushes. He was smiling, but in his eyes, there was a look of offense and jealousy, a taste of stubbornness. It seemed he had decided once and for all not to let that meeting of ours take place, not even in our dreams.

"And who's there bundled up warm and covered with snow"?

"Me, you creep!" Tasia suddenly pounced on him like an angry beast. She clenched her teeth maliciously, and looked around with a dreary expression. Then she grabbed up the broom lying near the bench and started after him! He retreated, backing away from her and using the Bible as a shield. When he couldn't stand it any longer, he turned away from her, let out a wild whoop, and tore off at breakneck speed, running all over: he raced through the beds of egg-plant and cabbage, jumped across the aster bushes, the dahlias, and the peonies, trampling them down along the way like a freshly-shod horse.

“What are you doing to our flowers? Look out, you’re ruining them, you worthless, good-for-nothing wretch!” angry shouts rang out simultaneously from all sides of the orchard.

Tasia got scared, quickly threw down the broom, and ran back. Marko, crouching low and laughing guiltily, bounded away from the flower beds and removed himself from temptation at the other end of the orchard. Tasia was out of breath when she got back; she sat down and began to think, but her dreams had been frightened away by all the racket. There was no possibility of restoring the magic lace of her fantasy which had suddenly gotten so entangled. But in a couple of minutes, Tasia’s face began to clear again like the sky after a rain storm. In her eyes appeared a light invincible as hops floating in water; she didn’t want her treasured dreams to sink out of sight. So she blushed and continued her story:

“...Someone is shouting at the window: ‘Let me in!’ ”

Marko, face red from cramming, poked his nose out of the lilac bushes and gazed on us with certainty: “I don’t have time now, but I may as well warn you that your dream will never come true, because I’ll find a way to prevent you from meeting!..”

Tasia left our little village soon after, and I went off to study without ever knowing where she had gotten off to. But I was certain that when the time came, I would surely find her.

The session was in full swing: we had singing, music, disputes, parties, and literature, so I plunged into life at the teacher’s college with verve. But sometimes I would remember that somewhere someone was as good as betrothed to me. One day I even had an overwhelming desire to write her, but I didn’t know where to send the letter. I tried very cautiously to find out from Marko, who had entered the college a year after me, where she was, but he acted as if he had forgotten her entirely.

“What Tasia do you mean?”

I reminded him, and he got angry:

“What makes you think I should know?!”

So I never sent the letter.

* * *

I graduated from the teacher’s college and started working. My school stood all by itself in the steppe at the crossroads between two hamlets. The two of us lived at

the school, my old mother and I. All she did was sit by the window with her head propped in her hand looking drearily out at the steppe:

“No, I’ll never get used to living here! We’ll wait till spring, and then you’ll take me home, son!”

And sad times were in store for us: the winter holidays were approaching, and I had totally forgotten all my friends. But I remembered them then and quickly penned a letter to Marko one evening. He was in his last year at the teacher’s college. I wrote him of my loneliness, of my remote corner of the earth, and about my life, which was more and more like exile. I wrote that in fact, my school was a place of exile for recalcitrant teachers. It was a warm, sincere letter. In conclusion, I asked him to come see me during his winter holidays. Then I mailed it and waited. Christmas was fast approaching... One day the children came to school to get their textbooks. In the late afternoon, a snowstorm began. I tried to hand out the books as quickly as I could, since the children were all from the village, and it was a long way home. Two little ones were left — a brother and sister — both from the second group. I tried to get them to stay at the school overnight since the weather was so bad, but they replied that they couldn’t as they had company at home and left. I looked out of the window: the storm was raging... I knew their farm was several miles away and was afraid something would happen to them along the way. Then there was my mother: “...you should never have let those children go home alone, son. Look how bad the weather is!” I sat there, and the wind began to howl. The snow flakes hurled themselves at the window, and suddenly it grew dark. Even my heart turned cold.

“The children will surely freeze. How can they get through such high snowdrifts?” I could see them as clearly as if they were standing before me: Ulyana, the elder, with an embroidered towel tied around her middle and big eyes dark blue like cornflowers. Then there was tiny Matvei, serious and smart as a whip. Ulyana acted as his nanny: when they got to school, she helped him take off his coat, pulled off his mittens, warmed his hands, and wiped his nose. Then she would sit next to him, look humbly and respectfully into his eyes as if he were an idol and ask: “Have a look, Matvei, and see if I’ve done this right.” And the stern Matvei would begin to check her work. He was a much better student than she... And now they were lost

somewhere in the blizzard and would surely freeze... "Tomorrow someone will find their cold little bodies out there in the snow," I thought to myself, and then the village women would start to gossip: "They found two little school children frozen in a snowbank; they were holding each other, the poor dears, and hugging their books to their chests so they wouldn't lose them..." I could imagine the faces on those mournful old women all too clearly.

So I put on my sheepskin coat and my hat and set off after them. When I left the school, I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. The wind tore at my coat and tried to knock my legs out from under me. I was up to my knees in snowdrifts, I stumbled and fell in the snow, which was up to my waist. It was as if someone were driving me on with a whip. And the thought burned in my head: "It's no use: the children are already buried somewhere in the snow clutching their little books to their tiny chests..."

I stopped and shouted: "Ulyanka!.. Matvei!.." But my voice was lost in the noise of the storm before it got beyond arm's reach.

I was bone tired and kept falling in the snow. My thoughts had already reached a point of despair: "If the children have already frozen to death, then it would be better for me to go back." My only hope was that there were people returning from the market, and someone might have given them a lift. If not, then they had frozen for sure. Suddenly I heard the quiet tinkle of sleigh bells right next to me, exactly as if I were indoors. I jumped to my feet and looked around: now I heard the jingle from the other side as if I were playing blind man's bluff. I floundered about in the drifts and looked all around me, but I didn't see anything. Then I felt something's hot breath right next to my face, and saw horses' heads before my very eyes. It was as if they had appeared out of the snow like ghosts. Then I saw the vague outline of a sleigh through the icy blasts of snow.

"Stop!" I shouted as if I were hailing someone from a distance.

"Who's there?" came the response to my call as if from a far-off forest.

"Did you happen to see a couple of school children on the road?"

"Yes. They're already in the village. Someone gave

them a ride in his sleigh. They even told us how to get here."

At first I was wild with joy, but then I got a bit worried again:

"It happened just like I thought it would... I couldn't be dreaming all this, could I? That sleigh looks a bit suspicious..."

Then I heard the driver ask:

"And who might you be?"

"I'm the teacher from the school at Burtyansk."

"Well, if you're the teacher, then get in; I'm bringing you a guest."

"Who?"

"Maybe it's Marko," I wondered to myself.

No, it was someone else entirely: the voice from the back was soft and delicate, completely unreal during this blizzard in the steppe. It was like a miniature silver bell.

"Why did you keep the children at school so long, Mr. Teacher? They might have frozen to death! What? Don't you recognize me?"

The voice sounded as if it were coming from under my hat:

"Do you remember the village school, the orchard, and Marusia... Surely you remember! Well, I'm the very Tasia who promised to come visit you at your school that day in the garden..."

Goose-bumps made my spine tingle: "That's it! This is a dream! I'm freezing to death on the steppe. They say when a person is freezing to death, scenes from his childhood come back to him."

I stood there and waited: the golden gardens began to shimmer in the distance and mysterious music sounded forth...

"Get in! Are you afraid or what?"

I was teetering on the brink of dreams and wakefulness. As we rode on, I couldn't get rid of the feeling that something wasn't right.

We reached the school.

My mother was overjoyed to see our guest. It was as if some relative had come — she was flushed with pleasure. But when she walked into our tiny room, our fellow villager was obviously upset about something. She looked about and sat down silently without taking her coat off. I tried to get accustomed to her presence: she had become

a stranger to me with her own private cares and concerns. But occasionally her eyes would blaze with sparks of gold that reminded me of the Tasia I had known so many years before. We tried to look after our guest, asking her if she wouldn't like to take her coat off, but she didn't say a word. My mother and I exchanged glances, and she said to me:

"We don't notice how cold it is in our little hut. But you can even see the frost in the air from our breath. You go get some firewood, son, and light the stove while I get the samovar ready."

The watchman had the key to the barn, and he had already gone home. So I set off for his house through the snow that lay deep on the vegetable garden.

I kept running up against snowdrifts and almost falling, but I couldn't get that peculiar incident out of my head.

"What in the world does she want? What has she come for?" Then I remembered, and waves of excitement spread through my body and diffused to my arms and legs. The very thought made my head spin.

How could I possibly wonder what she had come for?

She had come because she was betrothed to me! Because she was such an odd person, because she felt awkward — that's why she hadn't said a word!

"Well, if that's how it is, I guess we'd better get married!" I thought boldly. But as soon as I had said it to myself, my legs began to tremble, and something in me began to whine in cowardice. As I felt myself nearing the brink of the abyss, I protested: "That's not really the reason my knees are quaking. It's just that this is all so unexpected, and I really should take some time to think before I act... After all, I haven't made a move yet, so it's hard to say anything one way or the other..."

"Let's have none of that!" I mercilessly stamped out all such cowardly thoughts. "No hesitation, old boy! Don't try to worm your way out of it! That's even downright unhospitable: she was brave enough to come to me in spite of all the gossip it might cause, and here I am..."

"No, come what may, I'll marry her!"

By the time I got back from the watchman's, there wasn't a doubt in my mind. My cheeks were all aglow; I was completely happy, head over heels in love with my unexpected bride.

"What else do I need in life? Happiness has flown right

into my window, and I have to go and get stubborn as a mule and twice as dumb!"

The very thought took my breath away... I hurried as fast as I could, impatient to lay eyes on my beloved!

I nearly flew into the hut.

But Tasia wasn't there: my mother was in the kitchen alone.

"What's happened to our guest, mama?"

"I thought she was in the other room."

"I just had a look, and she wasn't there."

Mama shrugged her shoulders:

"Where could she have disappeared to? Maybe she went to pay the driver."

We waited, but she didn't come back, so I went out into the yard and looked all around the school.

There was no sign of Tasia or the driver or the horses.

Even their tracks were gone. I ran back to the house.

Mama was standing there waiting with a worried look on her face.

"Well?"

"Not a trace of them!"

"What kind of monkey business is this? I wouldn't believe a tale like that myself!"

The watchman came over and listened to our story. He thought for a while, then calmly and solemnly announced:

"Such a thing happens once in a lifetime, and then not to everyone... It must have been a ghost!"

And our little hut was filled with the breath of fairy tales.

For a long time after that, I racked my brains trying to figure out what had happened. Meanwhile, legends about that incident sprang up on all the farms around like mushrooms after a rain. And I could no more stop the rumors that I could put out a brush fire during a drought. If you stamp out the flames in one place, they spring up right under your feet in another. Once, years later, I passed by that school. The driver didn't recognize me, and as we rode along, he told me the following story:

"One evening during a snowstorm, the schoolteacher's betrothed rode up to the school in a troika with bells. Without even getting out of the sleigh, she told him: 'Marry another — don't wait for me...' As soon as she said that, she vanished into thin air, horses, sleigh, and all. And about a week later, sure enough, the teacher heard

that on that very night, his bride had frozen to death not far from Chernihiv."

I barely recognized this tall tale as my own adventure with Tasia.

* * *

So there you have it.

It couldn't possibly be Tasia after all those years!

"Where did you disappear to that night in the snow-storm?.." I asked, thinking to myself: "Perhaps fate is really on my side after all — we didn't get married that time in the steppe, so maybe now we've been brought together again for that very purpose." But I felt a sudden, sharp pain in my chest like a needle piercing my heart, and I cried out in reproof at this mockery of fortune:

"Wait a minute! I think the old man told me that you had married Marko!"

She burst out laughing.

"What a talker he is!" Then she turned to him and said calmly: "Why don't you light the lamp. Maybe he's not coming tonight after all."

She turned back to me:

"We rarely light the room in the evening, because there are always people poking about under the windows."

The old man lit the lamp, carefully drew the curtains, and went to check on the samovar. The two of us sat down near the stove.

"So you want to know where I disappeared to the last time? Till this day, I'm embarrassed every time I remember it." Then she told me an interesting story.

Knowing her expansive nature, I have no doubt that every word of what she said was true. The letter I sent Marko before the holidays was the determining factor in all that followed. It turned out that Marko had been writing Tasia ever since she had moved while the three of us were still in school. The Christmas of her brief visit, he had met her in Kiev on the way home from the institute. They read my letter and decided to come together. Marko was to arrive a day earlier, but there were snowdrifts all along the railway line, and Marko got stuck somewhere. When Tasia arrived and saw that Marko hadn't come yet, first she was indignant, then she got worried. She decided he had done it on purpose. She found out from the driver that the return train left at sunrise, then quietly, so as not

to disturb anyone, she left the house, got back into the very same sleigh, and set off for the train.

I was on pins and needles.

"That's Marko for you! In all the letters he's written, he's never once mentioned any of this. Some friend he is!.."

...We began to reminisce.

We spoke of teachers, and pupils, and long-forgotten incidents from our school days. We spoke of the unfortunate beauty Marusia who really had followed her fiancé into exile.

She had gone, caught typhus, and died.

We sighed.

Then we laughed when we remembered how Marko had covered his ears one day to keep from hearing the "Marseillaise."

Happy and sad intermingled, and it was as if some great joy were hovering over us: it rose and lit the whole of our country like the rays of the sun. And we fell silent like children waiting for Christmas who had been telling each other fairy tales to make the time pass faster.

...We reminisced about the past and talked of old times, but all the while, my thoughts returned again and again to the same thing:

"So they got married, did they! You'd think they'd have had the decency to write. Wait a bit, and I'll tell you!"

Then Tasia blushed like a peony again.

"I can't believe you didn't guess right off!"

"Such a thought never entered my mind. Marko's father kept going on about some Natalia Andriyivna, and I had no idea you were the Natalia * he was talking about. I've always thought of you as Tasia, after all!.. So I guess I'll get to come to your wedding — but you'd better make sure there's plenty of music and all our old friends!"

Tasia's eyes began to shine, and she sighed.

"Who knows what will be? Maybe the rumor that they've been released isn't true, or maybe... we'll have such a wedding that..."

She glarced cautiously over at the window.

Suddenly we heard someone tapping!

A shadow fell over Tasia's face for an instant.

* Tasia — here: diminutive of Natalia

“There... Did you hear it?”

The fog beyond the window thickened instantly and became forbidding.

In the same instant Tasia put out the lamp with a creak.

The room was dark now.

Then came a whisper through the darkness:

“That’s probably the village constable. If he asks for me, say I’m not home,” she said grabbing her kerchief and coat with one hand and opening the door with the other.

I carefully raised the corner of the curtain and peered into the darkness: I could see the form of a man through the black night.

He had a linen sack thrown over his shoulder and a walking stick in his hands. He was tramping over the fall flowers, covered with hoarfrost like a swarm of silver midges.

“Who’s there?”

His white teeth flashed under the window as he burst out laughing, face pale and emaciated as that of a corpse, eyes glowing from deep inside their sunken sockets. He looked like someone playing the fool who had covered his face with a mask.

“Who’s there?” we shouted even louder, the both of us together, Tasia and I, suddenly sick with worry.

At that instant, a chill ran down my spine, for in the sunken eyes of the apparition before me, something lit up, flashed and came into focus. From beyond the window, the figure triumphantly belted out the beginning of the “Marseilaise.”

“It’s Marko home from prison!”

Tasia rushed across the room laughing, her eyes filled with tears.

“Freedom! Freedom! Long live liberty, equality, and fraternity!”

All our talk and reminiscences unfortunately vanished into thin air. Like a child dropping a toy it’s grown tired of, she forgot me and threw herself into the arms of her long-awaited beloved...

The eternal night had ended: the walls of darkness tumbled down...

“Father, bring a light! Hurry!”

...And then there was the wedding... And now the coal black steeds, the tambourines, and the music...

*Bake fine food for the wedding feast, O Mother.
After it's over you'll mourn your lost daughter.*

And at that very moment...

The joy of freedom... Demonstrations, songs, meetings, organizations...

And after that, like a snowstorm in the middle of summer, came the dragoons!..

Then came the Cossacks with their whips that whistled like whirlwinds and cracked like thunder. That's the kind of wedding they had! The innocence of youth, the dark, flashing eyes, and the songs — all were caught up in that fury and borne away like fallen leaves, thousands of miles into the snow. Where have you taken me, my old gray hat! Even my heart is freezing!

Icebergs and polar bears!

The magic of the northern lights!

Then the hard frosts with their young faces and burning eyes, with their cheeks red as poppies.

And then...

What burning wind is that, and what is blazing, blazing upon your face like a flame?

* * *

It was as if I were waking from a dream: I felt a burning wind from the stage painful as stinging nettle. The song went on:

*I overtook my young years
On the Guelder-Rose Bridge
Return to me, oh joys and tears,
The time left us is brief.*

* * *

Golden lights glowed all about the hall. The soft shadows of periwinkle garlands fell along the length of the wall. The sea of bearded heads bent over as if to inhale the delicate fragrance of the flowers in some garden. They sat spellbound, but their thoughts sped on like falcons in pursuit of their own lost years.

And in the midst of them sat Natalia Andriyivna, her head resting on her hand. She sat silently, her cheeks burning with offense.

She looked at me shaking her head as if in the short time between the verses, we had carried on a long conversation. Maybe the merry horses were dancing before her eyes, too. Or maybe she was remembering that distant blizzard, or maybe seeing that my hair was already flecked with gray, she... Or maybe...

Oh, well...

What kind of a dream is this? What kind of mirage has seduced me into feeling that there are shepherds sitting by an autumn campfire blazing into the dark night out on the steppe? A traveller approaches the shepherds from the darkness surrounding them. He takes off his hat and lowers his head. The gray strands hanging down over his forehead stir in the breeze. There are thorns in his clothes; his feet are muddy, his eyes filled with longing. He approached them sadly and in puzzlement, as if looking for lost oxen. Finally he makes this curious inquiry:

"You didn't see my youth pass by here, did you?"

The shepherds laugh.

"What sort of youth?"

"A youth with music and tambourines. A youth with banners on coal black steeds."

"We didn't see your youth but we heard it roar past far away beyond the mountains. And as it swept past, it sang:

*I don't know, I don't know,
To whom I shall return..."*

LAND TO THE POOR

"Mom, Mo-o-o-ommy! You hear?"

"What is it, child?"

"The bells are ringing, calling for the village gathering."

"God's wrath be on them! They'll torture him! They'll murder him! Oh my dear child! Oh my poor one!"

The woman, lying in bed, began moaning. It was a very loud, drawn-out moaning. Her weeping, curses and groans mingled together to produce a jumpy, wheezing noise which filled the room.

Varka embraced her mother, talking soothingly.

"No ringing, dear, mother, no bells. I misheard. Oh please, don't cry, mother, don't..." She couldn't go on; lowering her fair head onto her mother's sickness-ravished breast, she burst into a flood of tears.

And the ominous tolling of the bells spread throughout the village.

* * *

The big fight in the village took place the previous night. At the gathering of villagers, Hordiy Titarenko, who had recently returned from the gubernial center, said that the power of the poor had been established and the rich no longer ruled.

"There will be no such thing as rich and poor any more. All are equal, because all are humans. The land of the rich we'll divide among the poor, because that's the law now. In the towns, factories were given to workers, and in the country, the land was given to the poor peasants. The rich will be brought level with the poor, and the rich won't have power. The time has come for the poor to rule!"

At these words a great din arose from the poor of the village of Fedoriv.

Then Titarenko went on:

"You, sir," he addressed the village headman Mazurenko, "you are not our headman any longer. We will elect

the village committee today, and you will surrender the seal to the committee..."

At these words the gathering fell silent. Both the rich and the poor fastened their eyes upon Mazurenko. And Mazurenko, who went red with shame and offense, straightened up, coughed, and walked slowly up to Hordiy.

"There's a new law, you say?" he hissed.

"Yes, the new law," Hordiy answered boldly.

"And who decreed it?"

"The Revolution."

"Now, here comes your seal!" Mazurenko shouted and hit Hordiy as hard as he could. Down Hordiy went, crashing to the ground; a hubbub rose among the villagers. The rich silently gathered around Mazurenko, while the poor stood around Titarenko. The two groups stood like that for a little while, shaking with hatred, and only glaring at each other. But then the two human walls began moving, set on a collision course, and when Hordiy, covered with blood, approached Mazurenko, the rich attacked the poor.

"Grovellers! Panhandlers! We'll beat the day lights out of you!" the rich bellowed and brandished their cudgels.

The fight began, a bloody and dogged one. Even the children joined it, throwing stones and fighting among themselves: the children of the rich against the children of the poor. Titarenko was knocked down and trampled on. The poor roared and rushed to save him, and then it was Mazurenko's turn to fall with a bashed-in head. The frantic pealing of bells came from the belfry. The poor stood firm, but so did the rich. They hit each other with stones, they bit, and grabbed, and tugged at each other's hair. They fell and then rose, and howled, and with renewed hatred drew blood. Then the young men from the rich families arrived at the scene. They saw Mazurenko, covered with blood, and made their charge. The poor gave way and dispersed. The only one left behind was the legless cripple Yurko Panchishin, who, sitting on the ground, tried to fend off his assailants with his clutches. But he was soon knocked down, too.

The women stood at a distance, wringing their hands. Those men who were hurt in the scuffle lay on the ground, unable to get up; their groans hang in the rising mist. The poor ran away, and the rich helped Mazurenko to his feet and walked him home. And the rich youths dragged both

Titarenko, more dead than alive, and Panchishin to the local jail.

All night long the rich held council in the house of Mazurenko, talking and drinking. Mazurenko, his head bound up, sat on his bed, said nothing, and only nodded his approval at the clamorous threats. It was decided to hold a trial to condemn Titarenko and the poor. The trial must be attended by the entire village, youngest and oldest alike. Those who might try to evade it must be forced.

They drank to celebrate the decision and ate pieces of salt pork fat with their drink.

* * *

"Varka! Where are you, Varka?"

"What is it, dear mother?"

"Do you see them?"

Varka looked out the window but said nothing.

"You don't see them, Varka?"

"Yes, I see them, brought out for trial..." the girl whispered through her tears, watching to see how her frail and sick mother would react.

"Go, Varka, go. Go out there, beg, implore them, maybe they will pardon him. Fling yourself at the feet of Mazurenko's wife. She is Hordiy's godmother. My God, my God, they are going to kill my child..."

And she burst into tears again.

As Varka ran out, the sun in the clear sky greeted her with a feeble autumnal smile. But she didn't see it; she was on her way to the village square, flying like an arrow shot from the bow.

* * *

The rich stood there with cudgels and rifles in their hands, looking proud and drunk. The poor peasants were represented only by their women: not a single man turned up. The women's faces were sad and white like the linen of the rich. The children, dressed in rags, were hiding behind the skirts of their downcast mothers, taking fearful peeps at the dreaded rich. It was very quiet, the only sounds being those of someone spitting and hiccupping after too much to drink the previous night.

"Here they are," the women whispered among themselves, turning in the direction from where the two men

were being brought to the place. The rich too turned to watch the approaching group; impatiently their drunken eyes began blinking, their mustaches twitching and their hands trembling.

The rich youths were carrying the injured Hordiy and Yurko on pieces of sack cloth. When they felt like a rest, they just dropped the bodies to the ground with a loud thud which could be heard from afar.

Mazurenko turned to the women of the poor and said sharply:

“So where are your courageous men? None of them dared come to challenge us, or perhaps, they all ran to town for help? Ha-ha! Bloody heroes!”

These words were acclaimed by the drunken laughter from the rich.

“They went to complain!”

“No, they went to catch hares in the fields!”

“Ha-ha-ha! And only yesterday they wanted to divide the land!”

“See the way they divided it! Ha! Ha!”

“Grovelers! Panhandlers!”

“This one doesn’t even have a decent shirt to his name, and yet he wants power!”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!”

They reeled with wild laughter, and tears of mirth gushed from their eyes.

The rich youngsters brought Hordiy and Yurko before Mazurenko and threw them to the ground. The rich looked and tightened their lips. The women looked and turned away. And the children burst out crying.

Hordiy, swollen, covered with blood, was lying on a piece of gray sackcloth; it was even hard to tell whether he was breathing at all. And Yurko Panchishin, who had lost an eye in the fight, sat up, his hair a mess of dried blood, looked at Mazurenko and a wry smile twisted his yellowish face.

“Trial?” he whispered. “Curse you...” He lowered his head in exhaustion.

Mazurenko coughed, struck the ground with his staff, and said:

“My dear fellows! There was a riot and there was a threat that in broad daylight the fruit of our work would be taken away from us...”

“See our calloused hands!” somebody cried out from the crowd.

“Yes, to rob us of what we have earned by these callous hands. All these have-nots whom we’ve been feeding for so many years wanted to take away our land and rule us. We, the masters, must not allow it.”

“We must not! We won’t allow it!” came voices from the crowd.

“This tramp Titarenko,” Mazurenko shouted, “roused the rabble against our decent fellow villagers and incited them to robbery. He even had the nerve to insult me, who represents authority. Another wastrel and sponger, Yurko Panchishin, injured several worthy people. You will decide for yourselves what must be done with these two. I, as your headman, release them into your hands. It is my duty to do so, and the law tells me to punish robbers. But I don’t feel I should do it myself. You pronounce your own verdict.”

“They must be killed! Killed!” the rich shouted.

“That’ll serve them right! Kill them! They’ll feel our strength!”

The miller Zabolotsky pushed his way through the crowd to the front and, gasping for breath, began his babbling.

“Gent... gent... gentlemen! We’ve had, you know, so to say, a revolt! It’s no joke, you know. They’ve had a revolt in town too! It means, you know, they have no law, and we have! That’s the story for you! It means then, you know, the rebels must be punished! My advice would be to punish all those penniless grovellers, but they, you see, ran away. As soon as they come back, we’ll punish them. But these two must be punished right away. Yurko Panchishin, you know, must be shot for his ‘malicious intent to murder peaceful citizens’. And the main, you know, leader of the poor Hordiy Titarenko ought to be buried alive. He wanted to have a piece of the earth and he will have it. He’ll have enough of it for a bellyful! That’s the story for you! I stand for burying him alive...”

“Great! That’s it! Bury him alive!” the rich, much pleased with the suggestion, roared in approval, and even stepped forward.

“He wanted our land, he’ll have it!”

“And why not? We’ll give him some of it, the son of a bitch!”

“He should learn that we have kind and generous hearts. Into the ground with him! There he’ll join his land committee!”

"That's right, my friend. By God, that's right!"

Then quietness fell on the crowd. Varka, dishaveled, ran out from behind the women and rushed, screaming, to Mazurenko.

"Please, sir, kind sir! Please! Show mercy, don't kill our Hordiy! We don't have anyone else to support us! Mother's sick. Please, sir, kind sir, please!..."

And she kissed his dust-covered boots and embraced his knees.

"Take her away!" Mazurenko bellowed, going red in the face.

Varka was dragged aside and thrown among the women who were wiping tears from their eyes.

"Make way, let's begin!" the miller cried out.

He went up to Yurko Panchishin, squatted down at his side, and, raising Yurko's head, said:

"Well, Yurko, bid farewell to this world. You've earned it and you'll have it. You, you know, is a military man, so to say. You fought in the war, you ain't afraid of death, are you?"

"How can you do it to me, Pavlo? You are my child's godfather!" Yurko whispered.

"I *was*, you fool! No more!" the miller shouted. "Cross yourself and pray..."

Yurko wanted to spit at him, but the saliva ran down his beard and fell on the miller's hairy hand.

"Pray, Yurko!" the miller screeched and rose to his feet.

But Yurko bowed his head and said nothing.

"He doesn't want to, the son of a bitch. Fanatic! Shoot him like he is!" Mazurenko called down.

"So help me God," the miller whispered, aimed his shotgun at Yurko's breast, and turned his head to the crowd. There was dead silence. The rich stood and stared at the miller, their faces ashen. But the women, their faces covered with their aprons, sobbed and the children burst into loud wailing.

Mazurenko gave a sign with his hand, and a shot rang out. A puff of smoke rose near Yurko; the women and children gave out a cry; the miller stepped aside, took off his hat and crossed himself. The crowd followed suit. And Yurko lay on the sackcloth, with no apparent change about him, except for a stream of blood which was staining his shirt bright red.

"Now get the second one!" Mazurenko bawled.

The young sons of the rich fetched their spades and started digging a hole. Hordiy Titarenko began tossing and turning and groaning on his sackcloth. He raised himself on his elbow and Varka rushed to him from where she stood among the women.

"Hordiy, dear!" she cried. She choked on her tears and sobs and could speak no more.

Silently, he brought her fair head against his blood-smeared face. His body trembled.

"Kiss our mother for me, Varka," he soon whispered. "I am to die for justice. Don't think evil of me..." and as he tried to kiss her, he lost his balance and fell face downward on the ground. Varka pressed herself to him, and her tears, falling on his dried blood, made it wet again.

"Hordiy, dearest! Brother dear! What are they going to kill you for? What have you done wrong?" she asked through her sobs, but there was no answer. The old Mazurenko woman was the one who came up to Varka, grabbed her hand and led her away by force.

A desperate wailing hung over the village square, and more children appeared, curious to find out why the women were crying so.

Mazurenko himself raised Hordiy from the ground.

"Do you admit that you deserve punishment?"

Hordiy did not reply.

"Do you admit it? Do you?"

Hordiy opened his wet eyes, looked at Mazurenko, and said in a weak but steady voice:

"I'll die today, but tomorrow is your turn. Because it's we who have power now..."

"Take him!" Mazurenko screamed in fury.

The young men seized Hordiy and hurled him into the hole, as if he were a huge rock.

"Fill up!"

There came the sound of spades grating away at the dirt, and the first clods of earth began falling into the hole. Hordiy's groan was exceptionally long and deep, and it was the only groan that came from him, as if it were a last breath that he wanted to take.

The rich pushed dirt into the hole with their feet and hands. And after it was filled, Mazurenko stood on top of it proudly, looked up and down the crowd, spat on the ground and started home, his walk unsteady. The satisfied rich followed him.

Meanwhile the rich youths were doing a sort of dance over the freshly filled hole, trampling down the earth, and hollering at the top of their voices:

“Eat it! eat it, stuff yourself to death with it! Lord, have me-e-e-r-r-cy...”

But on their walk home, they, for some reason, kept turning and looking back. Some of them thought they heard Hordiy's drawn-out groan escape from the hole and creep after them. But the place was quiet; no one was there any more, except for Yurko Panchishin, lying where he was shot, in the fresh pool of blood.

* * *

“Mom, Mommeeeee! They've killed him! Accursed beasts! They buried him alive! Mo-o-ther! Our dear Hordiy is no more... You hear?”

But her mother did not reply and lay quietly in her bed. Her wrinkled face wore a mask of immeasurable pain. Varka took hold of her mother's hands, and immediately dropped them, leaping away from the bed in horror: the hands were deadly cold.

She ran out screaming, and collapsed at the door. No one came to help. Only the rays of the autumn sun danced playfully on her fair head, and the naked stems of sunflowers at the wattle fence swayed sadly.

Although it was autumn, the day was clear and warm, brimming with hope for the better. The distant thunder of huge guns drowned the singing of larks.

It was autumn... or maybe spring?

(1891-1937)

AVENITA

The days flew like scared birds over the forest, whose blue, gray and greenish granite stuck heavily in the ground, over the sand mounds which the wind had raised, tracing its eternal ways through the old barren land.

Anxiety was soaking in the air, disquiet stirred in the morning fogs and the darkness of the night, and there was no hiding from it in that vast boundless land. On a calm day it seemed that something hostile was lurking in the dark pine forest, and on stormy nights bad dreams would come from the marsh reeds, pressing hard against one's breast.

Andriy Vasilyovich had lost his equilibrium since all communications had been cut off with the outer world. A maggot of dark anxiety constantly gnawed at his sunken consumptive chest; it was the kind of anxiety that dogs feel when they howl over a disaster in the night.

Once he tried to dispel that anxiety and, walking through the thick forest behind the house, began proving to himself logically the groundlessness of his disquiet. He posed questions and answered them. He drove himself with logic in the battles against the unreasonable, but anxiety would not leave him, and he hurdled all the logical barriers. Then the maggot of disquiet started to gnaw at his sick chest with even greater force.

Andriy Vasilyovich carefully concealed his anxiety from his wife, but realized that he could not hide it totally; it showed in his movements, his glances, and in the timbre of his voice.

"Why are you so sad?" Sima would ask him, looking him in the eye and waiting uneasily for an answer.

Andriy Vasilyovich looked away and said with affected indifference, "Don't pay attention to me. I'm just a little tired."

Sima's glance flashed with mute despair. She went silently to the window and stared with dim eyes into the depth of the forest for a long time, until Andriy Vasilyovich left the room and his steps had died away downstairs.

Sima had begun to notice the change in her husband back in the spring. Before that he used to joke and laugh, he enjoyed making up funny stories; but since the Poles had taken away the horses and a precious collection of seed from the grass farming station laboratory, Andriy Vasilyovich all but retired into a shell, and his sparkling laughter had given way to suppressed disquiet. He would stay in his laboratory, which also served him as a study, for hours, deep in his thought; and when he went upstairs to his living quarters he could not disguise his anxiety. As he walked up the stairs, he tried to whistle merry tunes and look carefree, but ten steps later he forgot the feigned merriment, and obsessive thoughts lacerated his forehead with deep wrinkles.

Sima watched her husband worriedly, and thought that there should be some trouble he was concealing from her. This pressed upon her a sharp presentiment of disaster, unknown and inevitable, like death.

The experimental grass farming station, of which Andriy Vasilyovich Ovcharenko was the director, had been set up on the edge of an old pine forest divided by a large marshy meadow. There, behind the wide meadow strip, a blue wall of pine trees stood in front of a village named Bolotivka, and the Olenitsya River's scattered beads glistened here and there in the middle of a green carpet of sedge and reed. Behind the forest, the river cut through the sand mounds with a serene lancet, then it quietly flowed into the forest's marshy banks and, finally, fed the bitter grasses of the wild meadow with its tart water. Sharp reed and sedge leaves hid its bed from all eyes, and one could think it was not a river but separate and disconnected pools. Its boggy banks did not allow either man or cattle to approach the water, and there was only one place where once a watermill had been, with a planked footway across the Olenitsya and a ford to drive cattle to the pasture.

About ten years ago a piece of land had been allotted to the station in a corner of the meadow, right beside the forest. Its square area was divided into regular quadrangles where "pure" crops of meadow grasses grew. Every lot had its own color, some glossy with the dark green of marsh plants, some shot with the gentle mat color of blooming grain.

The station court occupied one corner of the plot, and was enclosed by a high picket fence reminiscent of the

ancient settlements of the time of Prince Vladimir the Great. This impression was made even stronger by the forest wilderness that rolled up from the north, and by the primeval landscape to the south — with the intentionally still canvas of the faraway forest and with the horizon split by the smoky blue spears of pine. Once wild aurochs and deer had stalked these meadows, and now contented cows chewed their cud there, along with peaceful horses whose kin had long spent its wild spirit in strenuous slave labor.

There were buildings for equipment in one part of the court, and near the high gate was a two-storey wooden house with a blind outer wall. Obviously, the court was intended to withstand the various mishaps that could occur in these woodland jungles, notorious throughout the entire Ukraine for their men of the woods.

Andriy Vasilyovich descended the shaky stairs and opened the door to the laboratory. Immediately he felt the usual smell of dry herbs, the thick unswept dust, and some unknown chemicals that a clumsy student had once spilled.

The first waves of the revolution had washed away many students from the station; its staff workers left their now unpaid jobs, and, finally, only three people remained behind the station court paling, hanging on in misery and hunger, without any help from outside. The power that possesses creators and builders, that power which leads people to torture and execution for endeavors of their own choice made departure impossible for the consumptive Ovcharenko, for the sturdy athlete Somko and for the rosy-faced Sima.

Somko had arrived at the station as a graduate student, but lately, in addition to devoting himself to research work with a novice's ecstasy, he had to take care of Bulany, the station's only horse; he chopped firewood and did all sorts of housekeeping. Somko resolutely refused any help from Andriy Vasilyovich: what kind of help could a sick man provide?

In fact, there was not much work at the station now. The many armed gangs had stolen dozens of cows and horses, and the devastation was completed by the Polish Army which had confiscated even the seed stock to feed the horses. Now there was nothing worth wanting anymore, with the exception of those fifty acres of meadow which got on the nerves of Bolotivka's inhabitants.

Ovcharenko clenched his teeth seeing the devastation of the station which he had built with his own hands, at the cost of hundreds of days of gruelling and exhausting labor which might seem easy to the outsider, but was, in reality, so incredibly hard and exhausting.

At dinner time, Andriy Vasilyovich went upstairs and, trying to avoid his wife's eyes, washed his hands and smoothed his hair. He took his place at the table, carefully hiding his secret thoughts.

The meals had a strong odor of boiled greens which were to compensate the lack of meat and fat, but Andriy Vasilyovich did not care about the taste. He ate automatically, because he had to and not because he wanted it. He would go on eating while he was able to, for that was his salvation and the only reason why disease had not yet felled him. Especially now, when anxiety was eroding so much of his nervous strength, he should eat as much as possible, for he felt that his body was yielding, and coughing choked him more and more often every day.

"Have you noticed that we've got a bit of pork fat in the borsch today?" Sima asked him with a tone of housewifely solicitude in her voice.

"Yes, pork fat. I noticed," Andriy Vasilyovich lied and, raising his head looked intently at his wife. A wish to say something flitted in his eyes, but he quickly bent down over the plate again. Andriy Vasilyovich was afraid that words could betray him, and Sima would understand everything.

Embarrassed, the young woman fell silent.

They had been married for two years, and Sima often compared her husband to her father, who was a university professor and who, exactly in the same way, would talk little and reluctantly when engaged in some intensive research, fully absorbed in his thoughts. "Perhaps Andriy is engrossed in his thesis," Sima thought, and found relief in this thought, although she knew that it was hardly the right time to think about any thesis.

"Sima," Andriy Vasilyovich said unexpectedly, "would you like to go to your mother?"

"My mother?" Sima asked with surprise. "Why did that come to your mind?"

"I know you haven't seen your mother for a long time."

During these two years, Sima had been away from this backwoods not more than three times, and it was only to

the small provincial center. To get to the town one had to go some fifty versts in a dirty railroad car, and the road to the station meant another twenty five versts of bumping up and down in a horse-driven cart along the rutted forest tracks. On these trips she had an increasingly sharp feeling of being buried in this forsaken forest, and now that her husband reminded her about the capital, she brightened up.

"You know that I'd never refuse to go to my mother," Sima said, casting her eyes down. And suddenly she felt some kind of subconscious distress that was quickly spreading and enveloping her. She came up to her husband and pressed close to him. "Andriy, I'm afraid of something."

"Of what? Silly creature. Ha! Ha!" Andriy Vasilyovich forced out laughter, and immediately felt painful shame for his lies and the forced laughter.

"I don't know. I'm so scared!" Sima pressed closed to her husband, and looked in his eyes imploringly. "Andrus! Let's go together!"

Andriy Vasilyovich had not expected this, and was not ready for things to turn that way. He coldly moved his wife aside, mumbled something unintelligible, and hurried to the door, as if running away from the hunt.

"Andriy!" Sima cried out desperately. "You didn't answer me!"

Andriy Vasilyovich stopped by the door, as if protecting himself against an attack. "I can't go, Sima, I've got so much work." Fearing that Sima might startle him with some other question, he quickly went out to the laboratory. There, in Somko's reticent company, he would hide from his wife's questions that tormented him so much and compelled him to lie.

"Well, how is it?" was the pat question Ovcharenko asked Somko. That question had tradition behind it, and was considered necessary whenever the station director encountered his assistant.

Andriy Vasilyovich hoped to hear the equally significant "O. K., Andriy Vasilyovich, everything's fine," but this time Somko broke with tradition. He turned from the table and said curtly, "Bad."

Andriy Vasilyovich crossed the room several times, aimlessly touched a dry spike on the wall and asked again, "What is it?"

"They're blustering."

They both were quick to catch each other's thoughts, which is usual for people who have spent long periods together.

Somko leaned over the table by the window and inserted the breechblock into a rifle. Then he pointed it upward and clicked the firing pin several times. "In good order," he uttered his thought. Then he pulled a drawer out of the table and produced a sawn-off gun. "Bastards," he announced his second thought, examining the gun. He loaded a cartridge and tried to eject it. Everything worked nicely.

"The gun is for you, Andriy Vasilyovich, and I'll take the rifle," Somko said peremptorily, and explained, "I can use the buttstock if need be."

Ovcharenko knew that Somko did not overly rely upon his fighting abilities, but this did not offend Andriy Vasilyovich, rather even comforted him. Somko's strong figure emanated some indefinable warmth, the kind that children feel when they stand behind their father's back in moments of danger. "You are our commander in chief, Hrits," joked Andriy Vasilyovich, calling his assistant by his nickname as he usually did.

Somko put the gun and the rifle under the table and sat down on a chair, stretching out his legs with puttees wrapped around his calves above the worn-out soldier boots.

"I'll stay in the attic. From there I can keep the yard and the nearby area under fire. You'll lie on the balcony, only we have to face it with bricks."

"Anyway, I'm not afraid — they won't hit me in the darkness."

Andriy Vasilyovich grew pensive. He thought about his wife. "If only we could make Serafima Serhiivna leave!"

"We can do it today. I'll ask Fedot, the forester, he'll drive her to the station. Of course she should go."

"She should, but she doesn't want to leave!"

"Then go with her."

"Don't you understand, Hrits! If they learn that I've left, all our work will be ruined!" Ovcharenko shrugged his shoulders in anxiety.

"I'd rather have the work ruined than people!" Somko said sharply and turned away to the window. A moment later he glanced at Andriy Vasilyovich, and felt sorry for his words: he was standing there with a downcast look of

someone who had lost the last person with any faith in him.

"Well, well, Andriy Vasilyovich! I've said a silly thing, and you start worrying! You'd better persuade Serafima Serhiivna to go away."

"I don't think she'll agree, but I'll try again," Ovcharenko said as he went out of the laboratory. Going upstairs, Andriy Vasilyovich thought about the reasons he might suggest to Sima to prove that she had to go. The motives had to be innocent enough to put Sima at ease and make her agree. However, he did not really believe he would manage to persuade his wife. Sima had already shown signs of vague alarm at the dinner. Andriy Vasilyovich knew her too well, so he had to prepare for the worst: he had to tell her the truth.

The last step of the stairs confronted him, and Ovcharenko stopped, thinking. Suddenly he lost all the words he had made up, and now he did not know how to begin. Having stood there for a while, he rubbed his forehead, as one would do when forgetting something, then waved his hand hopelessly and opened the door to the living room.

There was no one in the room, although Sima often used to sit there after dinner, doing some simple housework or examining seeds through a large magnifying glass. In the recent months she had been of great help to her husband, performing under his supervision various experimental studies in botanics.

Seeing nobody in the parlor, Ovcharenko crossed the room and opened the bedroom door. Suddenly he felt an unpleasant tickling in his chest: suppressed sobs were coming from the corner where Sima's bed was. Andriy Vasilyovich came closer and saw his wife lying on the bed with a pillow over her head, her body shaking. She must have been afraid of being heard, and her hands were convulsively clutching the blanket in a mighty struggle with themselves, like the hands of someone mortally wounded.

Andriy Vasilyovich was astounded. It was the first time that he saw his wife in such a state. "Sima! What's the matter with you?" he asked softly, putting a hand on her shoulder.

Sima started, as though lashed with a whip. Copious tears were flowing down her face, and her chin trembled nervously. "No, it's nothing — Don't pay attention," she said in a barely audible voice, wiping away her tears.

But when Andriy Vasilyovich sat down on the edge of the bed, Sima clung to his shoulder and, losing control, burst out crying, like a sick child. "Don't worry, it's nothing," she repeated.

Andriy Vasilyovich held his wife tight, and when she calmed down a little, he asked, "Sima, why are you crying?"

"It's nothing."

"No, don't keep it back, tell me frankly, why are you crying?"

"I'm scared."

For some reason those words brought a chill to the man's back, but he quickly pulled himself together and tenderly stroked his wife's hair. "Sima, don't cry. There's nothing to be afraid of. You're just a silly little girl, that's why you're so scared. You go to the station today with forester Fedot, and from there — to your mother. And I'll come in about two weeks."

Andriy Vasilyovich's sober words quieted the woman. She wiped away her tears, got up from the bed and went over to the window, as she always did when talking over serious matters with her husband.

For a long time she looked at the multicolored quadrangles of the experimental crops, at the meadow's wide area bounded by the dark-green circle of pine forest, at the white top of the Bolotivka church which stuck out between the distant trees, as if reminding all who could see that somebody did live behind the dark forest and behind the reed-rippled river.

Andriy Vasilyovich kept watching his wife, but his mind was far away. One after another, his thoughts were congregating in the place of his life that was marked with the word *avenita*.

It was he who made up this word from a Latin root to name a miraculous herb, several seeds of which had been brought to Ovcharenko eight years ago from a remote southern country. The herb was said to grow prolifically in slimy swamps as well as in quicksand, producing unbelievable crops of grass and seed. The seven years it took to acclimatize the plant proved its wonderful properties, and Andriy Vasilyovich managed to turn a couple of seeds into so great an amount that this year he planted *avenita* in five plots. He dreamed that in another year several farms would start using it, and some ten years later it would be possible to grow it in lands where

even weeds did not grow now. He could spend hours calculating the benefits that *avenita* would bring to the country's agriculture, and for days on end he walked around, brimming with creative happiness.

Last year he planted as many seeds as he could, leaving just a little in reserve, and when that reserve was taken away by the army to feed its horses, Ovcharenko's only hope was the harvest.

"Andriy, I want you to know that I won't go anywhere without you."

Sima said this with such force that all the objections stuck in Andriy Vasilyovich's throat, and he just spread his hands reproachingly. "But you'll leave only two weeks earlier than I!" he finally said despairingly.

"I'll wait for you those two weeks."

"Sima, but Somko and I can run away any time!"

"I can run away, too."

Andriy Vasilyovich got to his feet and paced up and down the room. He was trying to find a way of talking his wife into leaving, though he no longer expected success. "Sima, it's not safe to stay here. Bandits threaten to attack us. The Bolotivka people sympathize with them. Somko and I have rifles, and we can escape when we have to."

"I also have a gun, and I'll also escape when I have to."

Sima did have a smallbore shotgun that she used for hunting ducks and woodcocks. Those words disarmed Andriy Vasilyovich, and he ceased his attempts to prove something. He was sitting now, his eyes on the floor. "Perhaps, we really should abandon it all and get out of here before it's too late?" a panic thought flashed in his mind. But it was quickly forced out by another, "But that will be the end of *avenita*, the end of my eight years of work with it, the end of all those plans which filled my life with happiness and encouraged me, despite tuberculosis, throughout this long grind." His imagination suggested, one by one, the cherished pictures of the dry sands carpeted with abundant green fleece, the nutritious lush grass carpeting the callous swamps which used to be fertile only for dearth and poverty.

No, he would not turn his back on *avenita*!

And when his certitude reached its maximum, the narrow rivulets of doubt began to eat it away, like water eats through sugar. "Perhaps, it's just madness? What would he, Andriy Vasilyovich Ovcharenko, ever gain from the treasure his *avenita* would give to the country? Did he

have the right to risk the young life of Sima who selflessly decided to stay with him in danger?"

And when the streams of hesitation reached the point where they threatened to breach the wall of his firmness, another picture filled his mind. All right. They would abandon this backwoods today and start for the railroad, taking what little they had with them. The very next day the villagers would herd the cows in here, completely trampling down the nurtured grain. Eight years of work would perish. Eight young years, the best years of work — for a moment of hesitation! No more hesitation!

The powers which for ages had encouraged creators and builders to perform feats of heroism, awoke in Ovcharenko's weak body, and they won. He raised his head and looked into Sima's eyes. Now his look had both tenderness toward this selfless woman, and the unshaking steadfastness of a courageous soldier.

"Well, we'll talk about it," Andriy Vasilyovich said with a kind smile, and his kind and wholehearted smile, the first one for a long time, made Sima warm and happy, as though she found something she had long lost.

As he was going downstairs to the laboratory, Andriy Vasilyovich felt a distinct change in his emotional state. The disquiet that had been chewing away at him for months, that anxiety which had followed him, like a shadow, had disappeared somewhere; it was replaced by the realization of danger and the calm certainty of a man who did not have to lie anymore, and could allow himself the great luxury of saying nothing but the truth.

After working in the laboratory, Ovcharenko went to have a look at the avenita in the lots. He stroked the ears lovingly, trying to determine the ripeness of the seeds, when he heard Somko's voice behind him, "So, Andriy Vasilyovich, how is it?"

"About a dozen days more, if it doesn't rain. Or perhaps, later."

Having examined the grain attentively, the agronomists went silently to the station yard. They were already working in the laboratory when Ovcharenko spoke, "What do you think, Hrits, can they attack us in the daytime?"

"I'm sure they won't. We'll be able to recognize them in the daytime, and they are afraid of that because no one knows what's going to happen the next day."

They fell silent again. There was only the rustling of the sheets of paper that were inserted between the plants

to dry them, and at times Ovcharenko coughed. Both men were arranging the herbaria and grass specimens which were laid on the tables and shelves. There were more specimens in the corners and on the walls, carefully fastened by wire to cardboard. One could see here the large variety of grasses which the station sought to ameliorate.

"Serafima Serhiivna has refused to leave by herself."

"Why?"

"She says she won't go without me."

Somko understood Andriy Vasilyovich's words as a subtle hint. "So, then you should go, Andriy Vasilyovich, and I'll stay," he said simply.

"Don't talk nonsense. If I go, I'll make you go as well. Because even if you stayed, it wouldn't do any good — without me the farmers will plunder the station, never mind the bandits. You know that I am the one that's stopping them."

Ovcharenko's words were not groundless. He personally knew almost all the villagers, therefore they could not dare to openly pillage the despised station which occupied such a fine piece of the meadow. Somko need not have been cautioned about that, as he himself knew very well that, should the director leave, the station would be over-run in broad daylight.

"Serafima Serhiivna says that she also has a gun and can fight as good as we can."

"She means that little shotgun?" Somko asked with a smile.

"Yes."

The laboratory's tense silence was occasionally broken by deep sighs which interrupted the men's thoughts.

"You know, Andriy Vasilyovich, maybe we'd better make a break with all that stuff?" Somko uttered his doubts and gave a concerned look at Ovcharenko.

"We can't, Hrits," Ovcharenko replied simply. "We'll get avenita seed first, and then be off."

"Yes, we'll get it, sure we will!" Somko cried out with youthful eagerness, and felt ashamed of his doubts.

The evening was slowly pouring blue mist upon the trees that had been heated up by the June sunshine; it spread out in long bizarre shadows, covering the fields with a thin felt of fog. The sound of church bells came down from distant Bolotivka, and thousands of ringing echoes banged among the reeds in the swamp.

Somko and Ovcharenko came out of the laboratory. Somko walked around the court, looking it over carefully. He had been working here for the past two years, and cherished the station. Once he had taken care of his father's farm in the same way, but since his father died and the farm went up in smoke among the shells, he remained all alone in the world, and the station became his home.

After watering Bulany, Somko came up to the Ovcharenkos and found them engaged in lively conversation.

"It isn't made up, Sima. Hrits went to the Bolotivka market today and heard Scarlet blustering — But here is Hrits!"

"And the villagers?" Sima asked Hrits.

"The villagers keep quiet, but it seems they're sympathetic. They won't start it on their own, but if somebody goes first, they'll be willing."

"And Scarlet's gang, is it big?"

"About six men, they say, not more. But there are no authorities in the village, so they can do whatever they want."

Everybody was thinking in silence. Then Somko broke it, "I believe we should arrange — "

"Arrange what?"

"Some kind of sentry, because, who knows, they may attack us without warning."

The whirlwind peasant tempests were still raging in the villages, not yet tamed by state regulations. Armed hordes roamed through the land in waves, stamping out any allusions to government rule which their predecessors had established, or rather, had tried to establish. Changes took place dozens of times, and this accustomed farmers to regard every armed man as a source of state power, and short-termed power at that. The village limited its range of interests within its boundaries; so Bolotivka, not unlike any other village, took little interest in the gigantic liberation struggle, paying all its attention to the small piece of meadow which belonged to the station. Will Bolotivka ever come to possess it? And who will get a hay-making plot there?

The villagers did not dare destroy the station because "the good man" Ovcharenko lived there, but if a crook like Scarlet did it, they would not mind.

"You, Hrits, will sleep here tonight, and I'll stand guard. The only way anyone can get here from the village is

past the windmill and then by the path along the drain ditch, across the Green Swamp. So we have to watch the path."

"No, tonight I'll go. We have to dig out a post there. And we shouldn't fire from there, so that they won't figure things out and take some other way next time."

They agreed that if Hrits spotted somebody, he would immediately make straight for the station so they could all defend the house.

"Charge the riffle cartridges with shot," Somko said, and went out of the room with a gun under his arm.

Andriy Vasilyovich locked the door and, with Sima's help, began charging the cartridges.

"Andriy, perhaps we can really give it all up and flee to the city? Can't we?" Sima looked into her husband's eyes with hope. "See, you're coughing, and besides — all those troubles and danger."

For a long time Andriy Vasilyovich did not say anything and kept forcing the wads into the cartridges. Only when about four dozen of them were lying on the table, he started speaking to Sima who eyed him nervously.

"We can flee. It's the easiest thing to do. We can call Hrits right now and start off. Yes." Ovcharenko stopped, came up to his wife and hugged her. "Yes. It's easy to do. But what will be the effect of running away? We will abandon the results of eight years of hard work. We will leave everything that has taken so much energy and money to be ruined. Even though this money has come from the state, and isn't mine, and though my work was paid for by the state as well, is it worth it?"

Andriy Vasilyovich emphasized his last words. He was now standing at Sima's side and watching her closely. "Yes. My work is not worth it. I did not stay here for the sake of my salary, nor for the petty pride in calling myself director of the station, but for some other reasons! Some other force made me stay in this distant spot, far from civilization, with my tuberculosis and no medical assistance! And who knows, maybe this is my last undertaking, the last chance to justify myself, to make my life worthwhile?"

The oil lamp had started to smell, so Sima put it out. Andriy Vasilyovich's agitated voice seemed to ring louder in darkness, and the words fell like heavy tin bullets. The starry night was oozing forth its scarce light, and not a single sound came from its depth.

“Avenita — that’s my justification! That’s my passport of conscience! The rest of my work may shatter into pieces, but I will not give up avenita!” A long fit of dry coughing overcame him. It often happened to him under nervous strains. “Suppose we run away. What then? The very next day our plots will be trampled out by the cattle, and not a single trace of avenita will remain, not even a couple of seeds! And when everything calms down, anyone can accuse me of having taken it easy at the station for eight years, having duped society with my fictitious avenita and then, like a rogue who has embezzled money and resorts to arson to cover his crimes, so I too, knowing in advance the consequences of running away —” Andriy Vasilyovich started coughing again, and could not suppress it for a long time. When the coughing ceased, he did not speak and sat there, without moving.

Two very different and hostile forces were struggling between the man and the woman. Sima was the first to break the long silence. “If only just a little seed had remained,” she said plaintively.

“Yes. If we’d had seed stock it would’ve been different. I’d have agreed to leave everything.”

The conversation was interrupted by a soft knock at the door. Sima and Andriy Vasilyovich pricked up their ears.

“Who is it?”

“That’s me, let me in,” came Somko’s quiet voice.

Hrits slipped quietly into the room and locked the door behind him. “They’re coming,” he whispered.

“Many?”

“Five or six of them. With rifles. Andriy Vasilyovich, you keep yourself down on the balcony, and I’ll go to the attic. Serafima Serhiivna, you come over there, to the window. Fire at the shadows. First I’ll ask who and why.”

Somko was in a hurry. Having given the orders, he went to the corridor where he could go up the staircase to the attic. His nervousness made itself felt by the others, and Somko noticed it. He said encouragingly from the corridor darkness, “There’s nothing to be afraid of. They are brave only when they attack the unarmed. They’re not used to resistance.”

They soon heard Somko’s muffled steps in the attic where he had made holes in the shingle roof to fire through. Sima put her double-barreled gun on the window sill, sat down on a stool and peered into the night. Andriy

Vasilyovich went out to the balcony and lay down, the sawn-off rifle in his hands.

The house lurked, waiting for the enemy. A cricket was tapping out its simple tune somewhere in the grass; frogs were croaking drowsily in the swamp, while every so often Bulany neighed softly in the stable. The forest was standing around like a silent black wall, smelling sharply of resin and the mushroom dampness after the day's heat.

In the attic, Somko was peering at the starry darkness, but couldn't see anything. It looked like somebody had poured black ink over the earth, flooding the bushes, the trees and the meadow around the station. Only a small glade in Somko's vision was not overflowed with black shadows, and it was from this side that they could expect the enemy.

Somko put the rifle through the hole and waited anxiously. Suddenly a figure made its appearance noticeable for a moment at the edge of the clearing, and then several more. The shadows disappeared quickly in the bushes, and nothing disturbed the stillness any longer. "Perhaps they want to sneak to the gate through the bushes," Somko thought, and instantly he saw two figures come out of the bushes beside the court.

"Who's there?" asked Somko when the shadows approached the gate.

The figures stopped. He heard breechblocks click, and then somebody answered reluctantly, "Friends."

"Halt! Or I'll fire!"

Curses were flung out in response, and a shot resounded with thousands of echoes. There could be no doubt anymore: Scarlet had come.

Somko was not a bad marksman, but his sight now failed him. Although he aimed carefully, the shadows moved back to the bushes, obviously unharmed.

Andriy Vasilyovich and Sima did not fire. The attack had not come from their side. But their hands tightened their grips on the guns, and their heartbeats quickened.

Encountering resistance by the gate, the bandits apparently decided to fire at the house from the opposite side, because shots soon came from behind the fence; several bullets hit the wall and tinkled against the plated roof. Now it was Andriy Vasilyovich's turn. He chose the exact spot from where the shots had flashed out, and let fire from his gun. After the first shot he was possessed by the thrill of a fight, known so well to anyone who has

clashed with an enemy under fire. He was now firing one bullet after another, while Somko supported him from the attic. Sima clenched her teeth and firmly held her gun in readiness, flinching after each shot, although she could not fire herself as her window did not face the enemy's side.

Somewhat later, Somko came downstairs and crawled over to Andriy Vasilyovich on his hands and knees. "They've crouched down in the ditch, our fire has no effect. Stop shooting," he whispered, touching Ovcharenko's shoulder.

Andriy Vasilyovich put the hot rifle on the floor. "So what will we do?"

"I'll go out and try to get behind them."

"No. They'll spot you."

"The hell they will. When you hear me shooting in the forest, on the left, start firing at the bushes over there. They'll certainly try to get away through them."

Andriy Vasilyovich did not argue. Hrits spoke with so much authority that he did not dare to reply.

Somko crawled back from the balcony to the room, again on all fours because the bullets were falling in hailstorms upon the house: the attackers must have had enough ammunition. "Serafima Serhiivna, you will fire at those bushes when you hear them leave where they are now."

Sima nodded silently. Andriy Vasilyovich inserted a new cartridge clip into his rifle and began listening.

Somko's plan worked out excellently. A moment later, rapid fire came from the forest. It was clear from the shots that the bandits had turned their fire to the forest, but they were soon shooting in the bushes, on the right. This gave life both to Sima's shotgun and Ovcharenko's rifle, but not for long. A quarter of an hour later the shooting ceased, and only far away, somewhere behind the swamp, the attackers kept shooting aimlessly, perhaps vexed by their failure.

When everything quieted down, Andriy Vasilyovich stood up and came to Sima. "I need to have my shoulder bandaged. A damned bullet grazed me."

Sima grew anxious. She felt about for her husband's shoulder in the darkness, and her hands touched a sticky mass. "You're wounded?" she asked in horror.

"A bit. Don't worry."

While Sima lit the lamp and searched for some material to bandage the shoulder, Somko came in. He was rubbing his hands with satisfaction. "I went after them right to

the path. They carried one in their arms. And what about you?" he asked Andriy Vasilyovich.

"They scratched me a bit."

The bullet had passed through a shoulder muscle, above the clavicle, missing the bones. Sima bandaged the shoulder as best she could. The arm was put in a sling because the wound gave him pain.

The short summer night was smoldering pink in the east. Soon it would burn out in the dawn's sunny fire. Shreds of the morning mist had become entangled in the pines and lay low in the valley, until the indifferent majestic sun dried up the remains of the charred night. The day was rising above the earth, implacable as death, examining languidly the vestiges of the night fight.

Andriy went to bed, but Somko and Sima agreed to rest in turn. "We've got to be on the alert. We gained a victory this night, but the bandits won't leave us alone."

Somko hid the sawn-off gun under his shirt and went out to examine the yard. He had guessed correctly, the bandits had been lying low in the ditch, as the grass was trampled and many empty cartridge cases were scattered around. On the grass there Somko also saw a large patch of clotted blood.

Having returned from his round, Somko said to Sima, "You can rest now, and I'll put some bricks around the balcony. The balcony is our best position."

After finishing work, Somko woke Sima. "I'll go to the village. We have very few cartridges left. Should get some more," Somko said.

They really were short of ammunition. The only way of getting it was by trading flour. "I'll leave ten pounds at home, and for the rest I'll trade about a hundred cartridges, or even two hundred."

"All right," Sima agreed. "Andriy should have enough bread, and we'll do without it somehow."

Somko nodded in agreement and went downstairs. Sima remained alone beside her wounded husband who groaned and tossed about in sleep. The long wearisome minutes dragged on. Occasionally she got up to check the door bolt, or to look out through the open window at the empty expanses of the meadow and the forest. When it seemed to her that somebody was disturbing the emptiness there, Sima would grab a rifle and peer at the suspected spot for several minutes without moving, holding her breath.

How will her husband get over this, and what will happen to her? This thought was troubling her, and she felt the concessions her mind had made to Andriy's reasoning receding now, pushed along by her emotions.

What's the use of Andriy justifying his life if he has to give his life away? Will he or she benefit from it?

No, she will demand to leave here immediately, especially now that Andriy needs a doctor's care. Now no one will dare blame him for failing to defend his case, for breaking up.

Andriy Vasilyovich was quiet at last. His emaciated face had become covered with untimely wrinkles, and only now Sima noticed the lush greyness that was entangled in his hair.

No, away from here at once, at any cost! She will demand, and he won't dare refuse in such a condition!

About two hours later Somko returned with the cartridges. He entered the room with a smile, but, seeing tears on Sima's face, he stopped short of speaking.

"Hrits, only you can persuade him to go! There isn't even a doctor nearby!" she imploringly addressed Somko.

Andriy Vasilyovich was awake. He refused any reasoning. He said that his departure would mean the end of both the station and avenita. The topic had to be dropped because it bothered Andriy Vasilyovich whose condition was bad enough as it were.

Somko had learned in the village that Scarlet's men had returned from the raid at night, but they did not reveal any details. Scarlet was lying in the house and would not come out. They said he was wounded in the leg.

"Maybe, now they will leave us in peace for a while."

"And what's new in politics?" Sima asked.

"The devil only knows!" Somko waved his hand hopelessly. "Some say the Bolsheviks have taken Warsaw, and others say Petlura is in Kiev. Orlik's gang has camped in the Zabolotiv woods and doesn't let anybody into our parts."

Now it was only Somko and Sima who had to bear the brunt of guarding. Andriy Vasilyovich could not get up. On the third day he thought he was feeling better and tried to walk, but his wound opened up, and he had to get back into bed. Sima grew thin and was sad. Only Somko was hale and hearty, as always. He kept vigil in the night, continued recording the developments in the experimental plots, and even weeded the most overgrown ones.

By and by, avenita was ripening. The weather was favorably dry, and Somko began hoping that they would be able to gather the crops in a week. But this hope was ruined flat by the rain.

"So, how is it coming along?" Andriy Vasilyovich would ask. He felt better now, but his shoulder hurt, and Sima did not let him get up.

"Everything's fine, but for the rain, darn it!" Somko waved his hand angrily.

"And why are you so pale, Sima?" Andriy Vasilyovich asked his wife.

"It's all nerves," Sima answered, concealing from him that Somko and she had not had bread for three days already, saving it for the sick man. They lived now on potatoes, salting it with niter which had luckily remained among other mineral fertilizers in the station storehouse.

It kept raining for two days, and only on the third day did the sun peep out, cheering everybody. Sima looked as happy as a child who had received an unexpected gift; she was gladdened both by the sunshine and her husband who could already walk across the room. The threat of complications had passed, and the wound was healing.

Somko went to the village again, this time to see the peasant he knew, and on returning, informed the others, "Scarlet has been blustering, 'I'll show them how to shoot,' he says. 'They don't have the right to shoot a man.' We must be on the alert."

Each night Somko went out to guard the passage across the swamp and came back only in the morning to do his housework and to rest.

"Andriy, we're going to have dinner without bread today," Sima guiltily said.

"So what? We'll have potatoes," he replied calmly and looked inquisitively at his wife. "How long is it, since you've had bread?"

"No, why," Sima said evasively, and felt embarrassment.

This made Andriy Vasilyovich realize that of late bread had only been given to him. It was not by accident that in the last two weeks Sima looked so scrawny, and Somko had become as thin as a flatfish. "You're sacrificing people for your own vanity," Andriy Vasilyovich reproached himself. "You're justifying yourself and your work at the cost of others."

A wave of doubts and hesitation rolled upon him again, threatening to defeat his firmness. "Maybe, we should

abandon it all and leave this horrible place?" he thought, and taking the opportunity that Sima was out, slowly went downstairs and walked toward the plot.

The meadow plots were glistening in the sun, pleasing Andriy Vasilyovich's fatherly eye. He bent over the avenita spikes and touched them with his healthy hand. He felt grains in the ears, and the wave of hesitation shattered against Andriy Vasilyovich's firmness definitely and completely.

Picking up an ear, he went toward the house. Sima met her husband at the porch and helped him upstairs. In the room, she examined the spike admiringly for a long time. Then she looked into her husband's eyes inquiringly. Andriy Vasilyovich understood that wordless question.

"If the weather is fine, we can reap it the day after tomorrow."

Sima brightened up. Two days, and their ordeal would be over!

But at night the wind began raging and herded together black rain clouds, upsetting the station dwellers. The sunset, and everything around sank into a stormy darkness. The forest began to murmur its thousand-voiced song, as though the forces of primitive chaos were trying to rend the earth.

Having finished house chores, Somko went upstairs, and the three of them sat near the lamp, listening to the voice of the storm.

"Well, time to go!" Somko got to his feet and slung the rifle over his shoulder.

"You'd better stay home, who will dare come in such weather?" said Sima.

"This is just the right weather to attack." Somko stepped out into the darkness and went to his post.

"It won't rain. The wind is driving the clouds away," said Andriy Vasilyovich, as if to himself.

"We'll leave at once, as soon as we've reaped the seed? Won't we?" Sima asked. She was anxious to hear him confirm it once more.

The man nodded in agreement.

Long silent minutes of waiting for the unknown dragged on. Outside, the storm kept raving, never calming down. Fixing her dreamy gaze on the lamp light, Sima spoke softly, "It seems that we're now sailing a ship that has lost its helm and masts. The stormy sea is hurling us from one wave to another, and we're unable to control the ship,

and hope only for a chance. For a lucky chance. And there are so few lucky chances!" Sima finished in a doleful voice.

"It's not true, we are actively defending ourselves," Andriy Vasilyovich responded sternly. "And that means that we aren't living in hope of a lucky chance. In this situation our only hope is our strength. Its only weak-willed people who hope for some accidental 'lucky chance'!"

Sima looked down with guilt. Only now that they were facing mortal danger did she get to know the real Andriy who had been concealed from her eyes by the decorous outward appearance and the position of station director. Only now did she realize the strength in her husband's consumptive chest, the strength she could not find a name for.

Suddenly a sound, like that of a muffled explosion, cut in on the noise of the storm. It was as if a tree had fallen, crashing the trees around it. Sima and Andriy Vasilyovich became tense. The first explosion was followed by several others, and the storm tore them to shreds. Sima put out the lamp. "Take my rifle and sit by the window, and I'll go lie up in the balcony," she said.

"Come on, I'll go myself."

"You shouldn't lie down, the wound may open up again."

Commanding notes sounded in her voice, and without saying anything more she went to the balcony, holding the gun. The wind rended her hair and whistled in her ears. Sima listened. One by one, the shots were dying away in the distance and, finally, subsided altogether, either muted by the wind or because the shooting had really stopped.

She came into the room and sat at the table without letting go of her shotgun. "What was it? Either Hrits had opened fire, or, maybe, they were shooting at some other place."

"I can't figure it out myself. The storm is roaring so wildly."

At that moment Somko knocked at the door. He met the bandits with fire by the ford, and they turned back. "They were shooting right at me, bastards, but I was in the trench — the hell they could get me!" Hrits smiled, as though he was talking about some innocent joke.

Although the following day was windy, Andriy Vasilyovich's forecast came true, and it did not rain.

Ovcharenko walked around happily, looking out of the window now and then. He was almost completely well now, only the sling reminded of the wound. At dinner Somko said, "The wind will quicken the ripening of the grain, particularly if the sun doesn't let us down."

"Yes, the sun is good now," Sima replied, and coming up to the window she cried out in fright, "Fire!"

Andriy Vasilyovich and Somko leaped up from their seats and ran up to the window.

"The stable is burning!"

Frenziedly, Somko rushed out on the balcony, but at that moment several shots thundered out from behind the stable. The bullets screeched, hitting the bricks the balcony was faced with.

"Lie down!" Andriy Vasilyovich shouted, and Sima, realizing what was happening, ran downstairs to lock the door.

Luckily, the fire did not threaten the house. The wind was blowing in the opposite direction.

The assailants probably wanted to lure the station inhabitants out into the yard so as to shoot them down there, but they could not hold back and opened fire too soon.

The balcony became a real fortress now. Andriy Vasilyovich, with only one hand in operation, had to fire intermittently; Somko's fire was selective, as he was trying to save ammunition, while Sima looked at her gun in horror because all the cartridges had been fired.

The avengers lay in the ditch, but it obviously gave them little protection and, one by one, they made their way to the bushes. Soon the enemy fire stopped. Somko went up to the attic and announced that four armed men were walking toward the village, across the marsh. "And Bulany is safe and sound, grazing in the bushes!" Hrits said cheerfully.

But the joy of a new victory was shadowed by the fact that the strain had caused Andriy Vasilyovich's wound to open up, so that even his clothes were saturated with blood. He had to be put in bed.

Holding his gun ready, Somko went out, having told Sima to watch the forest from the balcony. The remains of the stable were still burning, and there was no sense extinguishing them. Somko walked up to the ditch where the avengers had been hiding, and suddenly froze: a man was lying in the ditch, his arms stretched out, and instead

of the head there was an awful bloody mash. The first thing Somko wanted to do was to return to the house and tell Sima about it, but immediately he changed his mind. This could frighten the woman and disturb Ovcharenko, making him feel even worse. He had better cover the body with earth unnoticed, but how could he take a spade with Sima watching from the balcony? She might want to know what he was doing there.

No, he won't bury the dead man. Anyway, they should leave the station immediately. There was no doubt that the bandits would use the killing of their comrade as a means of instigating the villagers, and they could soon expect a fatal blow. This could happen even before the nightfall, therefore they had to hurry.

Somko returned to the house and came into Ovcharenko's room. Andriy Vasilyovich was asleep, and Sima was standing on the balcony. "Serafima Serhiivna," Hrits began with a frown, which suggested Somko's most serious intentions, "we must leave as fast as possible. The faster the better. We cannot remain here any longer."

"What's the matter with you?" Sima asked in surprise.

"Nothing's the matter with me, but I'm sure that our station will be a ruin no later than tonight. If we stay here we'll turn into corpses."

There was so much firmness and conviction in Somko's voice that Sima did not question him any further, all the more that Hrits added, "I won't explain anything now. I'll tell you when we leave."

"But will Andriy Vasilyovich agree?"

"He must. Avenita has ripened, and we can take about two sacks of grain with us."

Somko took a sickle and went to the plots. He quickly reaped avenita ears and put them into the sacks. They were ripe, although not enough for threshing yet.

"Well, avenita is already here," Somko said, putting down the sacks with the ears. "We can start, and the faster the better."

"Andriy, we must leave here at once!"

Andriy Vasilyovich could not understand anything. He looked at Sima, then at Somko, then again at Sima.

"Yes, at once," confirmed Somko, speaking like a person who knew what he was doing. "Time to get moving."

"What d'you mean — moving? And what about avenita?" Andriy Vasilyovich nearly jumped up in bed.

"Avenita is in the sacks over there. We'll take the ears with us."

"But why so fast? We have to thresh it, don't we?"

"We have to go at once, in two hours it will be too late."

The way Somko was speaking and behaving was unusual to both Sima and Andriy Vasilyovich. He had apparently made up his mind to become a dictator for the time being and make those irresolute people follow his orders.

"Take what you need most. We'll load Bulany with the avenita sacks, and Andriy Vasilyovich will get in the saddle. You and I will walk," he said to Sima without looking at her. Obviously, it was embarrassing for him to order people whom he respected so much.

The preparations did not take long. The most necessary things were put in the sacks which Somko strapped to the saddle, together with the avenita sacks. They had to use the horse as a beast of burden because their only cart had burned up in the stable during the fire.

They managed to put Andriy Vasilyovich on the horse with great difficulty. Although his shoulder badly hurt during the procedure, he endured the pain courageously and did not say a word.

When they were about to leave the yard, Somko ran up to the attic and again wondered if he had not acted impetuously.

The sun was already low in the west, casting its slanted rays on the meadow and the forest. The horizon was getting obscured by the mist that was barely visible so far, but Hrits did not care about the beauty of the scenery. He focused his attention on the place where the passage from Bolotivka to this side was. He could see some activity there, but it was impossible to make out what exactly was happening. "It can be that they are coming," he thought and hastily went downstairs.

"Well, let's start!" he said, and the three of them looked at the house and the yard for the last time.

Somko decided against taking the wide road; instead, he led his companions along some hunter paths that only he knew. He believed that was the safest way.

The air in the forest was already filled with the night's coolness and the earth's humidity. The last rays of sunshine gilded the tops of the pines, then flowed down their bark in amber resin currents. The limpid twilight gradu-

ally became darker, and the warm night quietly bent toward the ground.

Only now when the travellers had gone about four versts from the station, Somko took heart to tell the truth. "What d'you think, the villagers won't use the bandit's death as a pretext to ruin the station? And the bandits will certainly talk big about it."

Sima was walking beside the horse in silence, supporting her husband. His wound had opened up again, and blood was oozing through the bandages. Hrits led the horse, choosing the best paths.

"Hrits, maybe we can stop somewhere here, in the woods? Andriy is in bad shape."

True, Andriy Vasilyovich was completely exhausted and could hardly sit in the saddle. The loss of blood had told on him.

"Stay here while I find a proper place in the thicket."

Hrits went into the forest darkness, and Sima remained with her husband. Strength had left him; he lay on Bulany's neck and could not help moaning. Then he started to shake in fever, and Sima worriedly asked, "Are you cold?"

"I'm chilly. My whole side is wet with blood."

"Wait a while, we'll soon get to the railroad. There's a doctor there," Sima forced out those bracing words, but could not go on. Exhaustion and extreme nervous strain had sapped her strength. She leaned up against Andriy's knee and began to weep.

"Don't cry. It'll turn out all right somehow," Andriy Vasilyovich tried to soothe her, not believing himself that it might "somehow" turn out for him.

Soon Somko stepped out of the bushes, took the horse by the reins and said curtly, "Let's go."

In the thicket of the wood Somko made a bed for the sick man on a carpet of pine needles. He gently took Ovcharenko off the horse and put him on the sacks with clothes and avenita. Shortly Andriy Vasilyovich fell asleep, but he slept restlessly. He was twisting all over so that they had to hold him down, he cried out threats, mentioned avenita and, finally, wept voicelessly.

Sima was sitting beside her husband in silence. She had lost all sense of thought, and some unknown stupefaction seized her all over. Hrits went searching for water, and she could hear dry branches snapping under his feet somewhere in the bushes. A light wind was blowing through

the trees, sweeping away the rustling pine sounds, and occasionally the neighing of Bulany that was grazing in the bushes could be heard. A scrap of the starry sky appeared above the branches, and it seemed to Sima that she was sitting in a deep well which had no way out.

"Serafima Serhiivna!" she suddenly heard Somko's voice near her and stirred up. "Look in that direction!"

Sima raised her head. A crimson glow was blazing above the forest, on the side where the meadow station was.

"That's our station burning," Somko said confidently.

They kept looking silently in that direction until the bloody patterns in the sky began fading away, and the morning wiped them off completely with its light.

"Hrits," Sima said imploringly, "Hrits, what shall we do?"

Somko looked at her with compassion. Then he turned his eyes to Andriy Vasilyovich's waxen face. He was sleeping quietly now and looked more like a corpse than like a living person, exhausted by a long and grave illness.

"We can't take him any further now. We won't make the twenty versts to the station," Hrits pondered with difficulty. Sima watched him with expectation, secretly hoping that he would find a way out. She was unable to think logically anymore.

"The only thing we can do is take Andriy Vasilyovich to forester Fedot."

"Won't they be looking for us there?"

"I don't know. Fedot's lodge is about two versts from here. Here's the shotgun and the cartridges for you, and I'll go to Fedot."

"And if somebody runs into us?"

"Defend yourselves while you can, I'll return at once."

Somko caught Bulany and saddled the horse. Soon the clatter of the hoofs died out in the wood.

Sima kept looking in the direction Somko had galloped off. Morning had already dispelled the night's darkness, but the sun had not risen yet. Sima sat next to Andriy.

He will die, Sima did not doubt this, but what will she do, being so helpless now and utterly exhausted. She stroked her husband's pale forehead and thoughtfully studied his face which was so changed and pale now. Andriy Vasilyovich was sleeping peacefully, but a deadly pallor was coming over him. Suddenly Sima's hand began trembling and, one by one, tears rolled down her cheeks.

She moved away from Andriy so as not to trouble him, and quietly sobbed out her grief that had clotted in her heart like a callous clinker. She did not realize that she rested her head on a sack with avenita and sank into a deep sleep.

She was woken by a quiet conversation nearby. She sprang to her feet in a frenzy and looked around for the gun.

“What’s the matter with you, Serafima Serhiivna?” asked a familiar voice, and she came to herself. Somko was sitting calmly beside Andriy Vasilyovich, giving him milk from a bottle. It was uncomfortable to drink, but Ovcharenko hungrily pressed the bottle to his lips, tearing himself away from time to time to take a bite of bread in Somko’s hands.

“I’ve been back for about half an hour already. You see what a fine fellow Andriy Vasilyovich is!”

Andriy Vasilyovich really was much better now than the day before. He had had a good sleep, and now, having drunk the milk, he dozed off.

“Where did you get it?”

“It’s all Fedot. He’ll be here with a cart by the afternoon.”

Glancing at her husband to make sure that he was asleep, Sima asked in a whisper, “What about the station?”

“Burned down. Last night they came to Fedot to inquire about us.”

Andriy Vasilyovich stirred in his bed, and Sima rushed to his side. “Everything’s fine.”

“Is this avenita — here?” Ovcharenko asked faintly, putting a weak hand on a sack.

“Yes, avenita. Go on sleeping.”

“Lay it out, to dry. Or else — it may mold.”

The sun was climbing higher and higher, like an invincible banner of creative life, treating the whole world to the artistic spirit. The creative forces were continuing their luxuriant campaign, and the gay bird of the day waved its lively wings...

(1899-1934)

POLITICS

"For three years I haven't had a drink with the rich; for three years haven't been to a party with the kinfolk, me and them being at loggerheads; and now what — I'm going caroling today with them... Doesn't look right somehow. But I'll go anyway. I'll go just to spite them, just to see what kind of politics my know-it-all in-laws have got to offer..."

Shvachka stood by the table like the best man at a wedding feast: hat askew on his head, water dripping from his moustache, the pressure of his broad palm on the table making the nightlight flicker.

His wife was all a-twitter, happily:

"A drink or two wouldn't do any harm to your village eldership, would it?" She laughed gingerly, spreading her sloe-colored maiden kerchief on the table. "You don't want to forever continue quarreling with people and defending your Poor Peasants' Committees," she pressed on, smoothing out one end of the kerchief and watching Shvachka carefully throughout: if only he wouldn't get angry.

But Musiy Shvachka made light of it:

"There you go again weeping over your father's land. But it's gone for good, Mariana, all the six *dessiatines* *. The PPC members have got a hold of it, and it's a pretty strong hold, I'm telling you. But then no one would dare start croaking that Musiy Shvachka is taking up the wrong kind of politics... Now you tell me, who can say it's wrong politics?!"

The word "politics" upset Mariana. It was used in the village to tease her husband, who was in the habit of sticking the word in where it didn't belong. She waved her hand at him resignedly.

"Served them, you did, and what do you get in return? Half the village has turned against you — that's your reward; don't you worry, when I was starving with the children after you'd taken off with the commune, my

* *dessiatine* — a land measure (2.7 acres)

father, God bless him, gave us three *poods** of rye for a length of cloth..."

"Now isn't that something," Musiy chuckled, "but you could as easily haggle such a damned big favor out of a gypsy, let alone your own father! Right, daughter?" he jokingly looked down at the floor where his older daughter Stepanidka was sitting.

"Right," she said, shooting a quick glance at her mother.

"You're stubborn, *that's* what's right," Mariana rejoined.

"Like father, like daughter," Shvachka snapped, making Stepanidka blush and fall silent.

There was something else Mariana wanted to tell her husband: how the village rich railed not only at those among whom he distributed the land, but also at Musiy himself, Musiy-Politics who lost two fingers fighting the White Guards somewhere at the Perekop Isthmus; and how the rich promised that he'd have to pay dearly if he didn't behave himself. She wanted to tell him all that, but didn't — that was how much she wanted to visit her relatives.

"Do me a favor, will you? Don't start up with your politics at my father's, with all the in-laws around. They'll beat you up for all I know," she cautioned her husband, anxiously awaiting what he would say to that.

Shvachka stretched out his maimed left hand with two small stumps where fingers had once been, toward the nightlight. There was an air of no-nonsense determination about his reply:

"They'd better remember that even if Musiy-Politics lost two fingers of his left hand at the Perekop, his right hand is as good as new. They better remember that Czar Nicholas himself gave me a medal for my marksmanship..."

He fumbled in his right pocket for the flat shape of his Browning, his Perekop trophy, and with a brisk "I'll go harness the horses" stepped out the door.

"You're a real hothead, Musiy, but you've got a screw loose up there somewhere," Mariana said to herself, sighing heavily.

Silently, she put on her black sleeveless blouse, her indigo skirt, and the shirt with finely cutout designs, the one she had worn in her girlhood.

* *pood* — a unit of weight equal to about 36.11 pounds

The old skirt awoke memories of her girlhood years: "Oh well, no horses fast enough to catch up with them, no gold dear enough to buy those years back..."

Her glance fell on Stepanidka, and Mariana smiled at her inner thoughts. "Now what — five more years to go and you can start thinking about the dowry, mother!"

"I don't want you to go caroling with them," Stepanidka muttered.

"But it's not nice, child. We've *got* to call on our granddad. He helped us out with the grain, remember?" Mariana reminded her once again.

Her daughter fell silent. She remembered that grain only too well: mother bringing home three *poods* of it (having ground it at a treadmill on the way), and starting to knead the dough immediately, and then spreading out flat rye cakes on the table, and marking each one with a poppy head, and weeping bitterly all the while weeping and saying, "I could understand strange folk asking for a pledge, but when your own kindred treat you like they're pawnbrokers..."

"Mother promised then," the girl thought, "she'd never set foot in a rich man's house again."

"To you it's nothing, but they'll be making fun of Daddy."

"Now you're imagining things and talking like an old woman," Mariana reproved her. "Who's going to laugh at us? They'll laugh on the other side of their mouths!"

Musiy appeared in the doorway in his sheepskin jacket, which was overlayed with green English cloth (a piece from the greatcoat he brought with him from the Perekop battles against Wrangel *).

"Our politics now is not to laugh at the poor, or else he who does will himself end up poorly. What do you say, Mariana? And that's how it is — books keep piling, clerks keep filing, as the saying goes."

Suddenly, a joy he had never experienced before overwhelmed Shvachka and made him want to hug Mariana, but he checked himself and only gently stroked Stepanidka's silky hair.

"What do the rich matter to us, Stepanidka, eh?"

Mariana, hurt pride showing in her tone and expression, intervened:

* Wrangel, Baron von — leader of counterrevolutionary forces in southern Russia during the Civil War

“Beggars, that’s whom you’ll soon be filing.”

“Oh let the beggars alone — don’t get worked up about nothing. Better get dressed fast,” Musiy urged her impatiently and Mariana finished dressing in silence.

She tied a thick kerchief around her head, wrapped up some cakes, and fussed around the children, and when finally all seemed to have been attended to, stood up straight in the middle of the room.

“Go to sleep, children... Well, God bless us!”

“Come on, He says He did it already,” Shvachka remarked jokingly and threw his old greatcoat over his shoulders — the bulky shadow from his figure darted across the oven.

“Go to sleep, children,” he repeated Mariana’s words, felt his pocket with his right hand, and left.

Frost made the runners of the sleigh screech and turned one’s breath into puffs of steam, while the horse trudged through the snowdrifts, spraying out snow from under his hoofs like golden sand.

Mariana sat in the sleigh like a bride with her dowry — happy; it seemed to her that her family’s happiness was already within easy reach, and soon her rich relatives would stop looking down on Musiy as a miserable beggar and taunt him for his “politics,” and her sisters would no longer sigh in sorrow at the market, “Oh our poor baby,” inwardly congratulating themselves on being, unlike Mariana, rich women.

“Let another year or two go by,” Mariana thought, “and we (playing the part of Musiy now) will be able to stand on our own feet...” And in spite of herself she felt deeply proud of her husband.

Sweet dreams lulled her and Mariana’s thoughts scurried, stumbling, into the past.

True, Polish officers had beat her because of Musiy; the rich had wanted to drive her out of the village, never missing a chance to bait her — but only until the commune took over: then they all came running to pay their respects to Mariana. It was her day at last, and it seemed as if the world grew wider. Fearful of her husband who distributed land among the peasants they fawned on Mariana — but nothing doing.

“That’s politics now, Uncle Andrian,” Musiy told Kushnir, leading a bull out of Andrian’s yard when the kulaks were stripped of their possessions.

"You and your half-baked politics, one worse than the other," Andrian snapped at him angrily, and from that time on Politics became a popular nickname for Musiy among the villagers when they wanted to make fun of him. Andrian's wife ran after the bull as he went out, wailing and grabbing him by the horns.

"Kill me if you want, you sons of bitches, but don't take my cattle!"

"Sorry, that's politics now," laughed Musiy and the peasants, and the bull, hanging his head heavily like a prisoner, plodded on ahead of them out of the yard. Four years had gone by but there was no forgetting it for Mariana.

"Funny, thinking all this," she wondered.

"What are you sulking about?" Musiy asked his wife, cracking the whip across the horse's back.

The sleigh veered off to a fence by the roadside and bumped along until the horse dragged it over a hillock; from there on the road lay even, streaked blue with the moonlight as if somebody had spread out linen for bleaching. The snow creaked under the sleigh and it seemed to Mariana as if it were horseshoe nails — a dazzling variety of silver, blue, gold — that came sparkling out from under the hoofs. What a good horse Musiy Shvachka had, what a fast ride uphill!

"I've just remembered Andrian," Mariana said, leaning closer toward her husband. "He and Father must be pretty thick after their children's marriage — relatives. So he'll probably come to the party too?" She asked about Andrian with an apprehension quite unfamiliar to her.

"That's a mighty nice bunch of relatives we've got, eh?" replied Musiy sarcastically and for a while they rode in silence. "Stepanidka must be fast asleep by now," Shvachka said at last when they were already outside the village. Then added, "They'll all be laughing at me. A hell of a party it's going to be for me with everyone around hissing like vermin: Look, the commune comes a-fraternizing, the beggars are up to their old tricks..."

This made Shvachka angry and he cursed foully.

Furious, he then lashed the horse viciously and the beast tore through a snowdrift and raced on forward as fast as his legs would take him.

Soon they were riding across the manorial lands where the still unfinished new houses stood submerged in the snow; one of them — the luckiest — took shelter under

a rag of buckwheat straw, a nightlight or an icon lamp flickering uncertainly in its window; across the street, another house sported bare side walls and black holes of frameless windows.

Passing by this house the horse suddenly stumbled and wheezed nervously; Shvachka snatched at the reins and stopped the sleigh.

Mariana's teeth chattered in fear; Musiy carefully, without a sound, drew the revolver out of his pocket, but all was deadly quiet around them.

Suddenly a light in the house flashed up — once, twice, and went off after the third time; the horse raked the snow with his hoofs but would not budge one pace forward... Shvachka ran ahead a little and bending down over some kind of black spot shouted back to Mariana:

"There's a cat freezing here! Poor thing, couldn't get indoors and now goes caroling here."

He picked up the frozen but still breathing and utterly frightened cat, who clawed at his hand, and carried it over to the sleigh. Mariana, clearly upset by the encounter, whispered to Musiy:

"You better throw the devil away — somebody must've left it here on purpose. It's a bad sign."

"Oh come off it, silly," Shvachka laughed. "We shouldn't leave our friend here to die, should we?"

He put the cat on his knees, covered it and pocketing the revolver told his wife:

"It'll be a present to Andrian in return for his bull. Can you imagine: he still can't forget how we stripped him of his kulak's belongings!.. Giddap!" hollered Shvachka and jerked at the reins.

There were two *versts* * to go to the farmstead yet. The Christmas night, studded with stars, lay proud and beautiful over the steppe.

As soon as the road turned to the farmstead and they could already see the lights in the windows glimmering merrily at a distance, the horse changed to a sprightly trot, the runners screeched along someone's fresh track and the sleigh rolled on fast and smooth against the whistling wind. They were almost there now, at Shvachka's father-in-law's.

* *verst* — an old Russian unit of distance equal to approx. 0.7 mile

Two stacks of hay could already be seen silhouetted deep blue against the snowdrifts; the snow-clad poplars loomed like fairy-tale guards, and the garden by the roadside was all abloom with hoarfrost.

"It's them, hear? — Caroling..." said Shvachka, halting the horse.

His voice — shrill in the frost — made Mariana jump in the sleigh; all the way here she had been thinking about this meeting with her rich relatives, had worried about her husband: he was the outspoken type — wouldn't ever weigh his words, and such a hothead into the bargain.

"I'm begging you, Musiy," she said humbly as they drove up to her father's house, "don't start quarelling with them over your politics, please. In the village it's one thing, but here..."

"What are you getting worked up about?" Shvachka snapped back touchily. "You think I was born yesterday or something not to know when to speak up and when to shut up."

"Don't be angry," said Mariana tenderly and tears welled up in her eyes; then, as if spurred by the bitter frost, one of the tears rolled down and fell gently onto her husband's knee. "Throw this devil out of here," she grabbed the cat by the fur. Musiy silently took the small body which was already frozen stiff on his knees and pitched it away into the blue snow.

"May we join you for caroling?" called out Mariana to a tall figure of a man which had stepped out of the house.

Somebody welcomed them in a hoarse voice, opened the gate and when Shvachka's sleigh had halted under the hayrack, offered:

"This is some frost, Musiy Stepanovich, isn't it? Bites you good! Tough luck for carolers this year... Only there happens to be no Christmas in the Soviets' book."

Silently Musiy continued unharnessing the horse, covering him with the old greatcoat; meanwhile Mariana was being greeted at the door by her mother:

"Aren't you getting kind of stuck-up, my dear, like you live in some distant land somewhere. And here we are tonight — all the relatives have gathered for Christmas."

Mariana started to cry but then checked herself and wiped the tears — the frost made the young woman's cheeks glow like two ripe apples, her thin lips were tightly pressed, the amber necklace lay cozily on her full bosom.

Mariana waited for Musiy at the entrance hall: she was embarrassed to go in without her husband.

*And they sowed green grass on the hill so steep...
It's the silent night, it's the Holy Night...*

They were singing carols in the room; the company was still sober and the women's chanting was low and shy — nobody yet sang at the top of his voice. They kept singing a carol about a steep hill sown with silky grass, but hardly had the Shvachkas entered than the song broke off and died down.

"Perfect," said Andrian from where he sat at the table beside Mariana's father. "Perfect... Musiy Stepanovich will teach us how to sing carols Soviet style!"

Grinning slyly, he winked at the women who had sung the carol and all the guests turned their heads to the door; the women stared at Mariana, while the men rose grimly to greet Musiy.

"God's holiday is a holiday for all," her mother was telling Mariana as if trying to vindicate her daughter before the relatives. She made a point of calling Musiy "my dear son" to stave off a possible row, and even swept the bench with the flap of her jacket inviting the Shvachkas to take their seats at the table.

The food on the tables was served in big painted dishes; two tripes were still untouched in their bowls, and the homebrew, seasoned with lemon thick enough to add a blue-gray tinge to the yellow, was accorded the most prominent places on the tables.

The room was crowded. Four sons-in-law with their wives — Mariana's sisters — already sat at the tables; Andrian Kushnir, now a relative through his son's marriage, sat in the only corner adorned by an icon — the place of honor, for in fact he was the richest of all the guests; there were relatives of all degrees of kinship at Musiy's table, and all were amazed that even a hard-nosed communist like Shvachka would come to his father-in-law's for a Christmas celebration.

"May you have crops aplenty under God's care and may your children grow up to be strong and fair," intoned Mariana's mother offering her daughter a full glass. Mariana drank it, while her mother poured another one for Musiy.

"Though they beat me up hard because of you, son, even broke one of my ribs, your wife is my own blood, so it

looks like we're all of us equal in the family, aren't we?"

She glanced around, but all the guests were silent. Kushnir hid a smile in his black mustache; but when Shvachka and his mother-in-law downed their glasses (the old woman splashing the remaining drops up to the ceiling) he shouted:

"Now that's not right! The woman here butters up her son-in-law and we've got nothing but empty glasses to look at."

This sort of loosened up everybody, the banter grew louder to the accompaniment of clinking glasses, and the daughter of Mariana's elder sister, a student, strolled up to Musiy and spoke to him.

"I got thrown out of the institute because I'm a kulak's daughter — isn't it pure idiocy? I've wasted nine years in school and now what — they tell me I'm a kulak's daughter!"

"Why don't you marry a communist? — Nobody'll throw you out then," suggested Kushnir from his end of the table.

"Just let her do it, she'd get thrown out of the house that very moment," the student's father, a sturdy, puffy-faced man, announced haughtily.

His courage raised with a third glass of homebrew, Shvachka could stand it no longer.

"Listen, it's very simple: this is Bolshevik politics now. Once the rich could study all they wanted, so let's give the poor a chance to make use of their brains."

"Pooh, and you call it politics?"

"Can't help but agree with you, Halina Dmitrivna," Kushnir said. "Idiocy, that's what it is — not politics."

Everybody burst out laughing at Kushnir's words. Shvachka wanted to get up from the table and leave straight away, but Mariana did her best to calm him down and make him see that their departure would only turn them into a laughing stock and spawn even more gossip.

Oh what a glass of wine can do...

a young woman started up in a thin soprano and Kushnir took over and recited the rest of the lyrics by himself — nobody sang, because it was hardly the proper song for Christmas night.

Surprisingly, everybody insisted that the student should sing a Ukrainian folk song. The girl laughed at

their requests until Kushnir's wife straightened up in her chair and spoke in a proud voice:

"Come on, sing a Ukrainian song for me, let me remember my son whom the commune killed just because he took Petlura's side."

"Oh my beloved, my kith and kin," Mariana's mother called out to Kushnir's wife. "Sometimes they've beat the commune and sometimes the commune beat them — don't make us remember this now. Should we kick up a fuss on a holy night?"

"I'm not kicking up a fuss, my dear. I'm only asking your granddaughter to sing me something Ukrainian..." And Kushnir's wife began to cry.

The guests tried to comfort her, her son had a few harsh words to say, and finally everything seemed to settle back to normal. The women launched into carols praising the hospitality of the master and mistress of the house, singing glory to Christ the child, and the entire house resounded with joy for the child's birth.

Meanwhile Mariana was all on edge; her sisters had greeted her coldly and the youngest, who was married to Kushnir's son, even pointed a finger at her kerchief as if saying: must be from somebody else's closet, probably got it after a lot of begging and weeping, too.

Mariana was badly hurt. She felt so bitter that she couldn't risk swallowing for fear of bursting into tears.

"Don't be afraid, silly. Sing!" That was the student's father.

The student threw her cropped curly hair back from her narrow forehead, and stamping her exquisitely modeled boots on the floor addressed the audience:

"Why don't we sing *Let's Lay the Tables*, you know that one? It's one of the students' favorite carols, they always sing it at parties."

"One can also hear them bellowing the *Internationale* like bulls," commented Kushnir, obviously annoyed. Then turning to Mariana's father, added:

"Heard them on the train on my way here — scum, that's what they are. Spells student, reads beggar."

"Is it true, Musiy Stepanovich, that the commune already allows trade?"

"It is," Musiy answered gruffly.

"There's even a law," Kushnir continued loudly, "to the effect that you can't mess around with other people's property, see?"

Kushnir's news commanded everyone's attention — singing was the last thing on their minds now. The student who had already opened her mouth, displaying two rows of teeth as white and delicate as shelled nuts, froze in this position for a moment, then recovered, licked her lips and sat down next to Shvachka.

"Uncle Musiy will give me a 'poor peasant' certificate, right?" she asked him.

"Uncle Musiy will go to jail you mean," Shvachka retorted somewhat off key. The student pooh-poohed in reply.

"It's already four years, Musiy Stepanovich," Kushnir addressed Shvachka across the table, "that you took my bull, I'm grateful to say, for the commune, and I haven't forgotten. I'll die before I forget — it's robbery."

"I wanted to give you a cat instead of that bull, but it breathed its last on the way here. And a good cat it was."

"You're too young to talk to me like that."

"And how am I supposed to talk to you then? All soft and sweet, right?"

A quarrel was imminent.

Shvachka's face paled, his mutilated left hand started trembling, the darkened eyes were wandering around the room. Mariana was no longer by his side — she was being scolded about something by her younger sister, young Kushnir's wife.

Shvachka rose unsteadily from the table and walked quietly out into the yard.

* * *

The night was at its deadest. The stars seemed to be puffed up, so big and bright they were; the semicircle of the moon was outlined in red against the sky, and as far as the eye could see the snow danced and whirled over the farmstead and the adjoining fields.

"Looks like a snowstorm coming up," Shvachka thought absently, walking toward the stables. His horse had dropped the feedbag with oats, and in the darkness it took Shvachka a long time before he found it kicked up under the manger.

"Look what you've done, stupid," he rebuked the horse. "Hungry now?"

The horse neighed and beat his hoofs on the wooden floor.

"Here, eat," ordered Shvachka, replacing the feedbag on the horse's head. "Have a bite and we'll start back home, let them hiss, the vipers. They don't like our politics, see! How overjoyed they were by the news that trade was allowed: Kushnir was already itching to make a grab at the land. I'd rather see you laid in it to rest, you bastard!"

The horse kept munching his oats; somewhere nearby, a pig grunted in a warm pen. Shvachka stood listening for a while: sound asleep, no kidding!

He went back to the house. His head felt wobbly — not much of a man for strong drink, he was now rather tipsy after all the homebrew.

At the door Shvachka for some reason remembered his exchange with the student and burst out laughing, then swore for a second time that day.

"Damn her! 'Uncle, give me a 'poor peasant' certificate...' As if I'm dealing in them."

Inside, everybody was singing. Carols mixed in with songs about folks so rich and mighty, and barrels full of wine, and bulls with twisted horns — the homebrew had taken effect, and the chorus rang, boisterously drunk, against the windowpanes.

"Come on, be happy, Shvachka," Musiy thought, "rejoice: it's the Holy Night. Some folks in the village today could afford nothing better than borsch seasoned with fried fat for meat, and here you have tripe piled up in bowls. Just look at Kushnir, darting his tongue in and out like a grass-snake."

He unbuttoned the top of his blue shirt showing the yellow-red embroidery on the white one underneath, and firmly entered the room, his face eloquent with resolution.

"Doesn't like to keep his tail between his legs, the son of a bitch, but can't help it," someone's words hit Musiy as he was stepping over the threshold; all the guests burst out laughing.

"Politics is different now."

"Poor he was, poor he stayed."

"Oh let the Kushnirs be, son," his motehr-in-law was already by Shvachka's side pleading with him. "Let the bad blood flow away like water — there's no need to pick a fight now, is there?"

"I'm letting them all be, mother," Shvachka said loudly for everybody to hear. "Poor I am, but he isn't feeding my children either. So he'd better..."

"If *I'm* not feeding them," shouted Kushnir, "then the good people here are doing it."

"Really, who was it that gave Mariana beets last spring?" enjoined the student's father, leaning back contentedly in his seat.

Silent night, Holy Night...

chanted the women, putting their heart and soul into the song.

Kushnir waved his hand and the song stopped as if somebody had locked the singers' mouths. Mariana ran out into the middle of the room, tears streaking down her cheeks and falling to the floor.

"I spoiled my eyes, Dmitro, embroidering a Ukrainian shirt for your daughter (she pointed at the student), and now you're shaming me in front of my kinfolk. Why are you doing it to me?"

"You owed us money, Aunt Mariana, so you had to work it off," said the student amid the mute silence.

"You're lying — both of you. It was for the beets that I embroidered your shirt, not for any money. Your mother didn't want to take any money from me. It's God's truth."

"Is it really?" They all shrugged and sniggered under their breath. Shvachka, who stood by the entrance door next to his mother-in-law, turned terribly pale, almost chalk-white; his left hand was trembling — a remnant of a shell-shock.

Meanwhile, Kushnir rose from the table:

"You were like King Herod killing people out somewhere. You upped and took off to save the commune, leaving your wife and children for your father-in-law to feed!"

"Go ahead, let it all out," Shvachka said hoarsely.

"All right, I'll spill it. Wasn't it you who came back from the war and began dividing the land among people? And wasn't it you who robbed your father-in-law of six *dessiatines* and gave them away to who the hell knows whom?!"

"That was me all right."

"Aha, so let us bow in thanks to the good man."

"Do we need all this?" Shvachka's mother-in-law

ventured a stifled appeal to Kushnir, but his son interrupted her brusquely.

"It's none of your business, mother, just shut up and keep your nose out of it."

Suddenly there was a stir around the tables; somebody shouted: "What are you doing?!"

Shvachka grabbed for his right pocket and Kushnir's son, who was standing under a big pendent lamp, blew out the light.

Mariana's wild, frenzied scream rent the air.

"Don't! Kind folk, don't orphan me, don't kill him!"

But her voice was drowned out by the sound of a smashed bottle, a gunshot barking out somewhere in the hall, and a hoarse gurgling like that of a bull under a butcher's knife.

"He's got a gun, the bastard," the elder Kushnir hollered in the darkness, and all the women bent their heads over the tables.

"Get down, get down on the floor," screamed the student, but there were no more shots.

...Shvachka lay prostrate in the hall, a sticking-knife with a red handle protruding from between his shoulder-blades — he was still gasping and clenching the fingers of his right hand.

A startled, confused silence. Somebody lit a match.

Mariana lay writhing on the floor, hysterical; the sloe-colored kerchief covered her eyes, while the embroidered chemise was rolled up shamelessly above the waist.

Kushnir cast a frightened eye at Mariana then looked away, his eyes roving around, and whispered:

"It's all right. A drunken brawl — nothing more. That's what we'll say."

SNIPING

The main thing in sniping is the dog. Of course, some people might claim that the main thing is the snipe, but every hunter knows that sniping without a dog is as good as a wedding without music. In fact, if you want to discuss sniping you must talk about the dog, because without a setter you'll never catch a glimpse of a snipe, much less roast one.

So, first, the... snipe.

The snipe is a gray moorland bird with white down on its belly, a very long bill and long legs; it flushes with a characteristic cry and flies like mad.

Roasted it's scrumptious!

Snipe, you should know, is one of the few birds that must be roasted whole, guts and all: all the dressing it requires is to stick the bill under one wing, add a slab of butter and set it in the oven.

It's a rare treat, and if you add some sour cream and, Heaven forbid, a dram of you-know-what, the result is a symphony in flesh.... So lose no time and pitch your lot with sniping.

But as I said before, sniping without a dog is time wasted: no snipe, no pleasure.

We all know what a dog is: head, four legs, tail and bark. But our interest is in sporting dogs, of which there is a tremendous variety, and as we are concerned with sniping our interest is further narrowed down to pointing dogs.

These come in several breeds:

- a) Retrievers
- b) Gordon setters
- c) Griffons
- d) Irish setters
- e) Pointers
- f) Continental setters
- g) Spaniels
- h) Poodles; today the breed has deteriorated and gone mongrel.

What breed is the best?

The one you go hunting with.

You have only to get yourself, say, a retriever, and it immediately becomes apparent that no one ever had anything like it, and never will.

"What a dog! An Einstein, I tell you. Just hear what happened once. We were out hunting..." and so on and on.

You may listen or not, but the truth is that there certainly never was, and never will be, such a dog.

So what breed would I suggest?

The one you've bought or have your eye on.

A hunting novice, awed by hunting traditions, follows up his purchase of a shotgun with quests for a dog.

When the mother-in-law, good old woman, hears of her son-in-law's wish, she says tenderly (like all mothers-in-law), stressing the hissing sounds:

"A ssssetter's the thing. Akulina Kuzminichna's got one. Ssssplendid pointer. And ssssuch dainty habitsss. I'll assssk Akulina Kuzminichna. Shshshshe'll be having pups ssssoon. If by good fortune they don't die. Exsssscellent pups."

A month or two later you get your ssssplendid sssssetter from Akulina Kuzminichna. Your joy is boundless. From now on you are the proud owner of a real honest-to-goodness hunting dog.

You cuddle and pet it and fuss over it like a mother over her first-born.

You buy your setter a collar and leash, and in time take him for an expertise to the Hunting Club's Dog Section.

You present it to a stern-looking man and look at him in the same way that, as a boy, you would look up at your father, when he, stern and careworn, would happen to give you a tender glance and, perhaps, a pat on the head.

"Well?" you say. "Nice doggy? Nice pure-bred, eh?"

The stern man stares long and attentively at the doggy, then lifts his eyes to your face and lets drop indifferently, "A pi-dog."

"They said it was a setter."

"A pi-setter, then."

"What am I to do with it now?" you inquire fearfully.

"Do? Don't use the leash to hang it: it's a good leash. Hang it on a piece of string. Neither its papa nor its mama ever had a drop of setter's blood in their veins. A pi-dog."

It's always the first dog that causes so much trouble. Later on it's easier.

Later on, when you get to know hunters and their dogs, when you have already heard of the famous black pointer Cambise, or the famous retriever Ali, or the famous Gordon Jack, you are in a better position to get yourself a pup of your choice.

If you prefer pointers, you're sure to be informed: "Vasil Ivanovich has a bitch of Cambise blood...."

And so you've got yourself, say, a fine pointer pup. You lead, or bring, or drive the dog home.

"Capital dog, eh?" you inquire of your household.

The mother-in-law shoots a withering look at you through narrowed eyes, and repairs to her room with no other comment.

Your wife Lyuda casts a glance at mummy — your mother-in-law — then pats the puppy's head and says, "Nice dog. Will it have distemper soon?"

"I suppose so," you say.

"The sooner the better. They say every dog must have distemper, then it won't die."

"Then it won't."

"But can it die from distemper?"

"Yes."

"Oh well, the sooner the better."

"Where shall we place him?" you ask anxiously.

From the next room comes the mother-in-law's voice, who suggests, stressing the hissing sounds, "Get him a double bed, perhapsss? Or a sssspessscial couch?"

"Mamma," the wife soothes her, "don't worry. It'll have distemper soon."

The time comes for training your gun dog, a training on which everything depends: the success and beauty of the hunt and the satisfaction derived from hunting with a dog of high blood.

Before going to bed you spread a mat for Rover.

Rover mourns his mother, his little brothers and sisters, and whimpers pitifully.

Your mother-in-law shuffles out of her lair in slippers, walks over to the pup and soothes in tenderly: "Shut up, blast your soul."

You cough and say, "Sleep, Rover, sleep, pet."

"Sleep, puppy," your mother-in-law's voice says again. "Sleep in eternal slumber, nice doggy."

Rover slumbers, your mother-in-law slumbers, your wife

slumbers, and you drop off. As you fall asleep you hear your wife pleading in her sleep, "Come, distemper, come! Hurry, hurry, hurry!"

That's how the pure-bred begins his life in your home.

Taking a pure-bred pup out, when you have to climb down from the fifth or sixth floor five or six times a day, is a very pleasant athletic exercise.

You straightaway commence with Rover's tuition, teaching him all kinds of hunting tricks like following at your heel, fetching game or searching for some object. It is especially pleasant to teach the dog to find your night slippers.

It takes a pure-bred dog no more than two or three days to master this trick. Two or three weeks later your bed will be surrounded by night slippers: your family's, your neighbors', everyone's in the vicinity.

Then the happy moment comes when your pup begins to cut his teeth. One fine morning you wake up to hear the pup whimpering loudly and your wife Lyuda shouting at the top of her voice, "Good God! My best shoes!"

"What's the matter?" you inquire in alarm.

"He's chewed up my best shoes!"

"Who's chewed up your best shoes?"

"Your Rover has chewed up my best shoes!"

For two weeks the wife is frigidly courteous to you.

A little later, when the only remembrance of your mother-in-law's favorite slippers are two chewed insoles, all diplomatic relations with that estimable female are severed once and for all.

None the less you remain undaunted, you adore Rover, who already fetches things and noses for things, and you yourself saw him make his first point and catch a speckled hen in the yard.

His mouth was full of the hen's tail feathers before you had time to sick him, with the hen perched on the shed roof, squawking and clucking indignantly.

One day you come home and find that even your little son Yura refuses to speak with you.

"What's the matter?" you ask with surprise.

Silence. An intense silence broken only by the stertorous breathing of your family.

"What happened, Yurochka?"

"Rover gobbled up ten cutlets."

On New Year's Eve an even more difficult situation develops in the house.

"Here's all that's left of the turkey," the wife informs you, holding up the tip of that bird's bottom.

"Must have got it from the neck," you muse out loud.

And what else can you say?

The days roll by, and soon your pet's first birthday arrives. The time has come when it is best to place Rover in the care of an expert dog trainer. Only he knows how to handle pure-breds, and he can mold your Rover into something *non plus ultra*.

But it is important to keep in touch with the trainer yourself.

All I can say is that during the time your dog is with the trainer you go about in an old suit and down-at-heel shoes, and the wife is unable to get herself the new pair of shoes she has had her eye on for some time. You know what price oats and millet are today, and you also see that Rover turns out to be capable of picking four horses clean to the bone in the space of a single month.

But finally he comes of age. The time for your first snipe hunt arrives.

"Point!"

"Sick 'em!"

Rover dashes forward, and a huge toad jumps out from under his feet.

On the way back from the hunt you tell your cronies:

"So I tell Rover, 'Go and see if there are any snipes on that moor.' Away he goes, noses his way all over the moor, then comes back with lolling tongue. 'Well,' I ask, 'are there any?' 'No,' he says...."

* * *

And remember, friends, snipes must be roasted whole, guts and all.

Ah, what noble, scrumtious, tender game!

TYKHON'S LETTER

As long as old Shvayka lived, his sons were completely obedient to him, like the yoked oxen pulling a plow. His elder son, Tykhon, though himself father of five, did not separate from the old man's family. All their sheaves at the threshing floor were ricked together into one stack, and the grain was put into their one joint granary.

"Now, see, we'll tide it over to the next harvest," the old man used to say every year after the harvest was in, "and if you want more, you'll have to work for it."

Their house, with its rotting green straw roof that resembled a woman's hood, had three windows, facing the barn, and two more, facing the narrow, curving byway that each summer was overgrown with huge, hemp-size nettles under rickety wattle fences.

Then, one day, old Shvayka was dispatched to the cemetery in a casket; the nettles were trampled; the smell of incense mingled with smells of the baking bread; Tykhon scolded his wife for taking some flour to make stuffed dumplings; and Hritsko complained about the young oak tree that was sawed down to make the cross for the grave.

On the day after the funeral, Tykhon said:

"Now, we'll divide everything, and each of us will get his share. I must know who I am working for."

Hritsko stared into the ground, then at his home-made shoes, and said: "All right, if we must do it, let's do it."

Early next day Tykhon, armed with a pitchfork, chased Hritsko around, and Hritsko's wife ran after them trying to trip Tykhon with a stick. The eight children of the two Shvayka brothers, huddled close together on the porch, as if on an ice floe in stormy weather, were weeping and wailing in a medley of voices.

Tykhon shouted as loudly as if he were hitting an empty cauldron:

"What sort of farmer are you? You're good for nothing!"

"And you, you're a villain, that's what you are," Hritsko snarled back at him from the safety of the barn. "You're

good only at stirring up trouble. It's you who brought on the early death of Father with your hang-up for dividing things."

Nevertheless they did divide the property. When the evening came, the laths stuck out from under the displaced straw of the roof like ribs from a disintegrating barrel. The chimney looked like a sentry-box, rising from the dark loft, above the roof beam. Only one window faced out into the yard, and the door, covered with straw mats, faced the street.

Hritsko had his part of the house carried to their plot of land and then he sat there like a wayside beggar.

"Now let's divide the land," Hritsko said in his turn.

"Right," Tykhon agreed and sauntered off to borrow the measuring sticks.

Then it was Tykhon's turn to run from Hritsko who chased him with a spade, across somebody else's rye field. Tykhon's wife tore her sister-in-law's skirt in another skirmish. But next summer Tykhon's rye was growing on Hritsko's former potato ground. What rye together with potato green tops Tykhon harvested did not last long, but he did not expect much anyway, and until winter came he went around the village offering his services, holding his flail like a rifle.

"Tykhon," his neighbor would ask him, "could you, sir, come to help me, say, tomorrow?"

"With this thing?" he would shake the flail over his shabby hat. "I think I can. We, Shvaykas, don't know how to give orders, but as far as finding work to do — that's what you don't need to teach us."

"I say, Tykhon, tell me, why is it that you don't come to the meeting of our village? People say a new committee was set up."

"Well, neighbor, in my house I have both my gatherings and my committee: as many as seven people we have. And those things they invent at your Soviet — well, they do it only to squeeze some extra money from us."

"There you go again. The new committee is to help people like us, see? UC *, they call it."

"I see, but do *they* see things in the right way? I already have to pay 5 roubles for the orchard alone!"

* Committee of Universal Cooperation — peasant committee that organized mutual and other forms of aid to poor peasants

“You have to pay? But wait a minute, aren't you listed as a 'poor peasant'?”

“Who, me? Well, anyway, they won't drag me into that committee unless they cary me bound hand and feet. As long as I have my flail in my hands, they'll have to watch it when they come close. Our Hritsko, you know, has already started sort of hobnobbing with them.”

“And how are you going to make it to the next harvest?”

Tykhon disliked any reference to this, and knitting his brow under his shabby hat, he said reluctantly:

“Somehow we'll make it, so help us God, provided all's done fair and square. What do you think I fought with Hritsko for? To make him divide things justly, because I won't stop at murder to get justice done.”

When the ground was covered with the first snow, like a table with flour, Tykhon worked his small house with leaves and dung, and then didn't know what to do next.

“Hey, Serhiy, bring home a newspaper, will you?” he once asked one of his sons who attended school. “Ask your teacher to give you one. I can use it for rolling a cigarette too.”

Next day Serhiy brought home a newspaper. Tykhon tore a piece from it for his cigarette and then returned it to Serhiy.

“Read what it says here.”

Serhiy began reading the capitals of the headlines, stumbling and blushing as he went along.

“STATE OF LENIN'S HEALTH...”

“See what these wrongdoers have done to the man!” Tykhon said. “They drove him to sickness. If one fights for justice, one is treated badly everywhere.”

Serhiy put down the newspaper and said gleefully:

“Our teacher knows Lenin too and wrote him a letter.”

“Must be about his pay.” Tykhon thought a little and then added: “It was correct to write to him; it's impossible to come to terms with our villagers. All right, what else does the paper say?”

“GRAIN AID TO PEASANTS,” Serhiy read someplace else. “All members of the Committees of Poor Peasants and of UC will recieve for sowing...”

“Hey, wait a minute, read that again!”

Serhiy read it one more time. Tykhon grabbed the paper from him and began brandishing it so violently as if he wanted to shake all the letters out of it.

“And what about us? Are we any worse Christians than those people on the committees? Do we pray to a different God?”

At that moment the neighbor came in.

“What’s the matter, Tykhon? You’re yelling so loud I thought you were being skinned!”

“Of course I’m yelling! I can’t help it! Those accursed louts — anathema on them! — who make so much noise at the rallies, they, damn them, receive grain but they didn’t care a bit that my kids have nothing to eat except for rotten potatoes!”

“Do you remember what I told you? You made fun of Hritsko because of his making friends with the committees but they’ve already given him a horse.”

Tykhon, in shock, got up only to sit down on another bench.

“A horse? To Hritsko?! They did? Do you call this justice? He cut down my last oak tree, and they gave him a horse! Oh, no, just you wait, I’ll see to it that justice is done, I’ll show up those rogues at this UC, they’ll see! We’ll find the man to bring justice!

The neighbor, in his turn, tore a piece from the newspaper for his cigarette and left. Tykhon threw the remains of the paper on the stove and began pacing the room from the stove to the window and back.

All next week he was absorbed in thought; then he called Serhiy again.

“Find a piece of paper and write what I tell you. And write well, print them words. You found the paper? Good. Write this:

‘To the gov’nor, comrade Lenin’

The tip of Serhiy’s tongue, sticking out of his mouth, followed the movements of the pen.

‘I am comrade Tykhon Shvayka. I am a good Christian from the village of Mikitivka and I write to you a letter about injustice. I know that you are a just person and you’ll judge right. We have this UC thing but they don’t see what they are doing. They gave horses and grain to no-good people. Take Hritsko; how come they gave a horse to him? That’s not right. He got it only because he signed up at this committee, and I have seven mouths to feed in my family and though I ain’t no member of no committees I won’t stop at anything to get justice

done. We dearly want you to answer us. We hope God keeps you in good health.'

The envelope was sealed with bread that had been chewed for the purpose, and Serhiy printed the address:

'Moscow, Communist Soviet.
For Comrade Lenin to Receive in his Hands.'

"Good, now, write to this committee:

'Because I must have something to sow and I am as poor as the others I ask you to put me into your books for me, you know, to get grain and other aid in full justice. But I will have my children baptized anyway though God helped me as much as glasses help the blind but the Book says, *You can't live without God.*'"

On Sunday, Tykhon put both the letter and his application into his hat with great care and mailed the letter at the post office, and took the application to the village Soviet.

He did not mention the letter to anyone and warned Serhiy:

"Just keep quiet, then we'll get them all."

In three days he went to the village Soviet and slyly asked:

"Well, what's in the mail? Did you get any letters from there?" and he nodded in the direction where he thought Moscow was situated. The secretary was shuffling his papers and didn't pay much attention to him.

As more time passed since mailing the letter, Tykhon's visits to the village Soviet became more frequent.

"They must write back, mustn't they?" he thought. "Or maybe they couldn't understand Serhiy's chicken tracks?" But the secretary kept failing to understand Tykhon's nodding and almost never talked to him.

Sometime after Christmas and before Shrovetide, Tykhon met his neighbor on his way to the Soviet.

"Did you hear, Tykhon," the neighbor said in a low voice, as if he were speaking in the presence of a deceased, "they say Lenin died."

"You're kidding!"

"You don't joke about things like that. They are calling a meeting."

"May he enter the Kingdom of Heaven!" Tykhon exclaimed, crossing himself; and then he felt as if his hat

was shrinking on his head leaving very little room for his uncombed hair. He rushed blindly through the snowdrifts to the Soviet.

"I've had it," he thought, tripping over the folds of his coat. "I won't make it to the next harvest, and I won't find justice here. There was one person who could have put everything in order here but he is no more." His next hopeful thought was: "Maybe I'll still get through somehow."

When Tykhon arrived at the place, the village meeting of mourning had not yet been announced open. On the porch under the red flag with the fluttering crepe bands, several peasants were standing. They spoke in hushed voices, as if a coffin was to be brought out at any moment.

Tykhon went inside the building of the Soviet. This time he asked nothing and did not nod toward Moscow. He only looked inquiringly into the secretary's eyes. The busy secretary looked up for a moment from his papers, acknowledged Tykhon's presence and said:

"There's something for you, Tykhon."

Tykhon froze; a moment later his body felt as if it was pouring, like hot sand, into his big boots.

"No, I am not mistaken. Tomorrow you can receive the grain for sowing."

Tykhon's heart missed a beat and then he had a lump in his throat. Shadows flickered across his face, and though he strained to say something, his lips, quite against his will, did not want to part. At last he gained enough control to wheeze out:

"You received it, then?"

The secretary once again did not understand Tykhon and quickly returned to work with his papers. Tykhon, seeing that there was no point in waiting for an answer, raised his mournful eyes to the portrait in black crepe, and said, his voice trembling:

"In all truth he was really a man of justice," and tip-toed out of the room; outside, the villagers were talking in hushed voices, about the cruelty of Death as if they were in the presence of a body lying in state.

(1900-1958)

BROTHERS

I heard this gruesome yet enlightening story from a nazi German prisoner of war — *Gefreiter* Walter Schultz, an Austrian with sharp, piercing eyes and a foxlike twist to his mouth.

He jabbered away with the adulation of a slave who had been taught to be officious, and he tried hard to curry favor with me. His gabble was a mixture of German and mangled Russian.

The incident had taken place only recently. That particular night Schultz was on duty at the headquarters of his garrison. His commander, Lieutenant Hoffung, was visited by an old crony, Rathman, a correspondent of some newspaper. It was a good enough excuse to open a bottle of brandy or wine.

But even with no such excuse forthcoming, the Lieutenant never forgot to down a glass every evening. The Lieutenant was fed up with the war and everything else in the world. This time he invited a relative, *Ober-Gefreiter* Seer, a coward and a boor, who had been hiding behind the Lieutenant's back throughout the war.

Gefreiter Walter Schultz had long had the habit of snooping behind his master's door. This time, however, he missed the beginning of the argument. He only heard the distinct bang of a fist on the table and Lieutenant Hoffung yelling nervously: "I'm a soldier, I don't read newspapers! I have seen war, and I'll prove to you who's right. The Ukrainians, Kirghiz, Tatars and all those other savages are only waiting for the chance to cut one another's throat. And the Russians... I'll show you now how all these tribes regard the Russians." The Lieutenant roared with drunken laughter. The correspondent said something, after which the Lieutenant hollered, "*Gefreiter* Schultz!"

"*Ja!*" Schultz appeared in the door. He snapped to attention, his piercing little eyes open wide on his deadpan purplish face. He immediately noticed that the Lieutenant was already tight. Thick beads of unhealthy sweat had broken on his massive forehead, his eyes had grown dim

and restless, and he was looking for someone on whom he could vent his malice. At moments like that, it was better not to fall into his clutches.

"*Gefreiter* Schultz, bring me the two prisoners who arrived this morning," the Lieutenant ordered.

"*Jawohl, Herr Leutnant.*" Schultz disappeared.

After a few minutes first one then another Red Army soldier was led into the room. They had been confined separately. The Lieutenant interrogated them only once and had not yet shown them his real mettle. The prisoners stood half-naked in front of him.

"You can go, Schultz," the Lieutenant said waving his hand impatiently. Schultz left the room. Once in the corridor, he pressed his ear against the door crack.

"Why are they dressed that way?" Rathman asked the Lieutenant in German.

"You see," Schultz told me, "those bastards tore their uniforms to pieces. In the morning they looked a lot more decent. But what's the difference anyway? Does it matter in what wraps to die? Tomorrow that same Schultz will be only too glad to shoot them after the interrogation..." At this point Schultz realized that he had let himself be carried away and had talked too much. I pretended not to have heard his name, and he hastened to cover up the true yarn of his story. For he hated the Germans, you see! You must understand, he hated them. The Germans had stripped the captured Red Army soldiers of their clothes and had taken away their shoes.

The soldiers stood there barefoot. Their bodies were half-covered with dirty rags. And the three Germans were sitting nonchalantly as if it were a daily occurrence. The tall Red Army soldier was shyly wrapping the tattered dirty rags around his naked body, while the younger and shorter one was trembling in his torn, threadbare pants.

The left arm of the tall soldier was bandaged with a rag at the shoulder where there were patches of clotted blood, and the head of his shorter and weaker comrade was wrapped in a dirty tattered towel.

They had been taken prisoner when they passed out from loss of blood.

"I understand you know Russian, don't you?" said the Lieutenant to Rathman in German. "I'll have a talk with them. Remember, one of them is Ukrainian, and the other Russian. You'll see what happens." The Lieutenant

smiled. Rathman nodded, while *Ober-Gefreiter* Seer sat there, looking like a puffed-up, fattened gander.

The Lieutenant slowly turned to the shortish Red Army soldier who was barely able to stand on his feet.

"In the morning I had a talk with each of you," Lieutenant Hoffung said in a rather good Russian. "You are Russian, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm Russian," the man replied in a hoarse and indifferent voice.

"Your name?"

"Suslov, Ivan."

"And you are Ukrainian?"

"Yes, Ukrainian," the other replied in a more lively manner, because his wound was not as bad and he had more strength left.

"Your name?"

"Knish, Taras."

"Tell me, Ukrainian, were you in the same unit with this Russian?" Hoffung asked, looking carelessly at Suslov.

"No, this is the first time in my life I've laid eyes on him," Knish replied slowly, waiting what would happen next. He told the truth — he had never seen Suslov before.

"Tell me, Ukrainian, who's your enemy?" Hoffung asked suddenly.

Taras Knish was silent. He knew who his enemy was. But he waited. He took his time thinking — that's how he was. But when Taras had thought it all out, no one could make him change his mind.

"Well, I'm waiting," Hoffung said impatiently.

What could he tell him? Never before had Taras Knish seen so many live Germans close up. So that's what they were... He was terrified to realize that there was no hatred any more in his heart, only utter contempt. The Germans were abominable. It was especially disgusting to look at the one who was questioning him. He seemed to be doomed. Yes, exactly — doomed, Taras thought. That officer had lost everything in life and would never regain it. What was in store for him, for that German? Fear, despair, death. Taras read death in the eyes of Lieutenant Hoffung. He was not afraid of him at all. He was not afraid... In the morning Taras felt unwonted fear, but now that he had thought everything out, he regained his composure. Besides, he wanted to see it all through as fast as possible.

"It seems you didn't understand what I asked you, did you?" the Lieutenant drawled. "What did you do before the war?"

"I was a wheelwright with the Taras Shevchenko Collective Farm," Knish answered readily.

"Shevchenko... I see... Wonderful," Lieutenant Hoffung said with a smile and filled a large glass first with brandy, then with wine and pure alcohol. "Here, drink it, Ukrainian, get warm. And don't be afraid. I won't do you any harm." The Lieutenant gave him a glass with the concoction. Knish greedily drank half of it and was about to give the other half to Suslov. The Lieutenant bounded up and grabbed his hand. "No, drink it yourself!" Knish thought for a while and downed the drink.

"Now tell me, which of us here is your enemy?" Hoffung urged. "This Russian, isn't it?"

The Lieutenant motioned with his hand toward Suslov. Knish looked at the wounded soldier who was barely able to stand on his feet. Knish wondered what the German wanted of him. Knish liked to think out everything carefully, and he thought and spoke in a slow way.

"So you don't understand me?" the Lieutenant repeated ominously, yet keeping himself in check. He didn't want to find himself getting angry in front of Rathman and *Ober-Gefreiter* Seer. Especially in front of Seer. The Lieutenant had a feeling that this novice was enjoying the scene, although he was afraid to betray it.

"I understand," Taras mumbled.

"Speak up."

"What's there to say? Everything's clear," Taras said, looking at Suslov.

"Well, that's all I need," Lieutenant Hoffung said with delight.

"Thank God you really need it," Taras rejoined in the same tone.

"You, Ukrainian, will leave for home tomorrow. You'll be given your clothes right away. You'll serve Ukraine and help us. Spit into the eye of your enemy and bash him! Bash him!..." The Lieutenant ran up to Taras and, now totally out of control, he kept repeating the words over and over again. At that instant Taras recalled his wife, his three children, father and mother whom he had left near the ancient town of Korsun in Kiev Region.

"Who am I supposed to bash?" Taras asked slowly,

surprised as these thoughts revolved in his mind. For everything he thought and did was slow, absolutely perfect and honest.

"Him! Your enemy, bash him... Spit on him, trample him under your feet... The Russian... If you don't, I'll shoot you," the Lieutenant hissed in the ear of Taras Knish.

"Him?" Taras asked, silently motioning to Suslov who, exerting his ultimate efforts to keep on his feet by the wall, was looking wryly at the frantic German.

"The officer thinks that all people are dogs like the Germans..." Suslov said, smiling to himself ironically.

All of a sudden Taras felt himself smothered in disgust. The German officer seemed a monster to him that squirmed round his body, drawing his heart into knots.

"Bash him!... Hit, trample... Spit in the eye of your enemy! Kill the swine, or otherwise I'll tell him to kill you!" the drunken Lieutenant kept repeating in different ways. He was burning with rage, sensing the sceptical look of Rathman and the covert indifference and restrained malignant joy of *Ober-Gefreiter* Seer.

Feeling the superiority of Taras's mental poise, the Lieutenant began to lose his patience.

"I'll tear the hide off your back if you don't hit him!" the Lieutenant broke into a shriek.

Taras stood motionless. And suddenly he drew himself up.

"I'll kill the enemy!" he yelled and the window panes echoed softly from the shout.

For a second the Lieutenant was struck dumb with astonishment, and Taras took advantage of that second. Tense and concentrated, he summoned all the strength that was in him and kicked Hoffnung in the groin.

The Lieutenant's head smacked against the opposite wall with a dull thud. As he sagged to the floor, his feet jerked twice, and he calmed down forever.

"Goodbye now, brother," Taras Knish said in a low voice as he bowed to Ivan Suslov.

Friends say goodbye to each other like that after work when they know they'll meet again next morning.

That instant a spring seemed to have animated the deadly frightened coward *Ober-Gefreiter* Seer who, without aiming, discharged his automatic pistol into the two prisoners.

Taras Knish did not collapse immediately. He looked into the eyes of death in astonishment, then staggered and fell toward Ivan Suslov. His face grew serene. It is the kind of expression that brightens the face of a man after a carefully and well done job, a job done for something he believes in and can give his life for.

"Forgive me, brother," was the only thing Ivan Suslov had time to say before he fell across the chest of Taras Knish.

DIOGENES

It was uncomfortable in the barrel. His chest was aching and, besides, the lice were biting. There were other inconveniences as well. Some time ago, for instance, he began to put on weight, becoming flabby and fat.

Girls no longer paid him any attention, even young women stopped peering into his barrel. Only old peddler women visited him more and more often looking for answers to the eternal questions: What is truth? What is love? And is it possible to bring back what has sunk into oblivion? All this was of little consolation to the philosopher, but he became too lazy to compel himself to exercise. Days and nights passed until it all came to an end, and a quite unusual end at that.

The night was hot. Crowds were milling about the city streets. Then a noisy cavalcade ran into the crowd. At its head rode a slender, handsome, blond youth whom all immediately recognized as Alexander, son of Philip, King of Macedonia. The streets immediately emptied. The young girls were the first to take to their heels. Alexander was about to turn his horse in pursuit when his attention was drawn by a clay barrel stuck up amidst the stones of an old fortress wall. Two old biddies were sitting beside the barrel. Their faces revealed that they were living through the happiest moments of that period of their lives when the pleasures of the soul take over the worthless pleasures of the flesh. Some mumbling could be heard from the barrel. Diogenes was in a bad mood. These women types were of little interest to him. He was talking some idiotic nonsense but the women were going soft anyway; this drove Diogenes absolutely mad.

“What’s your name and what on earth does it all mean?” Alexander asked as he reined in his horse and curiously examined the scene in which everything was amusing, including these old bags in the madonna-like posture, and that filthy churl in a state of fury. He was fat and, obviously, ravenous as a wolf.

"Don't you know?" a drunken bawler by the name of Ptolemy gurgled in response. "That's Diogenes, the famous philosopher, a disciple of either Socrates or Plato, or maybe someone else... You must've heard of those ideas, something about Platonic love..."

"Ah, that's interesting of course," mumbled Alexander who himself had the honor of being a pupil of Aristotle, a cunning, nasty Greek from Stagira. He was immediately bored, as though he had just sat through a course of metaphysics, logic and other sciences which taught all kinds of things except how to become a good soldier. Despite his total contempt for philosophy, Alexander still managed to notice that, even though he was overly fat, the philosopher had a young face; hence, one could still turn him into, if not a soldier, then at least a useful citizen — a night watchman or refuse collector, whom the city lacked. At the same time Alexander wanted to know what this celebrity, the very sight of whom made one bored, had to say.

At the sight of the horses and the mounted thugs, the peddlers scattered, and Diogenes was left all alone with Alexander. At first, like the peddlers, he too was afraid, but, encouraged by the rather peaceful appearance of the high-ranking horseman, gathered thoughts, and asked meekly: "Can I be of any service to you, my lord?"

"They say you're a philosopher. Tell me in a word: What's the essence of your doctrine?"

"It's the incessant perfection of body and mind."

"In what manner?"

"Through inner vision of the ideas and virtues found in the human body and mind."

"But that's absolute idiocy!" Alexander lost control. "The only thing which paves the way to human perfection is force: It defeats one's enemies, calls forth feats of valor and overthrows the old kingdoms, replacing them with new. It is the most beautiful thing on earth. Force is the only tool of preventing people from rotting in their barrels, and I hope to convince you of this soon."

Saying this, Alexander turned to his men and they, at the wink of his eye, jumped off their horses and rushed to Diogenes. He tried to escape by diving into his barrel, but couldn't. Propped up by strong hands, he tried to twist out, but, unable to soar away, flopped onto the ground along with his barrel into which he grew as a melon grows into a bottle. The barrel was dashed to pieces.

As for Diogenes, he had barely blinked his eye when those same hands again supported him and he lost the final hope of setting himself free. The soldiers, however, turned out to be more good-natured than could have been originally expected. They didn't even break his nose, but only pushed him in the back and wherever they could reach.

Encouraged in this manner and yelling off and on: "This is coercion!" Diogenes finally found himself facing a steam-bath. Here, digging his legs into the ground like an ox and pressing his shoulders against his enemies' knees, he began to shout even louder that violence was not a philosophical argument and that in regard to that he was voicing his resolute protest. Saying this and similar things, he suddenly spun round, doing it so abruptly that he almost slipped out of the hands of his escort. Yet, his alertness had only dramatized the situation as, instead of walking into the dressing-room, he flew in, head first.

In a short while Diogenes was lying there, his head buried in a mat, listening to the bumble-bees buzzing in his head. The soldiers soon burst inside, ripped off his pants and shirt, and pulled him further, saying: "Move on, you scarecrow, don't be such a blockhead!" This went on until he was finally pushed into a bath where, to general amusement, he was perched under the shower. The water gushed out from the fine strainer of the showerhead as if from a boiler. It bit and lashed; his head spun from this hot-steam hurricane, and a pleasant languor filled his entire body.

The soldiers were shouting and snorting with pleasure.

And yet, while rubbing Diogenes' back, shoulders and chest with a sponge-cloth, while scrubbing off his twenty-year-old dirt, the soldiers hadn't the slightest idea that at that very moment a most important philosophical question was being pondered and solved.

It was so indeed.

Infuriated and insulted by this most brutal coercion, frightened by these infernal yells, by the rings and clouds of hot steam which hissed loudly as they gushed out from the showerhead strainers, and, finally, by the gigantic bundles of sponge-cloth dancing on his back, Diogenes was on the verge of fainting when he felt suddenly something pleasant lightly scratch the very bottom of his heart. He stopped his writhing and reeling, and, checking his feelings, was strangely surprised that this pleasant scratching was not growing smaller, but spreading, instead,

throughout his body, puncturing it with inexplicably agreeable needles...

Diogenes snorted with pleasure, just as the men did. What did it mean? Why did he feel so good? What caused this wonderful scratching? Maybe the jostling of those brutes? Or the torrents of water? Or the hot steam? But all these were external factors which were not supposed to have any effect on the movement of his mind, which was self-subsistent in terms of joy and sorrow. It had to be so. Thus had he taught all his life. And yet it turned out that it was all nothing but sweet boloney. The inner world, like cymbals, could live only when the external world laid its touch upon it. But the external world was boundless: nothing was more majestic and wonderful! What powerful melodies it could pick in the human mind!

This thought crossed Diogenes' mind like lightning.

"It can't be so!" he exclaimed. He said it so loudly that the soldiers started and exchanged glances. One of them, to comfort Diogenes, said in a hoarse, affable voice: "And what did you think, eh? A bath is better than your barrel, ain't it?"

Naturally, Diogenes didn't respond. He didn't even look at his unexpected companion, yet his hostility toward him disappeared without a trace. After a closer examination of his new fellows, he realized after all that they were not the brute thugs that he had originally pictured: they were just bearded children with very strong hands. Noticing the change in Diogenes' mood, the soldiers winked at him and patted him casually on the back, saying: "See, and you were kicking. What a blockhead you were!"

After the bath they all went to the barracks and were in time for mess. It seemed to Diogenes, who was as hungry as a wolf, that the soldiers' meat soup with millet and pork fat, and the large plate of buckwheat porridge — also with pork fat — were extremely tasty. He chomped away so that his jaw bones ached. After the meal they rested a bit in the shade. Diogenes started telling all kinds of funny stories, of which he knew plenty. Unable to control themselves, the soldiers roared with laughter like children. They took to this cute churl. Someone even expressed regret that Diogenes had packed himself up in a barrel whereas he could live a far better life amusing people at fairs at marketplaces.

Then they did some work, loading ships bound for a long voyage. Diogenes carried sacks just like the rest did,

but for him this physical effort turned out to be quite difficult. Because he wasn't accustomed to it, his back was aching, sweat rolled down his face, his legs buckled under him, his massive belly pulled him to the ground, but he still kept working, and did it so expertly as if he had been carrying sacks of rusk and dried fish all his life. Work is an external factor in relation to man; hence, it was interesting to see what new patterns it would weave on the fabric of his mind. In anticipation he had worked until dusk and would have eventually hurt himself had not their sergeant suddenly interrupted work with the yell: "Enough! That'll do! Have a dip now."

Without waiting to be asked another time, the men, and Diogenes as well, darted to the shore. The sea was calm and embraced by the blue dusk. Yet poetic beauty no longer mattered to Diogenes. For the first ten minutes he lay motionless on the still warm sand beach. Only later, when he could feel some signs of life come back to his body, did he splash into the sea. After a thorough swim, Diogenes suddenly faced the fact that hunger was gnawing at his innards. The sergeant must have sensed it. As soon as he saw that everyone climbed ashore, he again let out a growl, as loud as only sergeants can produce: "Come on, boys, supper's ready!"

They served dumplings for supper. Equipped with a giant fork, Diogenes made himself comfortable beside a bowl with an ornate green design, and labored so zealously that he didn't pass for breath until the plate was empty. Two mess-tins of dumplings slipped down his throat!

They slept outdoors. Diogenes found room by the affable bearded soldier. Incidentally, it was the same soldier who was the most enthusiastic with his knees when Diogenes was jostled into the steam-bath.

"So, you live all alone?" the soldier asked, adjusting a sack of dried fish in place of a pillow.

"As you see," Diogenes replied.

"Don't you feel lonely without a girl?"

"That depends," Diogenes replied in perfect bliss. Never before had he felt as comfortable as he did now, lying on sacks of dried fish. "And what about you?"

"Me?.." the bearded soldier livened up. "Well, buddy, I've an awfully pretty wife and a son... He's so cute." The soldier reclined on his elbow and began telling about his awfully pretty wife and really cute son. He wound up the

story quite unexpectedly, let out a sad sigh, and added: "When will the end of all this be? Wars and wars all the time. Somebody wants to start a fistfight and you have to turn your face for a slap..."

Thus passed the first day. It was followed by other days, weeks and months. Diogenes was already quite used to people and work, and carried sacks just like the others; at workouts he was as deft in handling the spear and in keeping step that the soldiers smacked their lips with pleasure. His once flabby body grew stronger, the belly disappeared, the shoulders were framed by firm muscles; he looked better, became younger in spirit and so slender that, as he would stroll down the street, he invariably caught the swift eyes of alert young women. Now that stupid philosophy according to which the road to the perfection of human virtues ran through the observation of those virtues seemed ridiculous to him. "No pain, no gain," he thought. "Even those torrents from the shower and these sacks of dried fish give reasons to believe that even the factors like this, petty though they may be, give impulse to the thought and can temper one's body. Nothing to say about deeds of great magnitude where the efforts and willpower of many thousands are merged." In thinking this way Diogenes was alluding to the great campaign Alexander intended to launch in Asia, wherein the entire Greek world would take part under the leadership of Alexander and his chief commanders. Diogenes anticipated the outset of that campaign: It was expected to have a tremendous impact on the nations of the West and the Orient, because grand actions should be followed by grand results both for nations and individuals.

Eventually, his expectations came true. The army set out for the campaign. Braving dust and heat and the hardships of a long journey, Diogenes enthusiastically kept in step, belted out songs, gnawed at rusks and, after a chew of dried fish, gorged himself on water. The farther the army proceeded, the more limitless the horizons became. The world was boundless; it spread to all sides, and it was a wonderful feeling to be the victor of this infinity. However, the passage to this wonderful world was blocked by the Granica River beyond which the tremendous Persian army stood on guard. Without a minute's hesitation, Diogenes stepped into the water along with, and sometimes sooner than, the rest of Alexander's soldiers. The Macedonian attack was impetuous. The crushed

Persian hordes sought salvation by taking to flight. Exhausted by the pursuit, Diogenes fell to the ground and kissed the earth. He was full of inexplicable joy.

Months and years streamed by. The great campaign continued. Diogenes took part in the siege of Miletus, raised river dams in the battle of Halicarnassus, and marched with the triumphant columns through Caria, Lycia, Phrygia and Cilicia. His body seemed to be cast of bronze. The halts made him weary from inaction. He was happy only on the march. When there was food and drink, he ate and drank with pleasure; when there was none, he kept marching on into those luring vistas, encouraging others by his tirelessness. With admirable gusto he rushed to learn everything he hadn't known before or which he saw for the first time. Having mastered Persian, he began studying the language of Egypt and, once he had mastered it, turned to the tongues of Phoenicia and Babylonia. He studied the life of villages and large cities, measured the proportions of grand structures, spoke to craftsmen and philosophers, and read the works of writers he hadn't known before. So thoroughly did he study the history of cities, geography and customs that his advice was highly valued, not only by soldiers, but also by the officers — he could indicate the way and knew where springs could be found in the desert. Incidentally, it was he who collected, drop by drop, water for Alexander when the army was making a long march across an arid desert. As everyone knows, Alexander splashed out the water, saying it was too little for all and too much for himself. Like the rest of his comrades, Diogenes was unimpressed. What Alexander did could be done by each and every one of them. He who had Asia at his feet should not have measured the grandeur of spirit and endurance by the glass of water.

The campaign lasted ten years. Alexander's army reached the banks of the Indus River and the oases of Sogdiana. The world was traveled to the end. Millions of people fell to their knees before Alexander, but as time went by Diogenes' heart felt heavier and heavier... He knew a great deal, had seen a great deal, but what he saw no longer excited him. Across the world, nations were shouldering the heavy burden of slavery. Kings came and went, new satraps followed one another, but the life of the people did not get any better. They drudged on under Alexander as they did under Darius. But they were

living, thinking creatures. Why did they have to toil for others and not live for themselves, for their loving, industrious wives and their tender children? Why was the world organized so improperly? Diogenes delved deeply into thought. He recounted the events of history, assessed and compared the histories of different lands. These thoughts never left him for a moment. Once tireless, he now walked with head bent low. The times when he would casually laugh at something were long gone. He cast aside his books. Talking to priests, these luminaries of the country, sickened him. The dressed-up courtiers were nothing but fools who could only cry at a wedding or dance by the coffin into which entire great nations were entered alive.

The campaign ended. For some time Alexander, like an excited child, bathed in his triumph, but it did not last. Problems arose: what was to be done with this tremendous kingdom which refused to stick together and was ready to fall apart at any moment? Alexander did all he could to strengthen it, but every gesture was either ridiculous, like changing the dress of his retinue to that of his Persian courtiers, or out of place, like the order for ten thousand Macedonian soldiers to marry Persian women. The conquered nations didn't need this, this was not what they had expected. These marriages could hardly save the empire. Something great had to be done by which Alexander could win the hearts of the nations weary from the yoke of slavery. On those days Diogenes did a good deal of thinking. But the history of the people of Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt, Persia and, finally, his native land, Greece, only strengthened his belief that slavery was the central reason for their decay. Only a free person can love and defend his homeland without being afraid of being stabbed in the back. As long as this threat existed, the kingdoms were doomed to collapse. So fell lush Athens under the blows of Macedonia — a country free of slavery. So fell all other Greek cities before the free soldiers of Philip, and now the empire of Darius had fallen under the impact of the same force. Freedom increased the people's strength, and it was hard to imagine how strong Alexander's empire might be were he to abolish slavery. Millions of people would be drawn to his side; nations would aspire to that same freedom. What Diogenes thought was awesome, although it was the only clue to saving Alexander, Greece and all the countries in-

corporated in the new world empire. Diogenes bent his greying head even lower. Who could understand him? No one. Absolutely no one...

Suddenly a wind of hope flashed across his tormented mind.

What if he could present his ideas to Alexander? What if he could excite his imagination with the striking pictures of a society raised on new foundations never heard of before, a society powerful enough to ultimately conquer India and China. With these thoughts in mind Diogenes directed his steps to the palace.

"What do you want?" they asked him.

"I want to see Alexander," Diogenes replied.

"That is impossible and unnecessary. If you're tired, as your appearance suggests, and wish to return home, nothing can keep you in this country any longer."

Without even waiting for what Diogenes would say to this, the courtier ordered him to put his name on the list of the veterans bound for home. Diogenes frowned bitterly and went off. The palace was swarming with noble Persian women, and among the Macedonian and Greek commanders there were many satraps, the watchdogs of slavery in the country. Could he reveal his plans to them?

It was raining. The weather was bleak and cold. The wind was blowing, and the yellow leaves were rustling sadly. Weakened by age and war, Diogenes lay beside a fence without even trying to shield himself from the wind and the torrents of rain. It mattered nothing to him. His life was wasted. Not a single memory could warm his heart. Mankind had suffered before him, and would suffer when he was gone. There they go, rushing to and fro, each one busy with his own problems, free men and slaves, the former with a secret, deeply hidden fear, the latter with a similarly deeply concealed hatred. Where are they going? Let them go. Collecting his strength, Diogenes turned to the fence. Now and then someone would come up to him and, recognizing it was Diogenes, would walk away, laughing. Street urchins threw pebbles at him, women laughed, jokers pulled at his chiton; he would get angry and curse them away, but they cursed back: "You're a dog, a rabid dog! When will the wind blow these outrageous ideas out of your head?" But they all, each and every one of them, were afraid of Diogenes, because what he

preached threatened society. A world without slavery — sheer madness! Hence, they pushed and kicked him.

Yet there was someone who cared. Waking up in the morning, he would find some food beside him, sometimes a bundle of straw and a jug of wine.

One time he was wakened up by the sound of steps. "Who's there?" he called out. The people disappeared, but beside him Diogenes saw a big clay barrel which could protect him from bad weather. Overcoming his fatigue, he hid in the barrel, happy with its comfort and mat of dry millet straw. So passed the winter, along with its bad weather and cold. The spring sun peered through. Its warmth brought Diogenes back to life. The sun is perhaps the only thing which brings at least some joy in the hard lives of the oppressed.

All this meant little to Alexander, however. Laden with thoughts, one day he was passing along the street, his heavy head bent low. Nothing stuck together, nothing succeeded as planned. There was unrest in the army, and quarrel after quarrel among his commanders. How poorly did they justify the king's hopes! Everyone was out for himself. But if he were to die, from sleepless nights or this terrible fever, who would stand at the helm of his kingdom? Ptolemy? Vain hopes, for he would be appropriate somewhere in the provinces — in Egypt, for instance. Emptiness. How could emptiness appeal to nations?

Meanwhile they crossed the city limits. Riding behind Alexander was Ptolemy who was laughing at some silly thing. One could see the fields: Oxen trudged there, the yokes set on their necks. They were driven by slaves, their heads bent low. What were they thinking of? Were they interested in the future of Alexander's empire? But what did it have to do with them? Alexander turned his head in another direction: shacks, fences, a forgotten clay barrel. But no — a man was looking out from it. He had a big, bulging brow and introspective concentration in his eyes. This touched some familiar strings. Who was that? Where did he see the man before? Ah, it was Diogenes, the philosopher. What was he thinking of? Did he share Alexander's concerns? The king halted his horse and called a boy to him.

"That's Diogenes over there. Tell him I want to talk to him."

"Yes, Sire!"

The horse reared and pranced.

"Diogenes!" the boy called merrily. "Alexander wants to talk to you."

Diogenes turned round and reclined heavily on his elbows. The name mentioned by the boy agitated him. How many memories did it stir in Diogenes' mind: his adventures ten years ago, military campaigns, arid deserts and his own unaccomplished pursuits. What did Alexander need? What did he come with? Meanwhile Alexander had come closer, dismounted from his horse, and sat down on a stone next to the barrel.

"Go ahead," Diogenes said, quietly scrutinizing the shadow of the person who once was a commander and a great king.

Alexander took his time answering.

"I think, Diogenes..."

Diogenes was silent.

"...about my kingdom."

Diogenes was silent.

"What will happen to it when I die?"

"It might not necessarily fall apart," Diogenes replied in a muffled voice.

"Have you... also thought about it?" Alexander's voice was trembling with anger.

Paying no attention to it, Diogenes continued: "It might not fall apart, but sheer force is not enough to preserve it. You're only half correct. You can take something by force, but to keep it, you need wisdom, too."

"Go ahead," Alexander said heavily, biting his lips. He was rocked with anger. Diogenes' words about the possible disintegration of the empire had a shocking effect on him. This meant that his thoughts on the matter were also shared by this...

"So, what should be born of that wisdom?" Alexander finally asked.

"Free the country of its slaves!"

"But there are too many of them, you can't kill them all!"

"Why kill them?" Diogenes exclaimed. "I didn't say that."

Alexander looked at Diogenes intently. A hint of guess sparkled in his eyes. He understood Diogenes' train of thoughts — the same horrible thoughts that had tormented him. But he was king of kings — how could he be the king of slaves? This was madness. And he yelled, rather to

himself then to Diogenes: "Shut up, you madman! The sun doesn't rise in the west, and rivers don't flow from the sea. I forbid you to speak about it any further!"

"But listen!.." A gust of energy suddenly rushed through Diogenes. His eyes were flames, and the lines of his face revealed unvanquished strength. "Listen to me," he shouted. "With free Macedonians you've conquered half of the world; set this half of the world free — and you'll conquer the entire world. The whole of India, China, the lands of Africa, Scythia, the Caucasus, Syracuse and Ethiopia will triumphantly raise you to heavens!"

Alexander was racked by confusion. Something young and daring sparkled in his eyes. His nostrils trembled with agitation.

"Don't waste time, Alexander. You'll shake the world, and your name will shine brightly throughout the ages."

But the flame in Alexander's eyes had already faded. His cheeks turned wan. He shook so violently that his elbows slipped from his knees.

"Something wrong with you?" Ptolemy asked in a concerned tone as he helped the king to the saddle. "Fever again? Or maybe this churl has said something wrong?"

"This churl?" Alexander gave Ptolemy a sad look. It took him a long while before he replied: "As for the churl — if I weren't Alexander I'd want to be Diogenes. But what does it have to do with you?"

TWO GENERALS

The life story of General Wolfgang-Friedrich von Zachau is quite unusual and, in my opinion, deserves the attention of psychologists, psychopathologists, sociologists and ordinary readers.

Yet the life story of Klaus Busch is also quite spectacular; it is also out of the ordinary and deserves no less attention. At least, that's what I think.

It is all the more true that life — their army life, rather — had linked the general and his batman together for some time.

All the changes in their lives, all the adventures they lived through, and all the misfortunes that fate destined for them they overcame together, jointly, or rather side by side.

It is this togetherness which evokes the interest in the life stories of the well-heeled general — a hereditary landlord and high-born aristocrat — and his run-of-the-mill batman, a private on the army rank hierarchy and, before the war, a poverty-stricken hired hand of a rich farmer in Westphalia or somewhere else.

It all started in the hot days of war, or rather at the very end of it. However, the war itself, in the sense of combat actions and operations, does not bear any direct relation to this story — only a touch, perhaps, only the motive.

The division under the command of General Wolfgang-Friedrich von Zachau was encircled in the woods somewhere on the border of Byelorussia and the Ukraine. The unexpected Red Army offensive was not only sudden and unpredictable, but also sweeping and many-sided: an artillery broadside and missile attack from the *Katyushas** were followed by tanks, motorized infantry, and regular foot infantry. The stunning blow on this *Frontabteilung* was so instantaneous that the regular foot infantry took the territory simply by running through. And, paradoxical though it is, the commander of the routed division had

* Katyusha — Soviet multirocket launcher of WWII

survived only thanks to the speed of the operation. The general, in fact, was not in the habit of climbing out to the surface: He just sat there in his deep dugout, with as many as four layers of logs above, and from there casually directed combat operations which were commonly referred to as "defensive-offensive" and disguised in the news bulletins as the "straightening of the frontline." In its sudden attack, which to the general came as something utterly unexpected, the Soviet machinery which was followed by infantry simply rolled over the head of His Excellency. The general only heard a quake from the roaring tanks — pieces of plaster from the primitive "ceiling" of the dugout even dusted his head — and then the stamping of the Soviet infantrymen's boots. It was very early in the morning. The general got up just before the thunder of the cannonade could be heard, and called up his batman: "Klaus! Klaus, *Donnerwetter*, where's my coffee?"

But it was too late for coffee. It so happened that after the Soviet units rolled across the division's defense line and the general's personal dugout, everything which was now left behind them — everything which the German officer had regarded as "that side" half an hour earlier — suddenly became "this side"; and everything which from our standpoint had been "this side," for him, a nazi soldier, now became neither "this side" nor "that side" — the general was suspended in some kind of vacuum. In other words, the general was neither a captive (for no Soviet soldier had jumped into the dugout to take him prisoner) nor free.

"It seems," the general thought to himself, "that we're stuck in encirclement."

Under "we" the general meant himself and, perhaps, his imaginary division of whose utter defeat he was naturally unaware at this moment. He simply thought that, due to unexpected circumstances, the division now appeared on "that side" which used to be "this side" not too long ago. Of course the general did not think at all about the real "we," meaning himself and his batman, Klaus Busch, who was blinking his eyes stupidly in front of his master: as everyone knows, the batman is a nobody. Even the *Fräulein* and *Frauen* whom the general met during this boring campaign in the East thought it normal to take a bath in the batman's presence.

The general was listening.

He sat there on his "Hunter" folding bed, holding one sock in his hand: He had managed to pull the sock onto his left foot even before the sudden assault, while his bare right foot was now freezing on the damp floor of the dugout. It was easy to catch cold that way, or even flu or pneumonia, so he quickly pulled the sock onto his right foot.

Anyway, the general was listening.

He could hear nothing nearby; farther off to the West, already on "that side," the sunbachine gun skirmish and explosions of hand grenades could be still heard; and to the East, objectively "this side" for the general, there wasn't a sound. It even seemed to the general (he was born a dreamer inclined to meditation about the paradoxes of fate) that the silence which was now creeping from the East was a materialized substance, thick as, say, collodion (thirty years earlier the general had studied chemistry at Heidelberg and therefore often indulged in associations from the realm of chemistry, paradoxical though they were). Like collodion exposed to air, that silence was becoming thicker and thicker, as though absorbing the general. This thickness squeezed and almost paralyzed his inner self.

"This way I can easily become a mesozoic insect stuck up in the would-be permafrost," the general thought. At this point he came to realize that he was getting frightened, because only in thousands of millions of years would the future nordic civilization unearth him, and nobody knows whether they would be able to revive him. After all, he was not an insect, but a human, the king of nature... Rot! What kind of nonsense was creeping into his mind...

"Klaus!" the general finally pulled a sound out of his throat. "Klaus! Don't you hear?"

Klaus Busch, the batman, had already recovered from his stupor and attempted to stand at attention and snap his heels.

"Go and see what's happening there..."

Klaus made three steps toward the exit — the first step was the way it ought to be, with a loud stamp of his boot against the floor; the second step was shorter and barely audible, while the third step was utterly uncertain.

"So?"

"There's nothing to see, Excellency. Everything's clear as it is..." he mumbled, looking fearfully at the exit of the

dugout. He even raised his hand to his chest as if trying to cross himself.

For a moment, an expression of either pleasure or arrogance, or perhaps even pride crossed the face of Wolfgang-Friedrich von Zachau. In fact, it was a misleading expression, for what kind of pleasure or arrogance could one talk about in a tragic situation like this? But the point is that private Klaus Busch, the batman, suddenly addressed him as "Excellency," a form of address practically out of use in the Third Reich's Wehrmacht. Let us explain things: Starting service after graduating from a military school in the German army of the pre-Hitler time, the hereditary Prussian *Junker* von Zachau had always dreamed of rising to the rank of general and to be addressed by this wonderful "Excellency."

In an instant, however, the general collected himself. "Private Busch!" he barked out, glad as he was that he could still raise his voice to such a menacing pitch. "You've got the order, and for some reason..."

Busch quickly disappeared through the exit. One could hear the squeaking of the ladder which led from the trench to the surface.

Busch was gone for only a couple of minutes. During this time the general failed to think over what could be done. Only one thought tossed in his mind: The sudden attack had caught the division unawares, the outposts were probably eliminated without much fuss — the Russians, especially the partisans, were quite expert in this — while the division, split into bigger and smaller groups, was (to use the military terminology) dispersed through the forest thicket.

The ladder squeaked again, and private Busch appeared in the doorway. He stood at attention, the way it should be, firmly pressed his palms to his thighs, snapped his heels loudly, and reported:

"May I report to your Excellency: neither ours nor the reds can be seen or heard anywhere around; from the West, where the division must have withdrawn, I could hear the shooting of submachine guns and distant artillery shots; nothing is heard from the East — complete silence, Excellency..."

The final words were pronounced almost in a whisper, as though Busch was afraid to disturb that silence.

The general mumbled something. He could "hear" the silence from the East himself, just like the shooting from

the West. But nearby there was emptiness. What could be done? He had to make a decision...

"May I report, Excellency?" Busch said hesitantly, again standing at attention and again snapping his heels. "They've launched an offensive, there's no doubt about that, and one might expect the second echelon of infantry soon." Assuming a casual posture, Busch added meekly, "And the second wave that'll comb the territory won't miss... the revision of the trench, Excellency..." And then, in a barely audible voice, as if not meaning to say it, as if speaking to himself, he concluded, "It's dangerous to stay here any longer. We have to leave the dugout at once."

The general, however, had already made a decision.

"Give me my coat and my boots!" he ordered.

Hastily helping the general into his coat and pulling his own around his shoulders, Busch again stood at attention at the exit: He was supposed to let the general go first. But the general had a different opinion.

"Move up, Klaus," he ordered. "And first thing look around the trench — whether they're already here or not..."

Busch looked out from the trench.

"Nobody's around," he reported quietly. "Emptiness... You can go up safely, Excellency..."

Panting heavily, the general climbed the squeaky ladder and looked around. It was quiet. They were surrounded by the forest — the trunks of tall, slender trees, and the undergrowth below. Where were they to go? Where were they to search for the imaginary groups of the splintered division?

Busch pointed to the right where the trees were not so dense, and where a clearing could be seen in a distance.

"Maybe this way, Excellency? Your eyes can reach further here and it will be easier to find ours..."

The general, however, nodded his head to the left where the undergrowth was denser and where there was shrubbery.

"This way, Busch, they won't notice us here..."

Saying this, the general moved on — at first steadily, even stately, but soon quickening his pace to a trot. He ran on, caught up in the long tails of his coat. The batman tugged along, lifting the tails to ease his movement.

In a few seconds the dense undergrowth embraced them; the cautious general and his devoted servant,

Having gone about 300 meters from the now dangerous dugout, they stopped to rest, to look around, to listen and, generally, to get hold of the unusual situation.

Absolute silence reigned in the forest — it seemed that even the birds had hushed down. The sounds of the distant skirmish still resounded from the West, but nothing could be heard in the East. Where was that second wave which was to comb the area after the strike force? It couldn't possibly not come. Military science and combat codes of all armies in the world demanded it had to be there. And yet, the general had already had a couple of occasions which convinced him that the Soviet army now and then deviated from the traditional pattern of combat operations taught in military academies. Generally speaking, they did not abide by the rules of warfare... Or maybe the first wave simply had gone too far? It was a wonderful opportunity to make a flanking movement, to chop off the first echelon of the offensive, to rout it and then to "lock up" the second wave. Well, the sweet scent of victory!.. What a feat, what a furor it could be! And, of course, it would be appraised — possibly by awards from the Führer himself. After all, the entire scheme of the Russian offensive at this *Frontabteilung* could have been disrupted! But where were the "dispersed" groups of his caught-unawares division? How could he gather them into one striking fist?

Vainly the general kept turning his head, his order for Busch to climb a tree and to look around from the top was needless. It was impossible to see anything in this forest, through this thicket.

How could the general possibly know that his caught-unawares division had rolled westward like a wave and had already been either routed or taken prisoner? There was no way the general could know that.

"Excellency," Klaus Busch stood at attention, "it would be wise to retreat further into the woods and to stay there for some time..."

The general made the decision: "Let's go Klaus."

They went off. They walked past high, slender trees, mostly hornbeam — there was a sizeable forest area on the general's estate, so he knew the names of his various trees. They walked through the dense undergrowth — the general noted this with disapproval as he knew something about forestry. They trudged through the shrubbery, and this greatly insulted the general: As everybody knows, shrubbery is a forest stowaway.

As they proceeded, the forest gradually filled with sounds, not those of war, but of its own forest life. Here and there birds were chirping — the general could not tell them by their song; frogs croaked lazily in an evidently marshed valley — this added to the general's repulsion; farther on, probably beside a river or a forest lake, a water-ox was trumpeting its horn.

About two hours had already gone by, and the general and his batman had penetrated rather deeply into the forest. Any noise of war was totally absent — neither shots nor cannonade — and that was horrible. But nature — the forest, the marsh, the birds, the frogs, the insects — was living her usual peacetime life. Nature rustled, purled, croaked and buzzed — and that was worst of all.

As time went by, the general got tired. He was unaccustomed to long walks, especially when not on gravel-paved park lanes. The general sat down, reclining against a slender birch tree — here in the valley the hornbeam forest gave way to a young oak and birch grove. "Klaus, I want a drink," the general ordered his batman.

That was unfortunate. In his haste, Klaus Busch did not think of filling a canteen.

"Excellency," he stood at attention blinking his eyes fearfully and humbly, "I'll run to the stream right away and fetch some water."

Luckily, the mess tins — both the general's and his own — were attached to their belts. Hardly had Busch dashed off toward the stream which was murmuring some thirty steps away down the valley when the general stopped him and hollered indignantly: "Don't you know that I don't drink unboiled water?! There might be all sorts of bacteria in that filthy stream..."

In reality, the transparent stream water sparkled clean. Busch, however, was aware that the general drank only boiled or, preferably, mineral water. In the USSR he particularly liked the "Borzhomi" and "Yessentuki No. 20" brands. Utterly lost, the servant looked fearfully at his master: What was he supposed to do? Untold sorrow gleamed in the blue eyes of Klaus Busch. His stare which, by the code of conduct, he could not take away from the eyes of his commander, registered only the general's tired and irritated face and the trunk of the birch tree above.

The birch tree! If it were only a month earlier when the sap drifted generously up the trunk, awakened after

winter. Then he would gladly treat the general to this forest delicacy — birch-tree sap. Could the sap still be drifting up? He'd better chance it...

"With your permission, Excellency?"

The general did not grasp what kind of action his servant wanted to take, but nonetheless nodded approvingly. Apparently Busch intended to fetch water from the stream and — hell! *à la guerre comme à la guerre* — the general would dare a gulp of unboiled water. He badly wanted something to drink, and with the realization that there was nothing, his thirst built up even more, suppressing all other thoughts and feelings.

Busch proceeded several steps away, chose a slender birch tree with clean, white bark, and made a cross section with his knife, with the longer cut running down. With his belt he fastened the mess tin under the cut. Good God! Large drops of sap streamed down at once — here, in the quiet of the valley, the vegetation period was belated but rather intensive. Before long the mess tin was filled to the brim.

"What's that?" The general was still out of sorts, but the irritation in his voice now yielded to curiosity. Busch stood at attention, snapped his heels and passed the general the transparent liquid.

"This is birch sap, Excellency," Busch reported, "There are no bacteria in it, it's living nature. They even heal wounds with it..."

Birch sap, Mother of God! The general instantly remembered how a long, long time ago the younger von Zachau offsprings, on their hereditary estate, in a park, loved sampling all sorts of fruit, berries and other gifts of nature which were inadmissible on the table menu and which the children were not allowed to even taste. The most tempting of those was birch sap in spring. Mother of God, it was ages ago! Well over half a century had gone by since those childhood years — what wonderful times they were... Dreams and sentimental recollections overwhelmed the general while the sap poured down his throat. He drank exactly half a liter: The officers' mess tins were meant for coffee while those of the soldiers, from which the low-ranking men sipped soup, had double content of one liter.

It is hard to tell whether it was those dreams of youth or the birch sap that produced such a stunning effect, but the general suddenly felt a gush of fresh strength which jerked him to his feet.

"Let's move on, Klaus," he ordered, "We must go farther to the West, into the forest. Maybe our units are hiding out there now. In any case, the reds can't be there since they've attacked from the East."

The general spoke condescendingly, looking at his batman with approval: Birch sap was his brilliant idea. Well done!

Busch shuffled after the general. He cast a sad glance at the white birch tree which was now vainly shedding the transparent sap. He did not manage to get any for himself to quench his own thirst. As he crossed the stream, he quickly bent down and ladled up a handful of water. His own thirst, however, was the least of his worries. Busch was trembling at the thought that the general would also want to eat. He had not even had his morning coffee.

Indeed, in less than half an hour the general again sat down by a tree and said in a dull voice: "Klaus, in fact it would be nice to have something for breakfast..."

Of course it would be nice to have something for breakfast, but who could have expected things to turn out this way. Fleeing from the dugout even Busch did not think it would be like this.

It is common knowledge, however, that orders from a higher officer are not debated. Any doubt, discussion, let alone aspersion toward one's superior are not permitted under whatever circumstances. Busch snapped his heels and looked at the general with his wide open clear blue eyes: "With your permission, Excellency?"

The general nodded, but somehow uncertainly, vaguely, because he was perfectly aware that the batman could not possibly find any food. Suddenly the general was scared: Busch had disappeared amidst the shrubbery — why did he go there? Did it mean he had deserted the general? Ice-cold sweat covered the general from head to feet. He even wrapped his coat closer around him to try and stop the sudden clatter of his teeth.

In this manner, wrapped in his coat with the stand-up collar, unable to tear his eyes away from the shrubs amidst which the wicked soldier had disappeared, the general sat there, rocked by fear. He even stopped thinking about his division and where it could be searched for. All he thought was about Busch: when the military police catch him — and the general had no doubt about that — he would order him to be shot. The general did not even want to eat any more.

Strange though it was, in just half an hour the frame of the batman, seemingly lost for good, appeared from the shrubs. The general was again covered with sweat — this time the sweat of joy, the sweat of coming back to life... The general quickly put down the collar of his coat. Standing in front of him was Klaus Busch, the same as before, only his flying cap was in his hand and the pockets of his coat were bulging.

“Here you are, Excellency,” Busch stretched the flying cap out to the general.

“What’s this?” the general asked with a touch of fear.

“Have a taste, Excellency. These are wood berries. They’re very tasty and nutritious, or, in scientific terms, are rich in vitamins. Here you have blackberry, raspberry and ashberry. Have some, Excellency, meanwhile I’ll make us some soup.”

The general took Busch’s flying cap and blinked his eyes. Then a grimace of disgust twisted his lips: “But they are rotten!”

“Oh no, Excellency. They’re the best there is: last year’s sun-dried. Your Excellency must have tasted sun-dried grapes? Or sun-dried apricots? Or perhaps...”

“Alright, alright!” the general waved these comments away. “And what kind of soup are you talking about?”

Slowly, Busch emptied his pockets; “Mushroom soup, Excellency. And rest assured that I know a bit about mushrooms and can tell the poisonous ones. I’ve also picked some hazelnuts, there are plenty of them in the grove. They will add a bitter flavor in place of salt. And this is caraway that’ll do instead of parsley, and this is...”

“Klaus!” the general said with irritation. “I’ve told you many times to hold your tongue! Do as you are told and don’t bother me with your silly explanations.”

“Yes, sir!” Busch obediently snapped his heels.

However, it was not that easy to stop his chatter, especially as he had not finished his report yet.

“I believe, Excellency, that we’d better stay here for a while until the men from our division spot us. If they don’t do it by night, I, with your permission, Excellency, would make a reconnaissance mission as soon as dusk falls. Over there, behind the shrubbery, the forest is quite rare, rather there’s a large clearing, and in that clearing is a small homestead. Certainly it’s dangerous to check it out in broad daylight, but at dusk I’ll venture out and will go see...”

“A homestead?” the general asked in excitement. “But maybe the reds are there?”

“That’s not known, Excellency, but as soon as dusk falls...”

“Alright, alright!” the general interrupted him curtly. “You’re starting it all over again. Do your job, and meanwhile I’ll think it over.”

Indeed, it was necessary to think over the situation: were they to wait until their people find them, or should they carry on on their own? And what if the reds spot them?

The general sank deep into thoughts, contradictory and uncomfortable. Why was there such silence, with no sound of combat? Did it mean that his division had withdrawn to such a considerable distance? Or perhaps the reds had already taken to their heels and his division did not dare to recoup its positions at once? Or perhaps they were making reconnaissance sorties. But who would make the decisions if he was not there? Bad, really bad...

Busch meanwhile lit a fire, or rather made a real camp fire, albeit in a small stove. In a slope of a hill he dug a small cave, bored a hole from top with a stick to serve as a chimney — and the smoke was compressed along the stream. The wind blew the smoke low to the ground. Klaus filled his soldiers’ mess tin with water, put in a handful of shelled hazelnuts, and some herbs and roots, and then put in the mushrooms. Soup was the likely outcome. They had no other choice.

At this stage, the unexpected happened — and yet, can misfortunes be anticipated?

The point is that the general was injured. In fact, he himself did the injury. It is not that the general wanted to help Busch — how can a general ever help his batman? — but simply to kill time and speed up the preparation of this fantastic soup, he unwillingly took several small dry branches of which Busch had managed to gather a good heap, and started breaking them into small pieces so that they would burn better. But there was one sharp branch amidst the pine drywood with which the general accidentally stabbed himself in the arm, cutting the skin from above the palm right up to the elbow. Blood gushed out of the wound like from a fountain. The general, unable to contain his pain and fear, began wailing.

“Klaus!” he hollered.

But of course, the sharp branch was dirty, with all kinds of bacteria which were now transported under the skin, or rather under the protective dermic barrier. Inflammation, gangrene or sepsis could hardly be avoided, because where could he get the antitetanus serum now? And with the loss of blood...

"Klaus!" the general hollered. "My first-aid kit now!"

Another pain in the neck! Where on earth could Klaus get that first-aid kit from? Generals do not carry them along, as they always have a medical unit to take care of all such occurrences. First-aid kits are the responsibility of adjutants, messengers and batmen. However, batman Busch in his hasty flight from the dugout did not even think that the first-aid kit would be of any use. Understood, he would get a couple of days behind bars for his laxity, but it would be later, not now.

"May I have a look, Excellency?" Busch bent over the general's injured arm.

"No, you may not!" the general yelled in irritation. "You know nothing about it. An antiseptic treatment of the wound is needed. Where's your first-aid kit? You must always have it with you, as the code demands. You'll get ten days under arrest. Infection has been transported into the blood!"

Busch, however, had a chance to examine the wound.

"Excellency," he dared comment, "there's a fair stream of blood and, in fact, all the bacteria, if any, must have been washed away. It's very good when an open wound bleeds..."

"But I can die from the loss of blood," the general kept wailing. "Look at it pour: a vein must have been ripped."

"We'll now stop the excessive bleeding," Busch comforted him. All of a sudden he permitted himself what was utterly impermissible. Instead of saying "Excellency" he just nodded his head sympathetically and added: "Oh, *Mein Herr*, you're exaggerating the danger. This is a trifle..."

The general shuddered with anger. This brute was doing God knows what! Addressing him bluntly, disregarding his rank and status! The general would immediately show him where he belonged, and would do it now... However, the general did not manage to present his indignation in an appropriate form as Busch spun round, muttered something like "Everything will be fine, *Mein Herr*," and ran across the valley toward the stream. The general could

see Busch picking some herbs which he then rinsed in the water.

In a minute or so the general's indignation over this apparently accidental "*Mein Herr*" had boiled down, leaving no trace, but the reference to his bleeding as trifle was the height of impudence. Were an injury like that to occur in action, the general would certainly get the oak leaves insignia to match his Iron Cross, or perhaps another Iron Cross to wear on his neck.

In the meantime Busch bent over the general's quaking arm and stuck a handful of leaves on the wound.

"Klaus!" the general let out a shriek. "What d'you think you're doing? You want to poison me! You're spreading infection."

"Absolutely not, Excellency," Busch replied without letting go of the general's arm, without standing at attention and without snapping his heels as he should. "This wonderful curative herb will stop the bleeding in no time."

Busch was a talkative kind, and this was not the end to his flow of information.

"Believe me, Excellency, in my village they don't know of or recognize any better means to stop bleeding. We don't buy those silly medicines from the pharmacies. Plantain will stop bleeding, cease pain and prevent inflammation better than anything else. Permit me, Excellency, to rip a band off your shirt..."

Without waiting for the general's permission or at least consent, Busch, the brute that he was, pulled out the general's undershirt from his pants, ripped off a band and with it tied the bundle of leaves to the wound.

"Ready, Excellency!" Busch stood up and finally snapped his heels. "Tomorrow morning you remove the bandage and won't recognize your arm: it'll heal like..."

Busch was about to say something funny, but held his tongue just at the right moment. He ended the phrase with a most discreet: "...like it should be, like it was treated by an expert surgeon."

The general, displeased as he was, was silent. He had to put up with it, there was no other choice. Maybe things would work out somehow without a sepsis or gangrene... If not, then the medical unit of the division would have every reason to report to the senior command about the dangerous injury of the division commander at the time

of a sudden and unexpected attack by the enemy troops. And then...

In the meantime Busch reported: "The soup is ready, Excellency. Here it is, if you please..."

There was no spoon of course, but here, too, Busch found a way out. He offered the general the officers' half-liter mess tin which had a handle and could be used instead of a spoon.

The general looked sideways at the proffered broth. It smelled delicious, because Busch had put in plenty of various roots and herbs. As for its taste (of course, if you dared taste it), it would definitely be a real slop. Or even poison... Should he, the general, really try some?.. The general's stomach was growling and moaning — that was how his appetite made its presence felt.

"You try it first," the general ordered. It was the proper thing to do: The cook should always taste his meal first to check whether it was good. And... how shall we put it... How could the general vouch for the complete political trustworthiness of this parvenu?

Obediently, Busch poured some soup from the bigger mess tin into the smaller, blew on it to cool the broth, and then swallowed it in one gulp. The general closely watched the procedure and the expression on the batman's face.

"May I report, Excellency," Busch allowed himself a short laugh, "that neither at the restaurant in Friedrichstrasse nor in the officers' canteen of our division would they offer you such slop, but in a situation like ours (yes, he dared this familiarity) no other soup can be possibly made."

Once he had said this, Busch dashed to the stream, rinsed the officers' mess tin and then passed it to the general.

The general made a decision. He poured himself some soup and tasted it. Of course it was a horrid, thin broth, like the one they probably serve to inmates in a jail. The general was not sure about it since he had never been there. Yet, the scent from the various herbs which Busch had sprinkled into the broth gave it a certain piquant flavor. Of course they would not serve this in prison, it was too good for that. The general made a decision and took a handsome swallow. Even though it was not a delicacy, the meal was nonetheless nutritious, particularly for an empty stomach. It was also undoubtedly rich in various ingredients.

In a word, the general gorged down the entire one-liter mess tin, leaving, however, a few scraps for Busch. In the meantime, dusk began to fall. Busch rushed in all directions, energetically tearing down thick branches of young pine trees. Then, under a hazelbush, he stacked up a large pile of them.

"Excellency!" Busch reported. "Have a nice nap. Of course this is a far cry from the deluxe bed they offer you in the hotel in Alexanderplatz, but in a situation like ours (again this impudent familiarity) you have the guarantee of not catching cold. Never make a bed of green leaves — you'll get rheumatism or some other ailment, whereas pine branches will keep the damp off the earth. It's also better to cover oneself with pine branches. You'll be dry and warm, because they will keep away wind and dew."

The general was eyeing the makeshift bed with suspicion. He was really tired and, after all, it was not home, but the front. Besides, he took pride in the fact that he was not a rearguard joke of a warrior but a combat general, a real soldier. He had to put up with circumstances and to taste everything...

The sun had already sunk behind the horizon. Dusk descended upon the forest, and outside the forest it must have grown dark also. Busch stood at attention and asked for permission: "I've got to go, Excellency. I'll check the homestead. And you have a nice sleep, don't be afraid: It's so dense here that neither friend nor foe will find us."

His eyes already shut, the general could still hear the rustling of the shrubs through which Busch was making his way toward the clearing.

The general woke up in his warm and, without saying anything, cosy nest when the full moon was towering high above the forest while Busch was towering over the general.

"The homestead is a no-man's land, Excellency," he reported. "Ours, uh... left in the morning, and the reds swept over it and ran on westward."

"How do you know?" the general flashed with anger. "Who told you so?"

"An old woman and a small child are still there on the homestead, Excellency," Busch informed him. "Where can they go? The bombs and shells have spared both of them somehow."

"And what's this?" the general nodded toward the bundle which Busch was carrying in the left hand.

"Something to eat, Excellency. There's bread, onions, pork fat and boiled eggs."

Stunned, the general caught the idea: "Bread and eggs, you say?"

"Yes, plus pork fat and onions, Excellency."

"Where did you get them?"

"Seeing we are in a state of war, I was forced to requisition them from the old and young creatures..."

Anyway, for the second time the general dozed off after a bountiful meal. Busch kept guard. However, as soon as the general began snoring, Busch also took a nap, wrapped in his coat.

Thus passed the first day.

It was followed by the second and the third.

General Wolfgang-Friedrich von Zachau and his batman, Klaus Busch, walked on through the woods — never in his life had the general trudged through such thicket. The ancient pine forest was interlaced here and there with patches of hornbeam and oak, and everywhere, under the pines or amidst the oaks, undergrowth was pushing upwards. This dense young growth was almost impenetrable. The general and his batman tore the tails of their coats to shreds trudging through this jungle.

Of course this battle with the thicket was bad enough, but on the other hand it was good, since nobody could spot them there. Yet, frankly speaking, there was nobody to look for them. The forest was absolutely deserted; over the entire three days and nights the wanderers had not seen a single living creature. Initially, this fact greatly puzzled the general. He kept asking himself where "ours" could be, and why nothing could be heard of "theirs."

Soon, however, the general, who had a great deal of impressive military and overall human experience, had to realize that when the German troops conducted an offensive, they had to create strongholds in occupied territories. They had to watch for the rearguards, to leave behind garrisons, to organize police and punitive units, in other words, they were forced to keep the occupied country under force and coercion. The Red Army units, on the other hand, fully concentrated on attack, and were in no need of reinforcing the rear, as it was their native land from which they were driving the loathsome invaders. In

the situation, what the general feared most of all was to run into the partisans or ordinary Soviet civilians. The partisans would instantly shoot him, a Wehrmacht general, whereas civilians would surely hang him. Frankly speaking, General Wolfgang-Friedrich von Zachau hoped — if such trials were to fall to his lot — to run into a regular Red Army unit. Strange though it may seem, in that case he, a general, could expect to... ugh... lay down his arms with dignity and to be treated by the POW code which meant a certain guarantee of personal immunity. From what the general had heard and in which he now wanted to believe, the combat units of the Red Army did not hang or shoot prisoners arbitrarily, but deported them under guard...

It was necessary to get out of this dreadful thicket as fast as possible. They must come out into the open and perhaps hide away somewhere near a clearing until they could spot a military unit or, the hell with it!, at least one Red Army man.

This is why he feared this forest silence so much, although the forest was filled with all kinds of totally pacific sounds, like the rustle of leaves, the light cracking of tree trunks, the chirping of birds, the croaking of frogs and the buzzing of insects.

They ate as they did on the first day. That scanty supply which Busch had "organized" on the homestead did not last long, and Busch was left with no alternative than to cook his famous "soup" again. Or he could feed the general on wild berries, mainly blackberries, and last year's sun-dried ashberries. The general had long cast aside every bit of fear of all sorts of microbes and bacteria, and generally abandoned his belief in microfauna. He now ate what was at hand, drank water from forest streams, slept on bare ground — and nothing happened to him, as if he were the same lout as Busch.

It turned out, however, that this Klaus Busch knew and could do many such things which the general had not been taught either in his tender years at cadet school, in his youth at an officers' school, or in his mature age at the Academy of the General Staff. The batman could find a path in the thicket, could guess where a particular type of berry grew, or which mushrooms could be found under a particular tree; casting a quick glance at the sky, or even without raising his head, by merely looking at the bark of a tree, he could tell the parts of the world. He could

point precisely where the drywood for the fire was to be gathered. Collecting drywood for the fire was now the general's duty. When the time arrived, Busch would say, "Herr General, there are dry branches lying around over there, under those pine trees, the ones reaching up high. If not, you can break the lower branches that are also dry. The pine trees drop their bottoms to the earth while reaching out for the sun."

And the general would go off to collect drywood. Initially, he felt ill at ease with this "Herr General" instead of "Excellency" as the army code of address demanded, but, when you come to think of it, the circumstances in which they found themselves were not envisaged by any code. Besides, they really needed drywood, and who else was there to collect it when Busch was busy procuring all kinds of roots and herbs to make a soup which could not be made without a fire. So, the general had no choice except to going amidst the pines to break off dry branches.

"*Mein Herr,*" Busch would permit himself to say when the general came up with one more bundle of dry pine branches, "you should tear off only the lowest layer of branches, because they are the ones that are really dry. And why do you touch the second layer? These won't burn, but only smoulder, and smoked pork loin isn't on our menu."

This seemingly joking lecture had, not only didactical undertones, but also an undertone of disapproval and reprimand. The general was tongue-tied — was he in a position to argue with this lout? It was an insult to his ego. Silently, he again trudged amidst the pine trees searching for drier branches. To bend to the ground which was a carpet of drywood was not a proper thing for the general to do. It injured not so much his body as his pride.

One more occurrence, however, seriously injured General Wolfgang-Friedrich von Zachau. One morning he happened to wash his face along with Busch. It was in a small forest lake. Anyway, bending to the smooth mirror of the lake the general saw, side by side, two muzzles overgrown with a thick brush of unshaven hair. The general shrank back in contempt without even splashing any water on his face. And yet, he could see streams of water rolling down his face... The general wept.

There was nothing strange or, moreover, ridiculous about it. Let the psychologists and psychopathologists rack their brains over this phenomenon, but as soon as General

Wolfgang-Friedrich von Zachau saw the reflection of his face, the very image of Busch's brushlike muzzle, he arrived at the bitter and painful conclusion: He was the last of the Prussian noblemen von Zachau and from now on, with a bitter and painful smile, he would have to swallow these "Herr General" or even the casual "*Mein Herr*" instead of his favorite "Excellency."

Even a worse thing happened presently. That horrible event occurred on the fourth or fifth day of their wandering. They came out on a large open clearing, and right in the middle a clean mirror of a large forest lake sparkled under the sun, transparent right to the sandy bottom. Busch took off his shoes and walked along the shore, taking pleasure in rinsing his weary, sweaty feet. "It's so warm!" he called out happily. "Why don't you join me, *Mein Herr*?"

In a word, in just a couple of minutes both of them, having taken off their dusty, sweat-soaked clothes, were basking their wornout bodies in the sweet summer warmth of the forest lake. True, to take off his clothes, the general went off a dozen steps and hid behind a shrub, for how could he, a von Zachau, bare his white, tender body before the eyes of his batman, before that pleb.

Klaus Busch crossed the lake a couple of times from shore to shore — he was an excellent swimmer. The general also ventured to swim a dozen meters from the shore. In the meantime, Klaus Busch had already climbed ashore and was examining his pants, musing whether to put them on again, or to wash them first. It was at that moment that the catastrophe occurred. The general could barely swim, and had previously swam mainly in the swimming pool on his villa where lifelines were readily available. But here, trying to reach the sandy bottom that could so clearly be seen from the shore he failed to put his feet on firm ground and sensed in confusion — obviously, it was merely an instance of self-suggestion, to use the medical vernacular — that he was hardly able to support himself on the surface and would now sink into the deep for ever.

"*Hilfe!*" the general hollered. "Klaus, save me, I'm drowning!"

Busch dropped his pants, dashed to the water and with broad strokes quickly came to assist the drowning man.

"Hold on, Wolfgang! Wait a second," Busch encouraged the general. "I'll be right over... Give me your hand!"

Klaus grabbed the general's hand, pulled it to his side, pushed the body to the surface, then put the general's arm around his neck and set out toward the shore.

Naturally, like every drowning man, the general only interfered with his rescuer: He tried to climb on his back, to straddle him, thus pushing Busch under water. However, Klaus was so excellent a swimmer, and this was perhaps not the first time he had rescued a drowning man, that he well knew the whole procedure. He not only pushed off the drowning man to get a breath of air, but also had to swing a couple of handsome smacks on the back of the general's head. You cannot do otherwise, or else both might drown.

"Ah, Wolfgang," Busch reproached him as he pulled the half-dead body ashore. "If you can't swim, why go into deep water?"

The general did not say anything, and not because at that moment he was coughing and bringing up water, but because he was still shivering from fear. As for the reaction to this casual and informal "Wolfgang," it only began to creep into his conscience.

Busch, meanwhile, put the general face to the ground, covered his head with clothes to protect it from the sun and said, "Rest a bit like this, the sun will warm up your back, and then..."

Busch did not finish, because the thought hit him that while the general was taking his rest, he could wash both his and the general's pants and underwear.

It should be said to the general's credit that as soon as he came to his senses, the first thing he did was to grab his pants in order to keep his aristocratic private parts from the eyes of this lout. Quite spontaneously he made the decision to disregard Busch's obscene attitudes, justly explaining it by the circumstances under which Busch had to dive into water and, generally, by common ill-breeding which naturally manifested itself in such a tragic situation.

Meanwhile Busch had made a bed of fresh and fragrant pine branches for the general, and himself went into the thicket to gather roots and berries. The general was left on his own in a soft, convenient bed, face to face with his dull thoughts.

What the general was thinking about at those moments is difficult to say, since there were plenty of reasons for sad reflections. Apart from that, he was afraid of running into the partisans or even civilians and, let's admit it,

dreamed of coming across a regular Red Army unit, which was perhaps the most reasonable worry of Wolfgang-Friedrich von Zachau. He was bothered by other things as well. Namely, by thoughts about great Germany. What would now happen to his poor country? Was it true that not only his division but others, also, as this parvenu Klaus puts it, have taken to their heels? And what about the imminent victory of the unvanquished German army? What about the *neue Ordnung* established in the lands conquered by great Germany? What would happen to the master race? And how was poor Adolf doing? (In his "thoughts to himself" the general permitted this, not so much familiar, as intimately-respectful, mental reference to the Führer.) How does he feel now in such circumstances? And what steps is he taking to instantly and dramatically rectify the situation?

It is an easy guess that personal aspects were not the least in the general's sad reflections. The first to be mentioned was hunger. The general could barely drag his feet on the calories extracted from Busch's soup. Then, there was his family. What was the glorious von Zachau clan thinking about the plight of the missing Wolfgang-Friedrich, in fact the last of the glorious clan of Prussian *Junkers*? The general had only two daughters. As for a son, the German *Gott* did not give him a son...

Klaus Busch returned from his "hunting trip" when it was still light. He began cooking at once. He crumbled his "vegetables" into the large soldiers' mess tin and dug an oven in the shore. Only then did he notice that there was in fact nothing to burn.

"Hey!" he yelled bluntly. "Wolfgang, what's up? You're lying around forgetting your duty. Why didn't you gather any drywood?"

Initially Wolfgang-Friedrich wanted to throw something at Klaus and utter a couple of words from the soldierly lexicon to which von Zachau had never resorted so far. But he forced himself to contain his anger — after all, they had to eat something, be it even this dreadful soup. Besides, it was not the right moment to start a fight with this lout over his continuing rudeness: aristocrats of spirit and blood must stand above this. And then, the night would pass, and Klaus would forget about his temporary "advantage" which he had attained by rescuing the general from drowning. In the morning everything would be in its proper place.

Anyway, going to bed after the soup and peering into the sky sprinkled generously with stars and so indifferent to human suffering the general was tormented by a sad thought: This is how things happen in life. In a tragic situation, *volens, nolens* (the general still remembered Latin) the people who are so different, so remote socially from each other, suddenly, by will of fate can become, if not equal, then at least on the same level. The general felt bitter. Although it is not definite whether that was what he was thinking — he was not usually inclined to philosophizing — one can assume that that line of thought was quite possible.

In the morning Busch awakened the general and said simply: "Well, Excellency, go wash yourself and have your everyday while I'll make us some coffee from this," he pointed to the dried berries picked the day before. "And move faster, Wolfgang," he continued. "The sun's high already..."

Swallowing tears of insult, Wolfgang-Friedrich von Zachau shuffled off to gather drywood under the high pine trees.

This very fact — that he went off without a word of reply — gives us reason to emphasize the possibility of those aforementioned philosophical meditations in the general's sad reflections.

So passed the fifth or the sixth day of the blind wanders of the general and his batman through the thickets of the Ukrainian and Byelorussian forests.

The general, maintaining his status, did not react to his batman's familiarity, while the batman, in his plain simplicity, was like one of the two Robinson Crusoes brought together: He did not philosophize at all and behaved as circumstances demanded.

In a word, let us not go into details describing the unusual situation of the two people lost in the woods, and not simply people, but German soldiers in a strange land which they had plundered. Let us only recount briefly how things went further, and how it all ended.

It so happened that private Busch, who was more practical in everyday living, became sort of the senior of the two, whereas the general, a rather delicate creature accustomed to scores of diligent attendants even in the most simple matters, was forced, although relinquishing some of his status, to accept these "prerogatives" of his subordinate. Waking up in the morning, Busch would say,

“Well, Wolfgang, time to get up,” or, “Well, let’s go have our everyday,” and then, “Now, let’s go make our coffee.” Or he would simply say, “Where’s the drywood? Ah, Wolfgang, you should’ve done it yesterday.” And so on and so forth. And after they had their soup and coffee, Busch would say, “Well, let’s get going. Only where to? God knows where. Let’s go forward. Like you have always told us, Excellency, forward, only forward, always forward.” What Klaus had in mind was to get out of that damned thicket... In a word, if in a couple of days somebody wanted to clarify who was the boss between the two, I would not be certain in the debate. They were, soldier and general, or general and soldier, not even in a combat situation, not even following the code of army behavior. Simply two people were walking on: One took the lead, the other trotted along; one ordered or suggested, the other obeyed and followed... It is impossible not to mention here that, brought up since childhood in the army service — first at cadet school, then at officers’ school and then at the Academy of the General Staff — Wolfgang-Friedrich von Zachau was accustomed to either giving orders or getting orders. Throughout his life, he not only gave orders but also obeyed orders, and now somebody else’s will was driving him. So, he obeyed orders diligently.

This is how General Wolfgang-Friedrich von Zachau and private Klaus Busch, subjects of the German Reich, soldiers of the Nazi Führer Adolf Hitler, were trudging through the forests.

Finally, in a week or so, the thicket ceased and the wanderers found themselves in the open. The thicket ended as if it was chopped off. A road wound its way along the wall of an old, dense forest, and further beyond the road were the fields. Before the war those were the vast collective-farm fields in which wheat formed its heavy ears, then turned yellow, and then rolled its golden waves toward the horizon. Now it was a wasteland, ploughed up everywhere, not by ploughs, though, but by craters from the artillery shells and zigzags of trenches. It was a desert where vehement battles had raged shortly before.

And it so happened that, at that very moment when von Zachau and Busch stepped out of the wood, a large truck bristling with bayonets was heading in their direction. The truck was carrying a military unit.

Understandably, the first thing the wanderers felt was relief: The damned thicket was left behind and here in

front of them were those very people whom they wanted to meet — enemy soldiers. As the general had fancied it, further on everything would develop by army rules and according to all kinds of international conventions on the procedure of taking enemy soldiers prisoners of war and the status of POWs.

And true enough, the truck came to a halt. The soldiers in it instantly recognized them as Germans — an easy guess considering the Wehrmacht outfit. The two Germans did not look quite presentable: unshaven, faces overgrown with beards, and clothes drab and shabby from trudging through the thicket. In fact, it was hard to tell one from another except by their coats. Busch's soldier coat was made of coarse, fleecy, dull-olive cloth, while the general's was tailored from fine, smooth wool. However, the general had felt cold in his rather flimsy coat, and Busch, kind as he was, had given him his own coat and himself donned the general's.

Naturally, the soldiers rushed at the unexpected sight, particularly unexpected here, far behind the lines. They crowded around the captives and, in a quite civilian manner, showered them with questions who they were, where they were coming from and where they were going to. Certainly, the first thing which came to their minds was that these two were escapees from a group of POWs of whom there were many in this locality, especially after the successful breakthrough at the front.

But no, neither the general nor the batman could say anything intelligible. They just blinked their eyes, since they did not understand Russian except how to say milk and eggs. And, frankly speaking, this unexpected encounter made them tongue-tied.

Finally, the unit commander wearing the shoulderboards of sergeant major made a haphazard attempt at communication, using the most common words and the German phrases common at the front. In a way it was a preliminary interrogation.

"Who are you? Where from? How did you get here?" he asked.

Getting no response, he tried it from another angle.

"Your documents," he demanded.

This was understood, and von Zachau and Busch pulled out the documents from their pockets.

The sergeant perused the documents for a long time because he once used to study German, but only at

elementary school. But finally, however, he made out that one was a private and another — a general.

When he learned this, the sergeant raised his eyes, hesitant which bearded muzzle to look at. Yet, drilled in army rules, he promptly lifted his hand to his helmet in a brief salute, addressing not so much a particular person as the ID card.

Noticing this brief movement, Wolfgang-Friedrich felt more at ease — this meant respect for the rank of general, albeit a general from the enemy army. Now he could feel more or less secure about his future. And from the height of his position he even felt a moment's pity for his batman. After all, Busch did so many nice things for him during that damned wandering, and, definitely, he as a private would be far worse off in captivity than the general.

Right at that moment the sergeant was returning the documents and — God Almighty! — he handed the general's ID to Busch and Busch's card to the general. Simply that the general's coat was hanging on the shoulders of Busch, who had produced the document from his pocket.

The general was about to yell, "*Nein, nein, Herr Ober-sergeant*, that's my card! I am the general and this is my batman, a private, an underling and a commoner..." But the next moment a second thought crossed his mind: "Oh *Mein Gott!* They are *Kommunisten* and without any doubt they will treat better, if not friendlier, the private, the commoner who has been mobilized against his will, had to serve in the Wehrmacht and fought against whoever he was told. As for me, I'm a general, a blue blood and that kind of thing... Well, no one can be sure..."

So, Wolfgang-Friedrich von Zachau, aristocrat, scion of a noble family of Prussian *Junkers*, did not voice his protest. One moment was enough for him to make the decision: in the meantime, let Busch go to a POW camp as a general, and everything will straighten out later. As for himself, Wolfgang-Friedrich von Zachau, a general, a *Junker*, a nobleman, an aristocrat, would use the soldier's ID and would pass as a commoner mobilized against his will, reluctant to serve in the Wehrmacht and forced to fight against whoever he was told.

Let us add to this that Klaus Busch, consciously or unconsciously — let this be decided by psychologists, psychopathologists, sociologists or the readers — played up to General von Zachau. When they were escorted to the

truck and the general tried to step in first, Busch suddenly grabbed him by the tail of his coat, gave him a handsome swat in the back, and pushed him away.

“Where d’you think you’re going, you son of a bitch!” Busch hollered. There was so much anger and hatred in his voice that the general could not quite understand whether Busch had decided to play up to his scheme or his hatred was really so strong.

The general was at such a loss that he did not find anything better than to mumble to the soldiers around him: “Hitler *kaput!*”

Roaring laughter was the response.

Klaus Busch was also laughing.

I don’t know whether what I’ve told you is true or false. This fascinating story was told to me by one German POW in 1945, that is, before all the German POWs were repatriated. Across from the house in which I lived they repaired another house, ruined during an air raid. The repairs were done by those who had caused the ruins — German soldiers.

At lunch break, the POW workers, after finishing eating from their mess tins, formed a line beside a fence lining the sidewalk and tried to mooch a cigarette off passers-by: apparently, the tobacco ration didn’t last long. I’m a heavy smoker myself and simply can’t refuse anyone a cigarette when they ask. Anyways, I would quite often offer the POWs a cigarette, and one of them must have remembered me well, because as soon as I passed by, he would hurry up toward the fence and ask: “*Bitte, bitte, ein Zigaret.*”

Of course I gave it to him.

That was von Zachau — at least that’s how he introduced himself, believing that an introduction was a gentlemanly duty. The second or the third time, when I gave him not *ein Zigaret* but an unfinished pack, he suddenly told me this story about himself: Here he was, a general forced to work as an ordinary soldier...

I must admit that I felt an immediate dislike for him.

The reasons for it are too numerous to recount.

I only told him, “Why don’t you say now that you’re not Klaus Busch, but von Zachau, a general and not a soldier?”

He sighed: “But they’re laughing at it...”

“Who’s laughing?”

“Everybody is: Your commander, and the guards, and ours...”

He swallowed with difficulty, overcoming a spasm in his throat. He wanted to cry, and only then did I believe that what he had told me was probably true.

He also added: “They’ve even nicknamed me a ‘general’...”

It was true. A voice came out of the crowd of his POW workmates: “Hey, general, why are you shirking their? Who’s going to fulfill your quota?”

A guard also said, “Really, general, it’s time to get back to work.”

Passing by me, the guard added across the fence, “On your way please. Talking to prisoners is forbidden. You gave him a smoke, let it be. But move on, don’t hang around...”

I moved on.

An instant later I called out to the general: “And what about Klaus Busch? Have you heard anything about him?”

Wolfgang-Friedrich von Zachau stopped for a second and answered: “He’s also here, but on a POW camp committee. He’s become the leader of the POW camp. They believed him...”

“Do you mean they believed that he was a general and therefore elected him to the committee?”

“No, they believed he was not a general... that it was a misunderstanding. Ironically, he’s now really made it to general...”

“General! General!” the POWs and the guard kept shouting. “Watch out, Klaus Busch, you can get a demerit on the board for shirking! Come off it, and get down to work!”

Never again did I give a cigarette to Wolfgang-Friedrich von Zachau, nicknamed Klaus Busch — let him go to the devil!

CHAPAI *

He was standing on the pavement in front of the house. The empty right leg of his pants was hanging untucked as evidence of recent distress, irreparableness and uncontrolled cruelty. He was a boy of ten. His emaciated face looked up at the May sky. An untidy blond forelock curled over his forehead.

The participants in the May Day parade were singing; the tanks roared, and the cavalry rode by at a fine trot. The air squadron was flying in the blue southern sky.

"Chapai," said a creature of three or four who was standing beside him (two drops were hanging under her nose, and she didn't seem to know what to do about them), "was it a tram that cut off your leg?"

Chapai's entire detachment gradually gathered around him. Decorated with combat bumps and bruises, their fingers dirtied with ink, the warriors stood pulling up their pants and sniveling in agitation. Their eyes were fastened on their commander's empty pant leg.

Chapai looked up at the blue sky without noticing anyone beside him.

"You can't run now," the little creature stated, expressing the cruelty peculiar to her age.

Everybody was silent. Suddenly a drainpipe rumbled, and a reddish boy slid down from the balcony.

"Chapai," shouted someone from the group of warriors. The reddish boy smiled proudly and waved his hand. The detachment burst out yelling: one of them whistled, another one snatched a piece of brick from his pocket, and a third one pulled his cap off his head and hid it in his shirt. The new Chapai led the detachment.

A little girl tried to run after them, but it was beyond her. She came back to the boy and touched his crutch, "I can't run either. Is it wooden?" she asked.

* Chapai — short for Chapayev, Vasily, a Red Army commander and Civil War hero; hero of a highly popular 1930s movie

The boy was standing, with his head higher than before, but did he see anything through the sudden torrent of tears?

"Don't cry," said the girl as sympathetically as she could. "I won't leave you."

"I'm not crying. Well, I'll be the Deputy from the Baltic Fleet * now."

"Me too," piped up the girl in solidarity, and drew her leg up as she tried to stand on one leg.

The blue sky of May Day was brilliant.

1938

Translated by Serhiy Bezdvirny

THE PROBLEM OF SUCCESSION

Family member Number One was two years old, and this advanced age gave Grandfather a free hand to act the way he did in the adventure that caused such a row afterwards. But could the "high-flying eagle of the blast furnace" (the old man carefully preserved in his memory this description of himself he once read in a local newspaper) be really subdued by women (besides, are women in general to be treated seriously?), even though the women in this particular case were his wife and daughter-in-law? Who said that they were supposed to know what the child should see and look at, or what he shouldn't, what air to breathe and where not to go? The grandfather was lucky to a certain extent: his son — that is the father of Number One — was out of town at the moment, and the verbal disagreement that arose did not assume catastrophic proportions. Usually, his son steered their arguments into making fun of the current situation in blast furnace technology, and into criticizing the outdated methods of making metal which were hopelessly far behind the nuclear age; the old man was very much exasperated by this kind of talk.

The adventure in question began when Hrihoriy Sidorovich, the grandfather of Number One, kidnapped — if one is to call a spade a spade — Number One, that is, his

* *The Deputy from the Baltic Fleet* — popular Soviet motion picture about the October 1917 Revolution

own grandchild, Hrihoriy Hrihorovich Junior. The absence of his father, Hrihoriy Hrihorovich Senior, made the abduction possible. It took place under adverse and dangerous circumstances, since Number One was looked after with special care and was under constant observation: he was the first male grandchild in the family.

The outrageous act was not discovered until the daughter-in-law arrived at the rendezvous at the cinema and failed to find either her father-in-law or son. According to their original agreement, Hrihoriy Sidorovich was to carry the boy piggyback past the festive stands, then leave the columns marching in the civil parade, and proceed to the appointed place at the theater and wait there for his daughter-in-law to come and take the boy home. The weather was, by the way, typical of early November: gusts of icy-cold wind interspersed with occasional snow. The daughter-in-law's alarm grew in measure as she, abandoning the wait at the theater, ran all the way home, and it turned into sheer panic when she arrived to discover that neither son nor father-in-law had returned. Of course, the intractable old man must have taken the little one somewhere "to breathe fresh air" or someplace else, only to satisfy his egoism in wanting to have his grandson entirely to himself.

Before they left, Number One saw his Grandfather take a bottle of milk and sneak it stealthily into his Sunday coat pocket. A muffin and an apple were hidden in other pockets, and the grandson was given a very long — almost the size of an umbrella for a kid — red lollipop. Candy was a forbidden thing for the child, but, first, the grandfather swore an oath that this particular candy was meant only to be played with, and not eaten, and second, it so greatly reminded the old man of his own childhood.

"Well, sir," the grandfather said. "We take the fields. Sound the march, if you please."

Hrihoriy Junior loved his grandfather. By the time he was two, the boy's love developed into a passionate feeling whose magnitude brought tears of jealousy to his mother's eyes. She thought it wasn't right that the little one, who belonged to her utterly, would, suddenly, put his arms around his grandfather's wrinkled neck and kiss him. And didn't everyone know that men were very insensitive and even heartless; they could, for example, try to pick up the child while their hands weren't clean — coming right back from work at the furnace, they rushed direct to the

baby's carriage! They clashed over it so many times, and the main source of trouble was considered to be the old man.

The boy's love for his grandfather was a different kind from the one he had for the rest of the family, even for his mother. The grandfather, when talking to the boy, never tried to use what he called baby-talk by twisting the words and sounds; he talked to the boy in a comely and dignified manner, something he did not always do with adults. Others could use frightening words to make the boy do what was required of him at the moment, with, in fact, no immediate result: the boy would usually put up some resistance, ask questions and stipulate new conditions. But the moment the word "grandpa" was uttered, obedience became immediate and all quarelling ceased. On the other hand, whenever the boy's mother scolded the boy for misbehaving, he went, crying loudly, to his grandfather to complain: "Grandpa! Mummy spanked me!"

It would be ludicrous to suspect even for a moment that she was able to hurt her son in the slightest — though the boy was, indeed, an untiring and vivacious child — but the grandfather would pick up his grandson, install him on his shoulders and, stooping in low doorways, go to demand an explanation from the cruel mother. "Oh, you tattletale!" the mother would say, "now, I know I should have really spanked you!" "No, you mustn't!" Number One would say from the height of his grandfather's shoulders. "Let's make up!" The mother, moved by her child's words, would start kissing the shrewd creature who had been taught by his grandfather what to say, and peace was once again established; in consequence, the boy's love for his grandfather grew even stronger.

It should be noted that the old man had not planned the abduction beforehand and had not meant to make his daughter-in-law wait in vain, racked with worry. His original intention was to take the little one to see the civil parade marking the October Revolution day and afterwards to deposit the child straight into his mother's hands. Nobody had the slightest idea of what brought him near the furnace burden yard, so far away from the theater, but once there, it was impossible not to go in. Hrihoriy Junior found the crook of his grandpa's arm a very comfortable perch; he brandished his extralong lollipop, as if conducting the old man's walking pace. The boy wore a bright red cap with a pompon. He pointed happily with

his hand to the engineer of the small dinkey that was puffing steam, and said genially:

“Grandpa, toot-toot!”

“I took it, Hrihoriy Sidorovich, that you joined the parade,” the old engineer said respectfully. “Everyone in my family was there, and as they went they themselves looked a little parade.”

“You see, Karpo Demyanovich,” the happy grandfather said, “I’ve brought my grandson to see our furnace.”

“You think you’ve done right? What if he is going to be a scholar of sorts?”

“Oh, don’t say such things! I’ve had enough of it from my son who is wearing me out by saying that he will never let him do the work his grandfather and father did. Just think what a...”

“Well, I can’t say your son isn’t interested in his trade...”

“Now, listen to what he is saying!”

A big snowflake landed on the grandson’s mitten.

“Grandpa, grandpa,” he said. “Look, I’ve got a fly!”

Then the child closed his eyes, listening to the piercing hooting of the dinkey. He had been taught to be nice with the people he liked, and now he offered his lollipop to the old engineer and said without pretence:

“Have a lick, please!”

Such generosity was duly rewarded, and the little boy was allowed to tug at the cord of the whistle and thus give a toot; his grandfather must have surreptitiously wiped a happy tear from his eye.

“You can go now,” said Hrihoriy Junior waving his mittened hand, and the steam engine began moving in obedience to this authoritative gesture.

After that, they approached the furnace. They went by the place where Hrihoriy Sidorovich had once lain on the ground with a one-barrel shotgun, aimed at the gate. His Red Army comrades were smoking, having taken cover behind a box car filled with ore. Shots were heard on all sides: a stray officers’ unit decided to support the Provisional Government, which, by that time, had already been ousted and arrested by the proletarian revolution in Petrograd. The officers made the plant the prime target of their attack, since it was the concentration point of forces of resistance. The plant workers helped the Red Army by providing men and ammunition. The fighting continued for two days until an improvised armored train rolled out

from the plant, shooting right and left, and proceeded through the town which had a railway line stretching along its main street. The unexpected appearance of the train decided the matter in the workers' favor; the officers broke and fled. That was the way the October Revolution was supported, and the new power was firmly established, in this small Donbas town.

"Now, grandson," the former Red Army man said, passing by the places of former battles. "Look, that's the spot where your grandfather was wounded in battle for the workers' cause. It was a long time before you were born."

"Yes, before," the boy with the ruddy cheeks said cheerfully.

"Do you know what your father calls me? He says that your grandfather is a shaman of the blast furnace, that's what he says."

They walked further until they reached the blast furnaces. As far as Hrihoriy Sidorovich was concerned, there was nothing more beautiful in the world than a blast furnace plant. The 90-foot high towers solemnly stood over the furnace stoves; loaded cars were in continuous upward movement. Only one furnace had been put into operation, the other was still in ruins: piles of limestone, ash, smashed bricks, crushed cars, twisted framework, destroyed by explosions, were still in evidence. The furnace itself, though dangerously leaning, had not collapsed, preserving its precarious balance in defiance of all the laws of gravity; it seemed immortal and unconquered, making everyone who looked at it, want to help hoist it upright.

There was some pig iron from the preliminary smelting, cooling in the casting yard, and agitation among the workers at the iron runners; a crane was moving, and an even, busy sound came from the furnace. Hrihoriy Sidorovich thought the furnace was making sweet music, and just by listening to it he could tell what phase the furnace was in at the moment, without having to look at the gauges. He never took his eyes from his grandson's little face, watching for the little one's reaction to the things around him. Hrihoriy Junior caught sight of a pile of sand and a spade and made it known that he wanted to be let down. While he was absorbed in his effort to handle the heavy tool, the boy was surrounded by the workers on duty. They greeted the old man, and, as the noise from the

furnace was so intense that it drowned out other sounds, shouted right into his ear:

“Hrihoriy Sidorovich! Isn’t it a bit too early to bring your successor here?”

“Isn’t he a great blast furnace operator?! May he be healthy!”

The old man had very special, gratifying feelings that couldn’t be compared to anything else in the world. The little creature was busy with his sand, the furnace was making the familiar, pleasantly low-pitched, musical sound; the clouds, hanging low elsewhere, seemed to rise when they were passing over the furnace, as if afraid of colliding with something; the rare snowflakes, falling all around, turned into sleet over the furnace. It was fifty years ago that Hrihoriy Sidorovich had come to work at the furnace. No matter how hard he had tried, he could never recollect all the details of his very first day at work. But now he saw himself, very clearly in his mind’s eye — and his heart missed a beat and he lost his breath for a moment — standing at that very place; he was a country boy, watching for the first time the moving smelted pig iron, just out of the furnace; the terrifying, sparkling milk ran close to his feet, breathing fire at him. Overpowered by emotions he felt that he had to shout, and probably he did, his voice drowned in the mighty bellowing of the furnace. Fifty years had gone by...

Number One left the spade and headed for the furnace. Any child would have probably done the same, but Hrihoriy Sidorovich was moved once again, taking it as another confirmation of the boy’s special interest, and waited to see what “it” would do next. The child stopped, and, craning his neck, looked at the black tower, as if studying it.

“Your sons, Hrihoriy Sidorovich, when they came here to see the furnace looked at it in exactly the same manner!” the foreman said to the old man.

The grandson stood riveted to the spot, staring at the furnace. Then he turned to his grandfather and smiled. He said something which went unheard in the roar from the furnace, and pointed a finger upward. Hrihoriy Sidorovich picked up the boy and carried him almost level with the furnace throat, high above the ground, from where the entire town, under the first snow, could be seen. The redness of the banners and bunting, with which the town was decorated for the October Revolution Holiday, stood

bright against the whiteness of the snow. Hrihoriy Sidorovich searched the houses with his eyes, and then his heart ceased to beat for a moment: he remembered that he had intended to telephone home from the mill and tell them not to worry, but had forgotten. Typically forgetful. Now, old man, brace yourself for getting it out at home! Neither his wife nor daughter-in-law will let him off easy. The droning of the furnace was familiar, soothing, and somewhat sad; the piercing hooting of the little steam engine down below sounded like "Gran-son!" The buckets, moving in file, came up to be loaded with white-hot slag, whose blinding light made everything around a shining pink. Then the buckets began moving down to dump the slag.

"Now you've seen everything we have here," the old man said. "Take over right away like it's done in our family. Now, if you don't mind, consider yourself hired for the job."

The child was enchanted with the deep drone of the furnace; he put his arm around his grandfather's neck. The boy found himself so high above ground for the first time in his life. It was so exciting to watch molten steel pour out from the furnace; the platform, on which they were standing, trembled; and the ringing of metal, din and clatter were all drowned by the deep voice of the furnace.

"And he says I'm a backward shaman!" the old man cried out. "He says, 'I also work at the furnace but I don't idealize it the way you do, old man! As far as I'm concerned I could do without it altogether as if it never existed!' And what is it that you want?, I ask him. Orange and lemon trees all around? And he says: 'I wish I were sitting in a garden among flowers, and everything was quiet, clean and beautiful. I wish the iron ore were smelted underground and we used nuclear energy to do it, and I would have just to push a button to let the pig iron flow!' That's wishful thinking! I'm not against progress, but don't you dare say a word against the blast furnace!"

"Grandpa, I'm hungry!" the little boy, newly promoted to steelworker, said into the old man's ear.

Hrihoriy Sidorovich immediately produced a thick old timepiece on a silver chain, clicked open the lid — sure enough, it was time to eat. They descended quickly and found a quiet place among the huge iron blocks. The old man took a handkerchief out of his coat pocket, spread it on the ground, and put the bottle of milk, the muffin and

the apple on it. Number One, sitting on grandpa's lap, took the bottle with a steady hand, and, leaning backwards, began drinking right from the bottle. It was not necessary to talk the boy into eating, as it had to be done at home; the boy quickly finished off the milk, took care of the muffin in equal haste, and proceeded with relish to the piece of rye bread.

After the meal, the future furnace worker disgraced himself by falling asleep, burying his face in his Grandpa's coat. The snow fell in flakes on the boy's eyelashes, and the grandfather kept blowing them away. Halfway home they met the boy's mother who was running to the mill in search of her son; she was sick with worry. The mother gave a horrified glance at the sleeping child; for a panicky instance she failed to recognize her son: the boy's face appeared to have lost its child's features and acquired those of a man — even with a moustache! — who could be drafted into the army for active duty, thus becoming completely alienated from his mother's words of endearment.

If truth is to be said, it should be mentioned that Hrihoriy Sidorovich was thrown into a far greater panic meeting his daughter-in-law than he had ever been meeting his own wife under similar circumstances. He puffed in a threatening manner through his moustache, and to forestall the eruption of her indignation, passed the boy to her, turned round and sped off. Now, with the problem of passing the trade down the family line from one generation to another solved, the unbroken succession in the dynasty assured, and the dispute between father and grandfather settled by the grandson, the old man was eager to meet his old cronies, to reminisce and talk about things gone by, to celebrate the October Holiday, to sing together, and, as tradition demanded, to drain the life-giving cup.

THE CAKE

The wise ancient Romans originated the expression "tastes differ," which is quite true. It is difficult to argue about likes and dislikes because, of course, what is one man's food is another man's poison. And was it not Einstein, the genius, who argued that not only the Newtonian laws of nature, but even this Latin saying was subject to the principle of relativity? Nothing can be accepted at its face value. Take, for example, this large cake, a magnificent product of baking. It could serve to qualify the old proverb.

Now, who is not attracted to big cakes? Suppose you saw one — could you remain indifferent? Why, tell me, do you pause in your tracks when you happen to be passing by the window display of a bakery? It's the cake that stops you. It's a big round one and sits on a crystal shelf, with a rainbow of Bohemian glass over it. A white, rosy or golden cardboard box encloses its fragrant, well-leavened insides. You can see only its creamy exterior with refined, elegant features which seem to be changing right in front of your eyes. For a moment you are trying, in a truly stoical manner, to withstand the temptation. And then — you are overwhelmed; your left hand all of a sudden lacks the strength to hold your briefcase, and your right hand goes upward in an inspired movement as if it were already holding the misericord, ready to give the cake the *coup de grace* and slice its crumbly body into evenly sized pieces: one for yourself, one for your wife, one for your guest, one for his wife, one to each of the children.

Do not try to hide your fondness of sweets. I am sure that you would not refuse to have a piece of cake. And now, after your heart has been laid almost completely bare, and has been filled with longing like a vial with anointing oil, you should be in a proper condition to listen to a little story about a cake.

It happened in the early 1920s; those were difficult years. It was the time when the clatter of wooden shoes

(for lack of any other footwear) was heard around town in all seasons. The story took place in the fall, when the trees lining the boulevards had long turned yellow, and began dropping their leaves. It seemed the leaves were, at the time, the only things in town that were golden. Those who used to wear golden shoulder-straps* were no longer around, and everybody else walked about in cheap, baggy clothing and crudely made sabots (or “wooden pieces” as they were locally called); such apparel was worn by even brides and bridegrooms, who, in keeping with this necessity of dearth, were garbed in this way at their marriage ceremonies. There also was a popular song that described the situation:

“It was awfully noisy in the house of Sneerson...”

The excitement generated by the NEP** was just beginning to spread, and not everyone knew about it. The heroic period of War Communism (when food and clothes were extremely scarce) taught us to value a good solid rusk, durable wooden shoes, and gray denim. We put these things far above the ephemeral cake, *crêpe de chine*, which were anyway almost impossible to get, and such other luxuries which became available later. I want to add that it was the time when we went about in a state of permanent hunger — we, that is myself and my friend Anton Nail.

I am happy to say that Anton Nail was my friend, happy because he was a very remarkable person. I could never tell — and nobody else really could — when he was serious or when he was joking. No one could ever single out a day or circumstance when he told a lie, or deviated from the truth by as much as hairbreadth. It was because my friend’s eyes and his beard that could grow two and a half inches a week, always convinced you that it was the holy truth he was speaking. Those stern eyes bore right into your heart, and the sight of his black beard completely dispelled whatever reservations you still may have had. When telling an incredible story, he looked at you in a manner that cheered you up no matter how downcast you were before. And when you, clasping your hands in disbelief, cried out: “Oh, what a story! Really!”, he was quick to reply: “Yeah, that difficult to believe, eh?” as if it had not been he who was telling the story but you yourself.

* the military and officials of tsarist Russia; all tsarist insignia were banned after the October Revolution

** NEP — New Economic Policy introduced in the early 1920s to revive the war-devastated economy

Then he would burst into a huge gust of laughter, and you were greatly embarrassed for having said such a silly thing.

Oh, Anton Nail, where are you, Anton Nail? What happened to you? I am positive that your place is at the summit of glory. Who of our friends could boast of possessing such a fervid imagination as yours? But let me tell the story in order and in some detail.

We were entrusted with the task of collecting money that was needed to run an establishment to feed starving children. Collect money! Easier said than done. Besides, we ourselves were no less hungry than the children. Anton, for one, had not eaten anything, except for some inedible stuff, made from oilcake, since the day we had been given this difficult task to perform. Five days or so had already passed. We had been given seven days to do it, and had only two days left.

Anton was told at the Committee to Save Children:

“Show initiative, use your imagination, do anything, arrange a show if you will but we must have money.”

In short, to get the money in the two remaining days was as vital as to win the Civil War. To do it we had to ensure that the population of the town we lived and worked in then would show their understanding of the situation, great sense of social duty and revolutionary conscience. They had to be compliant enough to give us sackfuls of millions and other banknotes of astronomical denominations of those amazing years. We did not doubt in the least the very high level of conscience among our citizens; but what was the way of stirring it? This was indeed, the problem to solve.

My friend treated my plan skeptically, to say the least; he even derided it.

“Is that a plan?” he said. “You call it a plan? That’s not a plan, that’s a... er... *Fourierism*, that’s what it is if you want a scientific description of your incapacity to come out with a sound suggestion. It’s just no good.”

“And why is it no good?” I asked.

“It’s in-ade-quate.”

“What do you mean, inadequate? Why? And what would you call ‘adequate?’”

Nail gave me a look full of contempt.

“One must have at least a little something here (he pointed with his finger at his forehead). You have ab-

solutely no imagination. You think the kids would benefit by such a plan? The kids are doomed to stay hungry.”

“Don’t be mad at me, my friend,” I answered spitefully. “You yourself don’t have an adequate plan, do you?”

“Who doesn’t have? Me? I don’t have?! Do you mean to say that I don’t know what...?”

He fell silent, overwhelmed with indignation, but in a short while he acquiesced, nodding his head:

“All right. We take a plan to be adequate if it gives us money and not crap. You follow?”

“Well, not quite.”

“Yes, a fool won’t understand it. One must act keeping in mind the interests of the people themselves. And a fool — you in this case — is sure to try to manipulate their good-heartedness.”

Basically, my suggestion was to stir up the citizenry with a passionate, inspiring, burning call: “Everyone to Help the Children!” It was this plan (a rally at which the call would be launched in a solemn speech) that had come under Anton Nail’s derision.

Then it was my turn to smirk and give him a scathing look. I said:

“As long as the Revolution has such sages as Anton Nail, solutions to the problems will be found. All right, we’ll see how good your plan is going to be. I, for one, will keep out of it,” I said, feeling offended, and threw myself into my bed and turned to the wall.

Nail, standing at the window, whistled a military march for a while, then sang several lines from the song “It was awfully noisy...”, and left without saying a word.

* * *

I fell asleep. I did not want to admit it but my brain stalled and I could not come up with any more plans. I seemed to have thought of everything that human reasoning could suggest. At some moments I felt blessed with a stroke of genius, but the vision of Anton’s beard that came to me through my oncoming sleep checked my thoughts. Quite unrelated glimpses from the past began appearing to me. As if through a haze, I saw my friend riding a horse the way he did at the time of marches, attacks and retreats. Hoisting himself up in the stirrups, he shifted himself so as to sit on the rear arch of the loosely girthed saddle, and gave the horse its head. The

horse trotted smartly, waving its black mane. Anton deliberately fell behind the group, and making sure no one was watching him, drew out a pencil stub, with a nibbled end, from the top of his boot. What was he up to? Oh, learning to write. Leaning over the saddle which was still warm and damp from his sore and sweating body, Anton supported himself with his left hand on the pommel and used his right hand to spell the name — the way he thought it was spelled — of a Tsaritsin*-based newspaper, right in the center of the saddle:

Soljer of the Revolution

It took him a long time with many attempts to complete it. He was very uncomfortable, but oblivious of everything except for his spelling; he rode in such an awkward position for about a mile. He was very pertinacious, this smith-turned-commander of a squadron. Anton's forehead was wrinkled with creative effort, and the sweat stood in the furrows. Then he broke into a smile. Had he made up an "adequate" plan and was now jotting it down on the saddle? Yes, it looked this way! He had concocted something, so I can stop worrying, and can give myself up completely to sleep.

And I did fall asleep, wheezing and snoring as though I didn't have to face a single problem bothering me either in the shape of the sword of Damocles or in the form of the orphans' home, children who were hungry and expecting the money we were supposed to get in two days.

* * *

I went out when it was getting dark. A wet wind blew in my face, ran down my spine, and threw sleet against my chest. As I walked I set myself to thinking. Soon I found myself passing by the building that formerly housed a school. I stopped because I seemed to see feeble lights flicker inside through the grating on the windows. I walked closer to make sure. No, no lights. But wait, a light came on again, and I got a glimpse of Anton's beard in the semi-darkness. Yes, it could only be my friend's beard, no doubt about it. He himself was standing in the middle of a hall. Two men who I didn't know were

* now Volgograd

standing beside him. They were using improvised lanterns to examine the hall. Why were they doing it?

I walked up to the front door and pushed it open with my shoulder. I entered and felt my way into the big hall through a dark passage.

"Anton!" I called out with some reserve. "You here, Anton? May I come in?"

"Come in, come in," he called back cheerfully. "Look, isn't it a great place for dancing?! What's your opinion?"

"Dancing? What kind of dancing?" I said, failing to comprehend. But Anton did not reply and turned to the man, standing at his side:

"You say it was formerly the school's chapel, correct?"

"Yes, it was indeed. The chapel's in the past too, like so many other things," the man said and sighed.

"And what was it used for afterwards?"

"Well, after the revolution it was used for many different things. They began to turn it into a cultural center, then, you know, it was something else, and then something else again."

"See? And you say it's not convenient. It's great! Let's go, friend," Anton turned to me, and we left abruptly.

We walked in silence for a while. Anton whistled a march tune, and I tried to understand the purpose of the meeting I had just witnessed. Then unexpectedly he stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and burst into a roar of laughter.

"Hey, what's the matter with you, Anton? My God, are you all right?" I cried out, not knowing how to stop this raucous fit which, I feared, would literally split his sides.

"Oh, it's all right, it's all right. Let's go home, brother, and you'll learn even more than you are supposed to know."

I obediently hurried home after him.

We walked into our room, lit our home-made oil-lamp (you would not find such a lamp nowadays), and Anton began speaking excitedly.

* * *

"You know, brother, it was quite different before the war and before the revolution, not like it is now. People have not seen decent food for so long now, it's not right for me to talk about it, but never mind, I'll tell you. Once we went to town with Nikon the smith. I was still an

apprentice then. We went to buy iron to make running gear for Maxim Shirinka's wagon. He was paying twenty eight roubles for the job. So far, so good. So I am walking down the street, window shopping. You can imagine, that my financial situation is at its usual low. Then — bam — a candy-fectinary is right in front of me. I stop dead in my tracks, can hardly stand. There's a wheel behind the window glass, a wheel all right, only without spokes, and made to look like candy, in all different colors. I just couldn't take my eyes away from it. I won't even tell you what was going on inside me. How about, I tell myself, having a bite at it. It was so hard to fight the urge to have it! So I enter the candy-store, pull out the five roubles the smith gave me — enough to buy iron for two tires. 'How much,' I ask, 'is this thing here?' And the young lady, the clerk in the store, you know, looks at me, sees the money, and says: 'One rouble twenty.' 'One rouble twenty?' I says. 'That's nothing. Give me some of it to try.' 'Oh, you can't begin a new one. We've got the one that's been sampled from. You can try some of it,' she says, then takes a knife and very deftly cuts off a very thin slice, no thicker than a coin. I put it into my mouth, and it just disappeared, like vapor, it did! Oh, my friend, was it sweet! So many years passed, so many things happened, the revolution, and after, and yet I remember. Then the young lady asked me: 'Well, shall I wrap the cake up for you?' Aha, that's what it is, I think to myself, a cake! No wonder it was so delicious! 'No,' I said, 'Don't. I didn't like it.' And I turned and left the store."

And Anton once again burst into the kind of laughter that I already heard on our way home.

"It was very embarrassing. I got out of the store and rushed to buy the iron. When I came back to Nikon, he was so mad at me — he'd been waiting for so long."

I listened patiently to my friend's story. Then said:

"I thought you'd invented something worthwhile, and you talk of some nonsense from the past. A stupid cake?..."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Anton cried out. "Wait a minute! Crushed barley is the main item on people's diet these days. They are happy to have at least that and don't dream of sweets. But they only seem not to be dreaming. In fact they yearn for them! For if you look into people's hearts, you are going to see that cakes have a special place there... if only they were available..."

"Cakes? Now?"

My laughter this time was no worse than Anton's.

"Children are dying from starvation, money to buy crushed barley is badly needed, and you talk of cakes!"

"Yes, cakes! That's exactly what we need, for you to know. Now, listen. In that hall you saw, there will be a dance the day after tomorrow. People will come to make merry, to dance until morning, until they drop from exhaustion. They will celebrate the victories in the war. We will announce beforehand a tremendous thing: a sort of lottery. On the posters we'll have it written in huge letters: Among other things you can win a C A K E! Hurry up so you can get your teeth into it! I'm telling you, I, Anton Nail, that you are going to see what a craving from the bottom of a human heart can do. And what a bomb this hypnotic cake will be! That's my plan, take it or leave it."

"All right. But where are we going to get a cake from?"

"We'll have it for sure. I've already made arrangements. There's a master baker still living in this town. And the ingredients I will provide. We'll get this cake."

What could I reply? I lowered my head in apprehension. My friend seemed to have been taken ill.

"A cake?" I said in a low voice. "My dear Anton, go to bed. Maybe we'll have better ideas in the morning. You've been carried away, and who knows what other crazy things you are going to say."

But going to sleep was the last thing Anton was going to do. He said that he had met here in this town his former comrade-in-arms, called Andriy Klyuchka, who had been a regiment commander at the Tsaritsin Front. And now Anton was leaving to meet this man. Klyuchka would help him since I was not fit for anything. Klyuchka was to bring as many people as it was possible to the dance, and would be the first to take part in the lottery.

* * *

The night and the following day passed, the day of frantic preparations. I abandoned myself to Anton's bidding, I did everything he told me. After all, what else could I do? The next day was the deadline for finding the money.

The evening came. I had worked all day long in the hall — curse it! — dusting it, and cleaning, getting the place ready for the next day's dance and the lottery in

which the main prize was to be the mysterious cake. I came home so tired I could barely stand.

I opened the door, entered the room, and what did I see sitting on the table? What is that thing, displaying its different colors, golden, green, red? That's a cake in a big, round, cardboard box! Anton was standing right by its side, a grin on his bearded face.

"Stay where you are, don't come any closer!" he said.

"What do you mean, don't come any closer? Why shouldn't I? Isn't that..."

"I tell you, keep your distance. Look at it from where you are, not closer than at three paces," he said and drew a gun, meaning to use it if necessary, and put it at his side.

"Listen, Anton, I want to touch it."

"Ha, he wants to touch it! Too many guys like you who would like to have this, have not done anything to make it. You do it yourself, and then handle it the way you please."

With these words he opened his suitcase, carefully lowered the cake into it, gave the key two turns and put the key into his pocket.

At this moment Klyuchka entered the room.

"Hi, Klyuchka!" my friend exclaimed. "Everything's set and ready. I wish you luck in winning the cake." Then Anton opened his suitcase and showed us the cake without letting us come a step closer.

Klyuchka and I were overwhelmed by the sight. We ceased to exist. We were bewildered, awed, impatient. But Anton did not let us enjoy the sight of this magnificent creation by an unknown master for long. Once again — and this time finally — he locked the cake in his suitcase. I only caught a last glimpse of it before the case closed and shut with a click: it had a delicate, light-pink surface, with a wonderful relief of white and red frosting that resembled the stripes on a senior officers' trousers made of expensive fabric.

Klyuchka was motionless, struck dumb; the eyes in his curly head flashed with determination.

"Nail!" he said. "I will take part in your lottery. If not I myself, then one of our men is sure to win it. I won't allow the bourgeoisie to have the cake."

Anton replied solemnly:

"Anyone who pays at our lottery has a chance to win."

Hearing this, I came up to Anton and hugged him, moved by profound respect and love.

Klyuchka turned round on his heels, clicked them, and began pacing up and down the room. A shudder of impatience passed over him. He had his heart set on winning the cake.

Anton and I again forgot that we had eaten almost nothing except for some oilcake in the last week.

* * *

I couldn't sleep, I spent three torturous hours tossing and turning as if on a bed of burning hot coals. Anton refused to explain anything; he was lying fully dressed in his bed, and to all my questions he replied:

"Tomorrow, my friend, tomorrow, after the whole thing's over, you'll learn everything."

At last he fell asleep.

Then I rose from my bed, making as little noise as a shadow. I had purposefully taken off my boots before I went to bed. I crossed the room on tiptoe and came up to the suitcase. I was short of breath; the beat of my heart seemed to be deafeningly loud; I put my ear against the suitcase as if there was something to hear. Inside was the dead silence of a mystery. I glanced back toward Anton's bed and began slowly raising the suitcase. Strangely, it seemed to be impossibly heavy. Yet I knew that the suitcase contained only air in addition to the cake, nothing else. Surely it must have only seemed so? I decided to try again: I gripped the suitcase, but at that very moment Anton raised his head briskly from the pillow.

"Stay away or I'll shoot to kill!"

I jumped back from the table and quite automatically raised my arms.

"Hey, you don't mean it, do you? I was not going to take it, honest. I just wanted, you know, to check whether it's heavy, you know, or something."

"All right. Just be careful not to get some heavy earth on top of your grave. Go to bed!"

I did. Falling asleep was like falling into a black pit. I slept all through the night, the next morning and afternoon, almost until the next evening.

When I got up, Anton was sitting at the table, engrossed in making some calculations on a scrap of blue paper. I stared at him emptily, trying to recollect the events of the previous day. I felt as if I'd slept three days in a row. At last I remembered. But why was it so dark in the room? Was it early morning or late evening?

"What are you doing, my friend?" I asked him after a while.

"I'm calculating how much we are likely to get," he answered in a voice that bore no indication of our recent confrontation.

Good, things are back to normal, I thought to myself. "Now, tell me, Anton, is it morning or evening?"

"Morning? Of course it's not! It's evening, my friend. Get up, get dressed and let's go."

We left in half an hour. It was Anton himself who carried the suitcase with the cake inside, pretending it was no heavier than a feather. When we found ourselves in front of the building of the former school, he put his free hand on my shoulder, and said in a low voice:

"You'll stick close to me as a member of the lottery commission. But there's one thing for you to remember: make sure you don't put a metaphysical look on your face when you get to see the cake better."

I nodded, without giving much thought to what he had said, and we entered.

People began arriving. Commander Klyuchka kept his promise and arranged for musicians to come. Martial music filled the building with its heavy reverberations. Men and women in their best evening clothes, young people, and even some elderly began quickly filling the chairs. I noticed that tickets were checked at the door.

"And who is going to get the money made from the sale of the tickets?" I asked my friend. He gave me a disparaging look.

"How come you can't figure it out? We're going to send the money through telegraph to General Wrangel. But there's not much money in the tickets. The main thing is the cake."

I asked no more questions. The hall was all hubbub. The people enjoyed the exciting march tunes. Their cheeks were flushed; their eyes sparkled. The air was permeated with the aroma of cosmetics and the stronger fragrances

of perfumes, and *eaux de toilette*; there was indeed something of a spring quality in the atmosphere. As I passed through this expectant crowd, I kept telling myself that Anton Nail was a genius. How great it was to see these faces, flushed with impatience!

As far as I can remember there was some speech making, singing, and reciting before the dancing began, really quite a social affair. The first dance was then thunderously announced:

“Mazurka!”

There was a commotion among the audience, as though a magnet had been applied. Somebody even ran out from the crowd, stopped in the center of the hall, and shouted, pushing people to make room:

“Step aside! Move back! Make a circle! *Les cavaliers, engagez vos dames pour la mazurka!*”

At that very moment Anton was sitting behind the stage curtains on the suitcase with the cake and kept glancing at his watch.

There was a momentary hush in the hall, and then the band struck up a mazurka. Hearts melted, and in a few moments the hall was filled with din, clatter and rumble; people seemed to forget that their feet were still sore from wearing wooden shoes and that only a few hours ago their bodies, which were swaying and turning now with music, had been draped in baggy gray sackcloth.

Waltz.

Cracovienne.

Pas-de-quatze.

Sweetheart.

Quick dance.

Pas d'Espagne.

“*Les dames, engagez vos cavaliers pour la Cracovienne!*” the master of dance ceremonies called out. The man was a natural dance emcee. Nobody elected him; he just emerged from the crowd and took control. At the start of dancing his hair was combed in an attractive style: on both sides of the neat parting it glistened as if lacquered. Gradually it became tousled; his dickey shifted somewhat from its proper place, his vest got wrinkled, but heedless of these things he dashed about the hall like a harlequin.

“...*pour la dance Hongroise!... pour le Czardas!... pour la... Cossack dance in waltzing manner!*” he shouted himself hoarse and would not let up.

The dancers broke into a sweat... and were tired at last. The time came for Anton to act; he called someone and told him:

“Arrange for the break.”

The man ran into the hall and got a hold of the emcee, who listened and then said:

“Mesdames! Citizens! Comrades! Break! *Asseyez-vous!* Interval, *s’il vous plaît!*”

At the moment when the break was announced, a group of military men arrived, headed by Klyuchka, who immediately rushed behind the curtains.

“Nail! Where’s the cake? Time to begin the lottery.”

“Yes,” Anton said, pushing me with his elbow. “You go onto the stage and announce it as a member of the commission.”

“Announce what?”

“The highest bidder will win the cake, incidentally a very rare thing these days. It will be a cross between a lottery and an auction. Our conditions: cash on the nail, and the losers don’t get their money back. Do you understand? Now, go!”

So I went. The people were already sitting in the chairs that they themselves had brought from the hallway and other rooms. A sea of human beings spread before me, with waves of white handkerchiefs rippling its surface. I ran my eyes over the audience and said:

“Comrades! Innocent children are starving. It’s not right. Now, the c... c... (I was about to say “commission” but changed it at the last instant into “cake”) the cake, you know, everyone of you will have a chance of winning a cake...”

“A cake?!” gasped the crowd. “How unusual!”

“Yes, a cake,” I said affirmatively, staring into hundreds of dilated eyes and hundreds of mouths that were gaping at my words.

“We will begin right away. The cake will be won by the highest bidder. In this sweepstake the winner takes all, and the losers don’t get their money back... Cash on the nail, please! The cake is the stake! Now! The cake!...”

I didn’t know what to say next. But I saw that every word of mine had struck a phosphorescent glow in the wide-open eyes; there was a sharp rise in the tension which at last reached a climax. Then I said once again:

“The C A K E...,” and anxiously turned to the side entrance where Anton was to appear from.

And he did appear. First of all, only his hands, holding the box, which were then followed by Nail himself who strode out and solemnly put his treasure on the table that was right in the middle of the stage.

"There it is, the cake!" someone from the front row cried out. And the spellbound audience immediately fell silent. What a frantic desire to win was on their faces! Do you remember that, my friend, Anton Nail?

And then he, after a few seconds for consideration said: "A million *. Will anybody give more?"

And he was the first to put money on the table, his last banknote.

A minute passed in silence. I had already left the stage, and was sitting with the audience, watching the expression on his bearded face. And then in another second or so, he said:

"Let's not waste our precious time. Who gives more? O-one..."

"A million one hundred," someone called out.

"A million one hundred and twenty-five..."

"A million one hundred and thirty!" a score of people cried out simultaneously.

"A million five hundred," came the voice of Commander Klyuchka, and banknotes began piling on the table.

"A million five hundred," Anton repeated. "Www..."

"A million six hundred..."

"...seven hundred..."

"...eight hundred..."

"Two million!"

"Two million one hundred!"

"Two million one hundred and seventy-five!"

"Two million two hundred... three... four... five hundred..."

"Three million!"

"Www..."

My friend! You purse your lips as if you intend to say 'one.' You are not really going to say it; you know what you are doing. You're only egging them on, I thought.

The people began to forget themselves; those who had been just nervously watching, now put their hands into their pockets, wallets and purses to fish out their money...

"Five..."

* the currency devaluation in the early 1920s was responsible for these astronomical sums; everyday necessities cost millions and more

"Ten!"

"Fifty million!"

"Who gives more? Www..."

"Seventy-five million!"

"A hundred million!"

"Www..."

Ah, my dear Anton! I'll remember it to my dying day. You bent the crowd to your will; you made them part with all the money that they had on them when they just arrived at our little dancing party. And when you sensed that it was time to wrap it up, you shouted:

"A hundred million! Www-one! Twoooo!..."

At that moment the dance emcee who was saving his money to steal the show, jumped to his feet and said in a hardly audible voice, his face pale and wet with perspiration:

"One hundred million seventy-five thousand..."

"One hundred million seventy-five thousand," Anton repeated, taking the money from him. "Www-one! Twoooo! One hundred million seventy-five thousand,.. th... th..."

The crowd was one creature, one agony.

One quivering soul.

Somebody grabbed me by the shoulder in a frenzy...

"Did he say three? Has he won it? Oh help me, fetch some water! Water!"

(Somebody fainted but no one paid attention.)

The face of the dance emcee was whiter than his shirt-front which absorbed the sweat from his chin; he seemed to be the winner.

All of a sudden Klyuchka got up.

"A hundred million one hundred thousand!"

The people were short of breath; it seemed there was not enough air to breathe. And then I realized that if Anton had been bluffing, the result could be tragic. The crowd was no longer a crowd of human beings: it had become a beast with hundreds of heads; breathing hard, ready to throw itself at its prey. The dance emcee would lead the attack. *But the commander! The commander... What will he do?*

"Move it!" somebody called out. "Get done with it! You hear? Quick, I tell you!"

"Www..."

"Wait! One hundred million one hundred and twenty-five thousand!" the dance emcee said with a groan and put his very last twenty-five thousand on the table.

Anton went pale.

What has gone wrong? Why are you so pale? Hand the cake to the emcee as soon as possible. He has earned it, I thought. He has won it! So, what's holding you up then?

"A hundred million one hundred and fifty thousand!" Klyuchka called out at this moment and threw another twenty-five thousand on the table — no doubt, his last too.

The emcee fell into his chair, as if knocked out.

The crowd was ripe for violence. If the cake was going to be won by Commander Klyuchka, Anton would be torn to pieces. I sensed disaster approaching and rose slowly, as though pulled by a mysterious force. Anton ran his eyes round the hall.

"Www-one! Twoooooo! Th-th-three! Sold..." resounded his metallic voice.

The people rushed to the stage, waving their arms frenziedly. Anton collected the money from the table and jumped into the hall over the footlights. And commander Klyuchka scrambled onto the stage and grabbed the box.

"He's taken it! He's taken it!" (The crowd was about to fall on him and tear him apart.)

But Commander Klyuchka hadn't really snatched it off the table: he got hold of it and failed in his first attempt — exactly the way I did — to pick it up. His face was flushed. Ha! He failed to pick the cake from the table! It was so heavy... And then, quite unexpectedly, his face broke into an impossibly broad smile. He searched with his eyes for Anton.

"Nail!" he called out. "How many pounds in it?"

"Thirty-eight," Anton replied.

"Is it made of oilcake?" Klyuchka asked.

"Yes, it is," Anton answered.

"From what seed was it pressed?"

"Nothing special: Sunflower seeds," Anton gave his final answer.

Then Commander Klyuchka took the oilcake out from the cardboard box, holding it in his strong hands, swung it over his head, and with all his might sent it rolling on the floor in the aisle.

The "cake" was rolling, like a stone wheel, making a rumbling sound:

"Hu-rumb-hu-rumb-hu-rumb..."

Only then did it dawn on the people what was going on and they exploded in laughter, as if an extremely power-

ful electric discharge burst through the air. It shook the walls so violently that I feared they would crumble and bury us under the ruins. I went off in search of Anton.

"What do we do now?"

Anton stepped forward and the sight of him sent the people into still louder fits of laughter.

He bowed, and his entire appearance, with his beard being a very noticeable feature, seemed to say: "Hey, that was a nasty trick they had played on us. I am quite angry." But in fact, he said something quite different:

"Citizens! Comrades! On behalf of the Committee to Save Children I thank you..."

"The cake-ake-ake!" roared the crowd with laughter.

Anton made a sign for the musicians to get ready and said with extreme politeness and dignity;

"Polka, please!"

* * *

Ah, what a wonderful man he was, my Anton. Anton Nail, always hitting the nail on the head.

A FOOL

They sent a car for me, and I went. The driver happened to be the talkative sort. Throughout our trip he didn't shut his mouth, and I heard many interesting stories from him. The driver seemed to know everything which had taken place within 50 kilometers from the district center for which I was heading, and there was nothing strange about that. While his boss was out doing his business, the driver had plenty of time to chat with equally loquacious people.

The car left the highway and slowed down to a crawl along the battered earth road. The driver was just telling me something discomfoting about the manager of the district creamery when I saw a young man in clean blue overalls walking in our direction along the path that ran above the road. He had a slight limp in his left leg.

"Mikola!" the driver shouted, bringing the car to a halt. "Walking home, eh?"

Mikola came up closer and I was able to have a better look of him. He was about 26-27. His big handsome head was set nicely on his shoulders; his light brown hair, not covered with a hat, was neatly trimmed, and his calm gray eyes had an intent gaze.

"Well, how are things with you?" the driver asked with barely concealed curiosity. "Did you change your mind?"

"In fact, I didn't," Mikola replied. "I've made the decision."

"Does it mean I should come on Sunday?"

"Please do, if you can."

"I will," the driver assured. "Have a bottle ready for me."

"I'd rather pay with money."

"I'd take money from someone else, but not from you — my conscience won't let me. I'll make it in line of friendship."

"Well, as you like," Mikola said in confusion, casting a side glance at me. "You must be in a hurry. See you later, then."

We moved on. The car swayed and rocked over the bumps, and the driver kept shaking his head, firmly gripping the steering wheel. I saw that he was dying to tell me something about that man in blue overalls who was now limping away from us along the path which ran above the earth road.

"Now tell me, isn't he a fool, that Mikola?" he said finally, no longer able to hold it. As he looked at me, his eyes were burning and he was deeply satisfied to have given such a precise one-word description of his acquaintance. "He is our cinema operator... The biggest fool in the entire district!"

He shook his head and burst out laughing. Without waiting for my encouragement, he went on: "I've known him since early childhood. We finished school the same year. Now he's come up with the idea of bringing his mother-in-law over to stay with them. He lives in a village and his wife is a teacher. It's twelve kilometers from the district center. They've got four children and the oldest will soon be 16."

I gave the driver a puzzled look: how was it possible?

"Well, the point is that it's not his son," he said noticing my bewilderment. "It's his wife's, by her first husband. You know, I'd better tell you everything from the beginning."

He shifted in his seat to make himself more comfortable, changed his grip of the steering wheel and, pleased as he was, began his story. I didn't interrupt him. He was an excellent raconteur; even a top actor would envy the richness of his intonation and mimicry, his pauses and reservations, and, above all, his inner smuggy laughter and the non-faked, authentic feeling of personal superiority over that foolish Mykola, a feeling that overflowed him.

"At school, we didn't notice anything special about him for a long time. He was just like anybody else. True, he knew more than we did, but that's because he was a book-worm. The teachers adored him. 'Mikola will go far!' they would say. Sure he has! He has gone as far as twelve kilometers, and settled down. It all began when our graduation class was sent to help a collective farm with the harvest. He could have just as well stayed home with his leg. But no! 'I'll go,' he said, 'We all have to help our country.' As if something was pulling him there. Well, we were taken to Olkhovatka by truck. They dropped us off at the local school where we were supposed to spend the

night, sleeping on bundles of straw in empty classrooms. The next morning the collective farm chairman woke us up and assigned each of us a share of work. Some were put onto the threshers, some weighed the grain, and some ferried water. I didn't sweat away — after all they didn't ask much of us. Whatever we did was just fine. As for Mikola, since nobody could match him at addition, he was assigned to weigh the grain. It was simple — you just stand there and write down the figures, as simple as that. But no, he wanted more. He would be here, there and everywhere, tying up sacks, helping to load the trucks. 'I won't eat collective-farm bread for just loafing around,' he said. 'Since I was sent here, I ought to work honestly.' He was soaking with sweat, and drank water right from the plug-hole in a barrel. On the third day, all of us turned out for work but him. He was laid up with high temperature. The fever was burning him like straw in a stove. We rushed to the principal who lived on the school grounds with her two children, a boy and a girl. 'Don't worry,' she said, 'I'll look after him.' We came back from work in the evening, but Mikola was nowhere around. It appeared she had taken him to her place, feeding him on streptomycin and tea with raspberry jam. She didn't leave his side for a second. The next day she climbed into one of the trucks which took grain to the elevator, and returned with a doctor. The doctor sounded his lungs and diagnosed lobar pneumonia. By that time we had just finished our assignment. Mikola returned home later, when he got better. Presently we learned that he was visiting Haina Kostyantivna in Olkhovatka almost every day, especially on Sundays. We started asking him about what kind of visits those were. 'I love her,' he explained. 'You're a big fool,' we said. 'She's ten years older than you, she's got children, and she has a husband somewhere.' 'It doesn't matter much to me,' Mikola replied. Believe it or not, we even discussed it at a YCL meeting and Mikola's mother was there — his father was killed fighting in a partisan unit — but nothing came of it. And the secretary of the district YCL committee just dropped his hand. 'He's a fool,' the secretary explained, 'and there's nothing we can do about it. Besides, there's nothing anti-party in the whole business.' But our principal, Svirid Buzilovsky, who's now retired, decided not to let the matter drop. He summoned Mikola to his office and began boring through him in his ever so soothing voice. 'How can it be,' Buzilovsky took

a fine borer for a starter, 'that a pupil of Grade 10 could rise to such notoriety throughout the district? They already know about it even in the regional center. You're our No. 1 student and we've decided to nominate you for the gold medal, but now there's no way you're going to get it unless you stop thinking of Haina Kostyantynivna.' 'You can deprive me of the medal,' Mikola replied, 'but you are unable to take away that part of my heart.' Once he had said this, he turned around and left. Well, Svirid Karpovich didn't give up — Haina Kostyantynivna was called on the carpet by the district board of education. 'You must exert a pedagogic influence on that student,' she was told, 'because you are tarnishing our entire education. Did you really decide to get this graduate to marry you?' 'I didn't decide anything,' Haina Kostyantynivna said. 'I know just as well as you do that Mikola is still a boy, but I cannot, and will not forbid him to love me. With God's help all things will pass. If not, then that'll be our destiny.' Well, they fixed a destiny for her — she was demoted and appointed a rank-and-file maths teacher in the same village, at the same school. 'Let it be,' she'd say, and Mikola would keep coming to see her, rain or shine..."

"What was it about her that attracted him?" I asked just for the sake of asking. "Is she good looking?"

"That's the point, there's nothing beautiful about her at all!" the driver burst out, shifting in his seat from excitement. "Small, thin, dark-haired... Only the eyes, like two headlights. They gleam so brightly that it seems you can read a newspaper at night in their glare."

Proud of this comparison, the driver waved his head, rearranged his cap, whose peak for some reason rested on the back of his head, and continued: "Anyway, we graduated and, naturally, Mikola didn't get his medal. He wasn't drafted into the army because of the limp, so he rushed to look for a job. After all, he had to support his mother — how much longer could both of them live on her pension? He would take any job there was, but these days you won't get far without training. That was how he was stuck with the film mobile. At first he worked part time. That's where he is still working today, but full time of course. No matter where his roads took him, however, he would invariably drop over to see Haina Kostyantynivna. Similarly, whenever she was in the district center, she would stop by at their place. She even made friends with Mikola's mother, and would stay over now and then. Can

you image the scandal? I should also mention that earlier the girls didn't pay any attention to Mikola. True, he was the top student and all that, but his limp... But then, they all seemed to have gone crazy about him. He was a hero! The craziest of them all was Lyudochka, the daughter of the chairman of the district executive committee. She went to school with us. Anyway, she dropped all her boyfriends and was just dying for Mikola. And she could pretty well die, you know. I just came back from the army when I heard about it, and I went specially to see him. 'What a fool you are,' I told him. 'The biggest fool in the whole district. Your own fortune is falling into your hands. Forget about your Haina Kostyantiniivna. Take Lyudochka instead — what else do you want?' And he looked me straight in the eye and said, 'I don't need anything and I know what kind of fortune I want. I will never leave the person who has suffered so much for me.' 'Didn't you suffer for her?' I replied. 'Well, she had her time with you and should be glad. Why, do you have to feed somebody else's children?' When I said this, he jumped up and gave me such a smack on the jaw that — you wouldn't believe it — I could hardly keep on my feet. After that, I didn't speak to him for three months, but then let it go — what do you expect from a fool? Especially since Mikola had proved it the best he could. Polia, Haina Kostyantiniivna's daughter, fell ill — not just sick, but seriously ill. As it turned out, she had meningitis. Not only Mikola didn't leave her bedside, but even sent his mother to stay with Haina Kostyantiniivna. He sold what there was in the house, went to Kiev a couple of times to get drugs, invited all kinds of doctors, wore himself out, became thin as a ghost, in winter walked in some flimsy jacket, but put the girl back on her feet again. Well, at this point a clever person would take off his hat and say: We've settled the accounts, Haina Kostyantiniivna, so long for now. But it appeared that Polia would be sick for the rest of her life. I'm not sure whether there was something going between him and Haina Kostyantiniivna until then, but after that our fool took her directly to the district center, to the marriage registration office. You know, on May Day we have fewer people on the street than there were on that day in front of the office. Finally, they came out, as though nothing had happened. Haina Kostyantiniivna was smiling as they walked arm in arm — but the crowd was buzzing with excitement, some laughing, some

making all sorts of cracks. Just then it started to pour but he kept walking, his head uncovered, just like now. I don't know how they made it home, but that's not the end of it yet.

"Haina Kostyantynivna's ex-husband turned up. A well-heeled man, he was working in education somewhere in the regional center. After rumors had reached him that Haina Kostyantynivna had remarried, he came to our district — directly to Olkhovatka. I don't know what sort of discussion they had, but I saw myself how the three of them were sitting in our restaurant and talking with each other as if nothing had happened. They finished a bottle of wine quite peacefully. When they were saying good-bye to each other, I couldn't help inching closer to the car so that I could hear. 'Thank you, Fedir Havrilovich, but neither I nor Haina Kostyantynivna need anything from you,' Mikola was saying. 'As far as Polia is concerned, don't worry: I'll do everything in my power to help her...' Fedir Havrilovich shook Mikola's hand and said — I heard it myself: 'You're a noble person, Mikola Ivanovich, and I'm happy that Haina has found her fortune with you...' Well, he was saying it to be nice, but I knew what was on his mind: God has sent my children a fool for a father... As he drove off, he waved good-bye and was gone.

"Well, do you think Mikola let himself rest content with that? 'It's impossible,' he said, 'that Soviet medicine doesn't have means to cure Polechka completely.' Haina Kostyantynivna taught mathematics, Mikola's mother busied herself in the vegetable garden, while he kept reading medical journals and writing letters to famous doctors asking what could be done with Polechka. Can you imagine the burden he had volunteered to shoulder? On top of that, he had his job with the film mobile, and that meant traveling to villages. Plus, he took a correspondence course at a polytechnical institute, and they kept sending him assignments — where do you get the time to take exams? One can't be everywhere at once.

"Suddenly a letter arrived from Moscow, from a clinic, telling to bring Polechka. Haina Kostyantynivna would have gone had she not have to go to the hospital herself — she soon gave birth to twins. Wasn't he lucky? Mikola was beside himself with happiness. He registered the twins, took the bus to Kiev, and from there — the train to Moscow. In a week's time, he came back. Polechka stayed behind in the clinic and — believe it or not — was kept

there for almost a year. Now tell me: Why does the state spend so much money on idiots? As it was, in a year Mikola brought her back to Olkhovatka seemingly in sound health. Even if she had some defect left, it was hard to tell; she looked a quite normal child.

“Haina Kostyantynivna idolized Mikola. He passed his second-year exams. The children grew up. The district was finally at peace. They were no longer the talk of the town. Well, live and let live, quietly, peacefully, without — what do you call it? — precedents. The district had been stirred enough, now give peace to yourself and to the people. But no! A week ago Mikola came to see me, asking to bring over his mother-in-law to Olkhovatka. ‘What do you mean your mother-in-law? Do you have one?’ I asked. ‘I do,’ he said. ‘It’s Haina Kostyantynivna’s former mother-in-law. She’s an old woman, paralyzed, with nobody to look after her. Everyone seems to have forgotten that she exists.’ ‘But there should be someone who ought to remember,’ I started. ‘Of course,’ he said, ‘Fedir Havrilovich, Haina Kostyantynivna’s first husband, ought to remember, but he has so much work to do in his position.’ ‘Well,’ I said, ‘no matter how much work he has to do, she’s his mother after all!’ ‘But that’s the point,’ he said. ‘She’s only his stepmother and they didn’t get on all that well.’ ‘But it’s no business of yours,’ I snapped at him. ‘What has someone else’s stepmother got to do with you? Why, it’s somebody else’s headache — just shut your eyes and move on.’ ‘If everyone thought like that,’ he replied, ‘the world would have perished long ago.’ Well, isn’t he a fool? I had no choice, so I promised I’d bring her over. After all, we went to school together. But I won’t take any money from him — he’ll give me a drink and that’ll settle the bill...”

Three days later I was on my way home — in the same car, with the same driver. We left the district center very early in the morning. It had been raining the day before. The pot holes on the earth road had turned into puddles, and driving was hazardous. As if to make up for it, the roadside fields pleased the eye with the brushlike fresh green stubble of winter crops. The driver was now telling me a different story. Suddenly, he cut it short. Walking in our direction along a narrow path was the cinema operator. Like the last time, he was wearing dark-blue overalls, his head was uncovered, but this time he was not alone. A tiny woman stepped carefully ahead of him. She was dressed

in a jacket cut like a man's. Her beautiful auburn hair, uncovered by a kerchief, was waving behind, carried away by the morning breeze. Seeing the car, the cinema operator and his wife came to a halt. Muttering something unpleasant, the driver put out the gear and stopped the car.

"As a matter of fact, we've been waiting for you," Mikola said without stepping off the path to keep away from the mud.

"Well, you know what kind of job I have," the driver began explaining. "Man proposes and the boss disposes..."

"When do you think you can make it, then?"

Meanwhile they were talking, I stole a glance of Haina Kostyantynivna. Standing behind Mikola's broad shoulders, she seemed to be sheltered by a firm solid wall. The driver was wrong when he said she was plain. True, her face was not one of those bright woman faces which catch one's attention immediately. Light, rather than dark hair framed her high clear forehead — what made the driver think she was dark-haired? Her source of beauty, however, were the eyes. They gazed so openly, so closely and so candidly that it seemed nothing could be concealed from their dark-gray depth. They seemed to enfold the whole world, filled with kindness and having a touch of sadness from which human life has never been protected... Haina Kostyantynivna's eyes emitted love and tenderness. Looking at her and her husband, I couldn't help thinking how happy they were to tread one path. Their faces radiated courage, confidence, devotion. They were happy, hard though it was for them.

The driver started the engine. The two of them waved good-bye and, without looking at me, went their way.

PUNISHMENT

I

There was nobody in the courtroom when he was brought in. A snow storm was raging outside for the third day already, and the windows, pasted up with snow, made the room dim. He was sitting between two sullen policemen and wheezed a deep cough. He was quite on edge because of the silence which he disturbed with his coughing and also because of this big room where he was ordered to sit right in the center so that all could examine his plain peasant face, his old faded jacket and his military high-boots, still from the Russian army, with their peculiar curled toes. He knew he would be again questioned about that already boring story and, although they would no longer beat him frenziedly in the mouth or on the jaw, he would nonetheless have to recount for the fourth or fifth time about that accursed Mykolaichik, about his filthy soul, about the attempted attack on him, and about his senseless escape with his child in his hands.

No, under no circumstances should he have taken Hapka along, especially in such frost. Hapka could have been safely left with her aunt Pelahiya (this is when he remembered her). She could have grown up there and, should he ever have had chance to get her back, she would of course recognize her father. Although she didn't see her mother while she was alive, she hadn't forgotten her — six years later she still remembers, and would remember him just as well. Yes, Hapka will remember... "She's mine," he whispered, and at that instant something grabbed his heart; so desperately he longed to see Hapka, with pain as never before. He looked around the room and saw no one. He wanted to look behind the door, in the corridor: It was dark there, and he could have missed her in some dark corner. He had already made up his mind to dash to the door, run out into the corridor and to call for her at the top of his voice when the door opened and the bailiff came in. He ran a duster over a brass cruci-

fix resting on the tribunal's desk. Scarcely had he put a matchbox by the candles when the side door opened and out came the chairman of the tribunal, a plump old man with a sleepy face which he never shaved in the hope of hiding a big wart on his left cheek. However, a beard did not grow, only gray stubble appeared; it did not cover that ugly wart, and perhaps because of this the judge had been fighting gall stones for as long as twenty years. He frowned at the defendant, then grimaced at the sight of the empty seat of the court secretary. Then he turned round, lifted his cloak and left the room. The defendant's heart started beating heavily. The judge's frown, his grimace and the fact that he slammed the door behind him — these actions indicated to him something terrible would happen.

The next moment the floor creaked and an officer of the military gendarme corps entered. He was a well-built man with greased light hair and powdered face; lots of medals and crosses on bright ribbons tinkled amidst the squeaking leather belts that wound round his body. Without looking at the defendant, the officer took his place at a desk by the window and began searching for something in his briefcase. Right behind him came the prosecutor. He nodded to the officer and, rubbing his hands, proceeded to his seat on the right side of the court bench. When he finished arranging the papers in front of him, he reclined in his chair, stuck a monocle in his eye, gave a light yawn and looked closely at Hnat. Disappointed with what he saw, he yawned more broadly, dropped his monocle, and sank even deeper in his chair displaying an aristocratic profile.

It was ten when the tribunal took their seats. In the middle, under a large picture of a woman dressed in white, with a blindfold and scales in her hand, sat the fat chairman. On his left sat another judge, thin, dark, with feverishly glowing eyes. The town folk knew he was the long-standing enemy of the prosecutor. One reason for this was the judge's wife who, twenty years younger than her husband, was bored to death with life in the country where only the prosecutor could understand her "uncommon, wasted soul." The third member of the tribunal sported a dark goatie, had sharp eyes and a smart character. Before that memorable May* he was a solid

* referring to May of 1926 when Piłsudski staged the coup in Poland which established a military fascist dictatorship

National Democrat, read only *The Warsaw Gazette*, recognized only Galler and passionately hated everything that "reeked of the East." After that May, he turned around completely even faster than the prosecutor; he threw out Galler's portrait from his office, was the first to subscribe to *Glos Prawdy*, and passionately hated everything that "reeked of the East."

Next to him sat the young secretary with greased hair. He was also bored in the country and was providing great services for his masters while cherishing his one and only dream — to someday get to Warsaw and go, at least once a week, to the dancing parties in Adria. Hardly had the secretary drawn out his shiny new pen when the chairman of the tribunal summoned him and whispered something in his ear. After that the secretary came up to the defendant and politely informed him that the government would provide a lawyer for him. At that moment the lawyer appeared. He flushed, either from cold or from the embarrassment that he had kept the high court waiting, bowed to the tribunal and, without even looking at his client, ran up to his desk and began to open the files with quivering hands. He was still a young man, it was only his first year in his position, and because his father was only a poor tailor in Bialostok, he was not able to advertise his business properly and, as a result, had no clientele so far. Today's hearing was the first case of importance entrusted to him. And although he had to provide a defense for a pittance from the court fund because his client was too poor to pay, he nonetheless gladly accepted the case and had stayed up all through the night browsing through the files of evidence that would decide the lot of two persons: his own as a lawyer, and the accused Hnat Orestyuk. He was well aware that severe punishments were popular in those days and that the gallows were creaking all across the country. Apart from this, during his first year he was able to get to know the judges who were hearing this case, and he was conscious that his Jewish extraction and his name, Lyubomirsky, would also play their part. All this made him quite nervous and his hands were shaking when he was arranging the files.

As for Hnat, his hands did not shake. When the tribunal entered, something touched him deep inside and he felt like a hare caught by hounds. In the occasional glances from the judges, the prosecutor and the officer, he could see so much dislike and contempt that he imagined that

if it was proposed to sentence him to five years in prison, none of those gentlemen would argue. He was feeling so insignificant in the eyes of the judges that, when his lawyer finally entered, Hnat felt more at ease and his spirits went up. And though he knew that this young lawyer of low standing was no match for the self-confident, stern judges, he was nonetheless relieved for no longer being alone and helpless. There was at least someone beside him who could explain better than he could that the judges should not waste so much of their time on such a rogue as Mykolaichik.

Hnat calmed down. He was calm when the chairman called his name, and even brightened up a bit when the proceedings started. In an hour or so these stern gentlemen would go for lunch while he would be looking around town for Hapka. Four days had passed. No, in four days she couldn't have gotten lost. Hnat remained calm.

II

The interrogation was conducted by the chairman and the judge on his right. The one on the left kept silent as he always did when the monocled prosecutor was bringing charges. They were asking the same questions as the police and the investigator. Since it was the first time during the week that Hnat was at ease, he spoke readily about his village, and about the greedy Mykolaichik to whom half of the village was indebted. He counted on his black fingers how many farmers Mykolaichik had ruined, how many people he had sent to prison, and there were not enough fingers.

Hnat let loose. In the presence of the judges he accused Mykolaichik and accused the landlord from a neighboring village who was paying off Mykolaichik when he brought strike-breakers to work in the landlord's fields.

The chairman frowned constantly, the judge on his right was indignantly whispering in his ear, and the prosecutor dreamily gazed through the window.

Hnat also told how the villagers hated Mykolaichik and how they wanted to get rid of him. But Mykolaichik only laughed at all this and every night went to a tavern together with the headman. And it so happened that one night (that was the day after ten people from their village were taken to Novohrudky) that Mykolaichik was walking

home all alone. Some people noticed him and passed the word on to Hnat. Then the ten of them set after Mykolaichik and caught up with him when he was just entering his home. Yet, even this did not stop them. Hnat, with stick in hand, was posted behind the house so that Mykolaichik would not get away, and then the others broke the windows. Hnat did not wait long for Mykolaichik to come running out in his direction. And he was running so fast that Hnat had hardly swung his stick when Mykolaichik disappeared into the willow-bush, from there firing a shot at Hnat. But it was from a distance and the bullet whizzed past his ear. At midnight, a carload of police arrived from town, and the ten of them realized what was in store for them. When the others woke Hnat, he did not want to go at first, but then, remembering Hapka and thinking what would happen to her if he would be put under investigation for half a year, he wrapped the girl in a sheep-skin coat, took her in his arms, locked up the house and dragged himself along after his nine fellow villagers across the white fields, toward the border.

It was a four-mile journey and as they passed through the woods toward the border, morning had already broken. They saw a striped pole and turned to the right to get by unnoticed. Coming out into a large clearing, they saw a soldier with a gun walking on the other side. At that point they thought they had made it and hurried across the clearing toward the soldier. But suddenly a loud "Halt!" came out from the forest and a rifle shot rang out. The nine started to run and made it in no time to the other side. Only Hnat was left behind: He didn't have courage to carry Hapka through the bullets. "I'd better do a half-year stretch," he thought to himself, "and Hapka will not get lost with so many kind people around." Hnat shuffled back, not to his village though, but directly to town. And that was the worst of it, since, if left alone, Hapka would definitely be lost in the town: she was only six, after all.

Hnat finished his account and looked around. He wanted to see that all of them sympathized with Hapka who was only six and was now wandering around a strange town, cold and hungry. However the faces of the judges, like those of the prosecutor and the gendarme, were quite expressionless. The lawyer dug even deeper into his papers.

Hnat had been questioned for two hours already, and when the chairman got tired, his bearded neighbor took over. He shot his questions and bared his large yellow teeth, as though to catch each answer of the defendant in his mouth, to crack it open, to chew it and to spit out a ready paragraph on the desk of the tribunal. He had seen Hnat for the first time in his life and, in fact, it did not matter much to him what the charges were. But he despised Hnat because he was speaking the loathsome language, and because he was looking him straight in the eyes, and because there was enough strength in him that, if released from chains at least for a moment, would inevitably crush and demolish everything which formed the essence of his life. Then he, without a cloak, would become an orphan, all alone under clear blue skies, left in the open, and there would no longer be smooth roads and paths, but an open field, and his own feet, and nowhere to go.

The prosecutor was silent all this time, and when the bearded judge hid his teeth and, pleased with himself, relaxed in his chair, the prosecutor gave the dark judge an inquisitive glance, for a minute or so, but when the other judge remained silent, the prosecutor sighed lightly and, as if in passing, cast a question at the defendant: "Mykolaichik didn't do any harm personally to you, did he?"

"No, not to me," Hnat replied.

"Why did you harass him, then?"

Hnat was silent, because he didn't understand the prosecutor, and it seemed to him that the prosecutor was joking by asking such an awkward question. After all, every child in his village knew what kind of person Mykolaichik was.

"Well, you don't know. But we do." At this point the prosecutor stuck the monocle deeper in his eye socket and continued.

"For how long have you been member of the organization?"

"Which organization?"

"The terrorist one."

"But I never..." here Hnat stumbled.

True, he had been involved in something like that. A year ago, the landlord's farmhands went on strike and Khariton, Mikhailo's son, kept saying, "We are the

organization, and the masters will definitely break their teeth on the organization." But since the masters were now sitting in front of him, Hnat decided to deny the charge.

Meanwhile the prosecutor kept jabbing the defendant, "There were ten of you, and you delivered an organized attack."

Hnat was at a loss and could not say anything. The prosecutor was triumphant.

"Incidentally, for how long have you been involved in spying?"

Hnat could no longer be silent. He already knew that he was improperly charged with things which would mean harsh punishment, and that this mistake should be corrected with all possible means. Someone should tell them that this time Mykolaichik was as usual telling blatant lies and that there was not a grain of truth in Mykolaichik's chirping.

"High tribunal, there has never been anything like that. I couldn't possibly know anything of this kind, and I didn't know. It was Mykolaichik who was a spy in our village. It was he who sent me..." Hnat was suffocating with rage.

"The terrorist gang, of which you were a member, upon crossing the border provided detailed information about the deployment of our troops."

The gendarme officer furrowed his brow and nodded, although he knew just as much as the prosecutor. But he was honestly performing his gendarme duty.

"And you still don't accept your guilt?" the chairman asked with dissatisfaction.

"But I'm not guilty, high tribunal. I wanted only to lash that scum Mykolaichik and of this I confess, but as far as me being a spy — this isn't true! I can swear as much as you want! — This isn't true!"

No matter how convincingly Hnat spoke, the chairman only frowned in his usual way, while the prosecutor, the bearded judge and the gendarme only chuckled apologetically.

Then the lawyer stood up and began asking Hnat in a trembling voice about what kind of person Mykolaichik was, whether he was a drunkard, whether he had ever started fights with anybody, whether it was possible to kill at least a cat with the stick that Hnat intended to use on him, or whether Hnat knew what spying meant. In the

end he solemnly pronounced: "Hnat Orestyuk, from this crucifix Christ is looking at you. He sees that you are innocent and that your soul is as pure as His soul was..." Saying this, he sat down without even raising his eyes.

The judges, the prosecutor and the gendarme looked at the lawyer indignantly. The very fact that this ordinary Jew dared to appeal to Christ and compared some commoner to Christ, and moreover with remarks insulting the tribunal — all this decided the plight of poor Hnat. As if sensing it, he lowered himself heavily on the bench, dropped his head helplessly and, as if in a daze, listened to the testimonies of witnesses among whom were Mykolaichik, the headman and a border guard. He didn't come to his senses even when a break was announced and he was taken away from the courtroom. In the corridor the lawyer came up to him and, avoiding his eyes, whispered, "Everything will be fine. Take it easy, Orestyuk." Then he quickly ran up the stairs.

Meanwhile the members of the tribunal gathered by the window looking out on the prison yard. They curiously studied the thermometer which pointed to 22 below zero.

IV

When the prosecutor began to speak in the afternoon, the lamps were already lit and his monocle was shining like a gold star. He spoke without his usual pathos, apparently because the verdict was obvious; as to the defense lawyer, he paid no attention to him at all. In half an hour he managed to expose Hnat's criminal nature and emphasized the mortal danger that such a degenerate would pose to the young country. Such people were the hirelings of a foreign power who, in a crisis, tried to seize with their evil tentacles the fold of Christian culture and civilization so as to kill in it everything beautiful, kind and lofty and, afterwards, to place naked man on naked earth. In the name of the salvation of the world of Christ who, incidentally, had been humiliated several hours earlier, the prosecutor urged the judges to pass the sentence that would be a holy fire purging the scab from mankind's sound body. He ended up with the appeal that the judges, like ancient Romans, should not be lenient with *Hannibal ante portas*.*

* Hannibal by the gates (Lat.)

When the lawyer stood up to speak, it was perhaps only Hnat who was listening, for he alone could be interested in the speech of a person who was trying to break a wall with his head. In fact, on that day lawyer Lyubomirski spoke dully, probably realizing that the case was already decided, or perhaps because he sensed that he had no chance against such forces. When he sat down, the judges stirred in their seats as if they had been waiting for this moment forever and quickly left for a conference. The prosecutor went out with the gendarme to have a cigarette, and in the room only Hnat remained with the police escort and the lawyer who, in dismay, leafed through the notes of his unnecessary speech.

Dark shadows from the policemen engulfed Hnat. It seemed to him that he would remain in this room to the end of his days, and that the shadows around him would keep growing until they covered him completely, and then there would be night, a hopeless night that would hang over him. Hnat did not want anything now and it seemed to him that even if he were sentenced to life imprisonment, it would make no difference. Even Hapka came to his mind only once in a while, and then only faintly, as though he had forgotten her face, as if a thick haze had covered his drab, unhappy peasant life.

V

In about twenty minutes the tribunal returned and took their seats. The chairman stood up, rearranged his cap, cleared his throat and in a nasal voice read out the sentence.

“High court... Hnat Orestyuk, aged 32, farm laborer... for terrorist activities and espionage... hereby sentenced to death by hanging... cosas to be reimbursed... sentence to be executed tomorrow at half past five in the morning.”

When the chairman finished, his neighbors nodded their heads, the prosecutor took out his monocle, cleared it with a handkerchief and put it in his pocket, the officer let out a sigh and as he stood up, his belts creaked like the gallows. The lawyer turned pale and stared into Hnat's face with horror in his eyes. The expression on Hnat's face was a look of tremendous bewilderment. Hnat understood every word of the sentence but it was incredulous. It was too much of a surprise for him and he began examin-

ing the judges as if asking what they intended to do with him and whether they were joking. Yet, the judges avoided his stare. They quickly gathered the papers and proceeded to an adjacent room to take off their cloaks and, in this manner, to finish the day's difficult routine.

Hnat, on the other hand, would have stood in the middle of the room forever had not the policemen reminded him that the first part of the proceeding was over and that he could now return to his cell. By the door the lawyer approached him, for some reason shook his hand and said that he would telephone the president of Rzecz Pospolita. Suddenly Hnat remembered something and, without looking at the lawyer, repeated several times: "Search for Hapka! Find Hapka!"

"We'll be searching all through the night," the lawyer reassured him, again shook his hand and disappeared in the darkness of the corridors bristling with police bayonets.

His cellmates already knew about Hnat's sentence, even before he returned from the hearing. When he entered, all were silent. He sat down on his bunk and felt hot in the neck and ears and then he sensed that he was at death's door. There was a deep hush in the cell, and he felt his blood rushing through him, beating against the walls of his veins as if aware that the next morning it would freeze for ever. Something creaked in Hnat's chest, then yelped and flew away in a long nervous, unending cough. Then there was again silence — the inmates, eyes down-cast, sat silently in the corners of the cell.

The door opened, and Hnat was told to gather his belongings and to proceed to the solitary. He stood up heavily and began pulling on his old warm sheep-skin coat which was left to him by his late father. Yet, his hands were shaking and he missed the sleeves. Then his neighbor, a wrinkled old-time beggar, came up to him, stood up on his toes and helped Hnat with the coat. Hnat looked around and silently followed the guard.

VI

It was around midnight. Hnat had been sitting on a stool for hours and ran his fingers through his light, uncombed forelock. His heart was no longer beating anxiously, perhaps it was also tired and needed rest. But Hnat was thinking and could not believe how clear and

reasonable and strange his thoughts were to him. He was puzzled why they had come to his mind so late, when only a few hours were left for him to think, and after that — death. His cell window overlooked a courtyard and he could hear somebody hammering nails and was sure that it was the casket being prepared for him. They will put Hnat Orestyuk in it and will bury him deep, lest he, god forbid, should rise from it again, lest Hnat Orestyuk stand up and seek revenge for his, and not only his, peasant injustice. Now he clearly saw that the judges had reason to send him to the gallows. His brain was now working like a new, well-greased machine. Hnat had discovered within himself a whole ocean of hatred which until now had slumbered somewhere under his heart. Now he was aware they must have realized it. Again and again he imagined the tribunal, and behind it he saw Mykolaichik's malicious grin, and behind Mykolaichik, in the dark, stood the landlord, and behind the landlord, in pitch darkness, he could see a whole crowd of such mykolaichiks and landlords, and all those mykolaichiks and landlords wore gold crosses and medals on their chests, and each of them had creaking belts that tightly wound round their bellies. They all looked at Hnat, and in their eyes Hnat saw that same hatred which he had just discovered within himself. They clutched Hnat Orestyuk in their arms and had to put an end to Hnat Orestyuk. But Hnat Orestyuk was able to defend himself — he had to. Hnat Orestyuk did not have to fear the bullet, but since he did, now he had no reason to be scared by the gallows. Hnat Orestyuk was rock-hard, he was not made of dough, and there was no way the mykolaichiks and landlords could mould something out of him. Hnat could strike, Hnat could strike severely, and because of this had to be destroyed. Hnat Orestyuk had to perish.

In the middle of the night a short, filthy priest entered his cell. An eight-pointed silver cross hung on his chest, and it seemed to Hnat that he was brought before the tribunal for the second time. Then he saw how the priest dashed into the crowd of mykolaichiks and landlords and with a last fearful glance stared at him until he disappeared completely. The door closed behind the priest and a new watch of guards peered in through the spyhole. Hnat already knew everything, and he was calm. Now he could finally get some rest and he fell asleep right on the stool.

Early in the morning Hnat was woken up and informed that the president had declined his appeal. In the door of his cell stood the prosecutor, behind him the chairman of the tribunal, the gendarme officer, the warden, guards and some unknown gentlemen in expensive furs. Hnat was told to get ready. He wanted to don his coat, but this was refused to him: they did not know if the rope would hold such weight. Then he wanted to wrap a kerchief around his neck as his throat had troubled him for several days already, but this also was denied.

When he was escorted along a narrow corridor into the courtyard, the pale lawyer, apologetically, told him that the police had searched for Hapka, but that they had failed to discover her so far and that he would keep the search going. Hnat halted and his escort halted, too. In dismay, he looked first at the lawyer, then around himself, turned pale, flushed and began yelling at the top of his lungs: "Hapka! Hapka!" Then his hands were tied behind his back and he was pulled forward. But Hnat kept shouting and calling for Hapka who was somewhere behind the walls and her father was unable to look after her, to see her, or even give her his last kiss. Hnat kept calling for Hapka as if he was calling for his life which was soon about to end.

Coming out into the courtyard, he felt lost and became silent. It was still very dark and the snow was falling in large flakes. Hnat understood that if they hanged him, a humble Hnat Orestyuk from out-of-the-way Samosilky, then something big was taking place in the world and that Hapka, and Hnat himself, her father, were too small in the face of that bigness. Now Hnat was silent — not a word left his lips.

Wearing only a jacket, he was shivering from the cold. Noticing this, the gentlemen wrapped their furs tighter. When Hnat was led up the scaffold and his legs were tied, some of them came closer to the gallows — it was dark and they wanted to have a better look at Hnat's death. Lawyer Lyubomirsky, however, ran away into an ante-chamber where he sat rocked by a quiet hysterical whining.

Hnat was mounted on a stool and the noose was secured around his neck. In front of him he could see a curious crowd, but could make out only the judges, the prosecutor and the gendarme. In the darkness he could see their

faces but not their eyes, as if they were hiding them, as if they were scared by the huge force of hatred that flared from Hnat's eyes. They were waiting for Hnat to close his eyes. But he did not, even when the stool was kicked aside from under his feet, and although the noose squeezed his neck so hard that his eyes bulged from the pressure, he did not avert them. He poured on the onlookers all of his hatred and felt compelled to tell them a few words about it. But the noose had a firm grip of his neck and didn't let out Hnat's final word. And then in rage and despair, his powerlessness took hold of him and a second later his heart stopped beating.

For five more minutes the gentlemen stood freezing under the gallows. Sagging under the weight of Hnat's massive body, the gallows creaked, while the officer's spurs now and again tinkled from impatience. Then the small, fat prison doctor climbed onto the scaffold, pressed his ear to Hnat's chest and informed the gentlemen that they could go and warm up a bit. The company decided that it was too early to go home and that it would be much better to wait for morning in Dzenciol's confectionary where they served the famous grog.

Hnat's eyes followed them for a long time until they were pasted up by the fluffy, clean snow.

Olexandr Dovzhenko
(1894-1956)

ACROSS BARBED WIRE

For three days and three nights Petro Chaban had been sitting in a dark barn, locked up without food or drink. He sat there and listened, and it seemed to him that the door opened many times and that the Germans took him outside and, after cruel torturing, cast his dead body into a ditch.

Rotting in the ditch were many hundreds of shot peasants and wounded soldiers who had not managed to retreat with the army eastward. The ditch was far from the barn, and Chaban heard everything that happened there in the last three days.

With each shot he fell down into that ditch, and each time his soul soared skyward as a firebird — an eagle or a dove — which he once saw on the royal gates in a church.

This bird was flying over the land spreading his rage to the four winds. It fluttered its wings against every window, against the poor doors beyond which hope fought despair in grieving hearts, through which famine, slavery and inexorable death were creeping in. Further on it soared even higher, so high that there was ringing in the ears, and then Chaban seemed to see the whole land.

The land must have flown into some bloody nebula and fallen ill. The magnitude of death was so large that for a moment it seemed to Chaban that his own death and torture was so insignificant that he even smiled and opened his eyes. There was a knock somewhere. The door opened — and the barn was flooded by such a strong steam of fresh, warm October air, that Chaban's head began spinning. When taken outside, he stumbled on the threshold and almost fell.

"You are the chief of a partisan unit which began operating in this region, aren't you?" a fatigued German officer asked him. "It was you who put to death 240 of our officers and soldiers, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I am a son of the Ukrainian people, Communist Petro Chaban, aged 42. I am the commander of the partisan unit and killing soldiers and officers is my job,"

replied Chaban and looked around. How strangely the village seemed. How pale it had become, as if someone had dusted it with grey ashes, as if some poison was poured over it, contaminating everything.

In a nearby square Petro saw a gallows. Four peasants were hanging from it, and he recognized them at once. Those hanging were Vasil Tkach, Oxentiy Nechiporuk, Levko Serbin and Kupriyan Shumilo. The fifth noose was vacant. The peasants, mostly women, stood near the gallows in a semicircle. They were motionless, like chalices filled to the brim with grief. There was much more grief than they could contain and it spilt over across the village. No one cried though.

“That’s all I want to say.”

“Well. Two more short replies and you’ll go free,” said the fatigued officer nodding his head toward the noose. “Now, where are your partisans hiding and where have the weapons of the reds been cached?”

“I won’t tell.”

The officer stood up and came closer to Chaban.

“Listen. I can see that you are a strong person. Your eyes show contempt of death. But war is war. In the given situation there’s nothing in the world that’ll give you the slightest reason to reply in such a manner. You’re not a European. Do you realize this?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then, don’t irritate me. Tell and die fast.”

“I won’t tell.”

“Listen, I don’t want to yell at you or to beat you now, although this is part of my duty. I’m tired of it today. Every job has its boring sides. But I can appeal to your reason.”

“Petro!” came a desperate shriek from old Levchikha who was standing amidst women.

“See, even the people are begging you,” the officer smirked.

Chaban also smiled, but in his own way. They looked into each other’s eyes, and each one understood another one’s smile.

No, Levchikha was not begging. Chaban got her message at once. She was conjuring him. This desperate, pitiful cry, just one word, just the sound of his name, this eternal motherly lament contained, like a small cage, all of her womanly lot.

“Hold on, don’t give up. Endure all the tortures that

come your way. Endure the suffering as your forefathers did, the Zaporizhian Cossacks, when they laughed at the enemy on the battlefield. Be bold, so that those who survive will not despise your name, so that they may glorify you as their brother, their comrade. Keep silent, for our land is miserable enough as it is."

Chaban kept his eyes fixed on the officer.

"I won't say anything."

"I can see it already," the officer said quietly. "Well, then until tomorrow morning, I need some rest so that I can have a fresh start. And tomorrow, as your saying goes, cry as you may — they won't hear. Fortunately, I studied your language for quite a while."

"Well, nobody knows," Chaban said.

"Quiet! Tomorrow, I'll personally put out your eyes and chop off your limbs. Then, I'll cut off your tongue and carve a big star on your chest."

"What for? What do you want to prove by this? Why do you need my star, my tongue, my put-out eyes? What do you need them for? All you need is my death."

Chaban leaned toward the officer. He peered into his grey, watery eyes, into the wrinkles on his forehead and around his mouth. He wanted to penetrate into his horrible, secretive soul. He had never thought there could be such people.

"All you need is my death!"

"A conventional death — I'll make a point of it," said the officer taking a note pad out of his pocket. He loved to write down episodes which he considered worthy of his nation's history.

"What do I need it for? I'm a romanticist of war. You won't understand it. In fact, I'm not even saying this to you. I'm speaking my thoughts. So... At this day, he who has marched through Europe has experienced something. He has lived, you understand?" The officer's hand was running fast across his memory pad. "If we view life as Dr. Faust did — to aspire to know everything, to live through everything which human life, as short as an instant, can provide in the sense of great or small, like this or that gallows, kind or evil, lofty or miserable... But this is already philosophy," the officer finished writing and looked up at Chaban. "Do you understand?"

"Shove it you know where, the devil take you," Chaban cursed and turned away. His unfortunate family was standing by the gallows, awaiting his hanging.

"But," continued the officer, as if not hearing Chaban, "before that I'll order to have your wife raped — endure that if you can. You see, I don't like women. I'm living with a dummy. Then I'll have your children killed so that there's no trace of you left in this land, because this land is already ours anyway. And then you'll be hanged by your former neighbor. He's been dreaming about it back in Siberia."

Chaban turned around. Behind him, like a ghost, stood the kulak Maxim Zabroda. How did he turn up? He even swayed to the side at the sight of Zabroda. For an instant he caught a glimpse of his last day. His mouth went dry and he forced saliva to his lips. Zabroda turned pale and panted heavily. The officer was obviously pleased with this meeting of neighbors. He was an experienced and adept specialist.

"You're a partisan, and I can't treat you in an ordinary way. I have my own prestige, and you are a strong prisoner. Oh, I can already see you in the process," and the officer's eyes gleamed so coldly that Chaban shivered.

"Today he'll spend the night in the camp behind the wire," the officer barked to his squad in German. "Let him freeze a little during the night, it'll be hot for him tomorrow."

After this order the officer walked off.

"Halt! Where d'you go?" Chaban suddenly said in a commanding voice.

The officer halted, yielding against his will to the authoritative voice.

"Everything you've said is obscenity unworthy of a man. An inhuman death is the only thing you can give to me. This is your butcher's job. But my soul will remain untouched. There's nothing you can chop it with, and you can't put out its eyes. You're trying to scare me with tomorrow. But for tomorrow, just as today, make a note in your book: Cry as you may — no one will hear. I laugh at you." The final words Chaban emphasized, so that all could hear, to try to raise the spirits of the people who stood near his noose.

"Please stop this useless agitation," the officer frowned, coming up to Chaban. "My God, how I hate you all. I even hate to look at you. Oh, how much I'd give to get out as soon as I can from your country of death."

"You won't make it," Chaban replied, satisfied with winning the duel.

“You hope in vain for a bullet,” the officer resumed. “Tomorrow you’ll die like I said.”

Saying this, he went off.

...By a highway, outside the village, in a gully from which they once took sand for the road, was a large POW camp fenced with new high poles with barbed wire. Above the gully and at the corners, a strong guard was posted. Any attempt to escape, or even to touch the wire was met with instant death from submachine gun fire.

Thousands of helpless people were dying here like flies in their own, trampled land. They were half-naked, and barefoot, filthy and so emaciated with grief, by cold, by dirt and by extreme hunger that they seemed to themselves not human beings any more but some mystic creations of an ailing mind, walking shells of misery and decay. They died by the hundreds day and night, from hunger and wounds, giving to those living their last bows and farewells muttered with colorless lips. The dead were lying amidst the living, and the living did not cry over the dead, because all they wanted was to eat, eat, eat.

It is difficult to find those colors with which one could paint those camps, and perhaps many years will pass until the birth of a new Dante who, with his genius multiplied by the unimaginable quantity of human suffering, would produce another *Divine Comedy*, as a solemn reminder to the upcoming generations of the high price paid by our people when mankind’s destiny was decided in our vast fields.

On that day Dante’s inferno was fortunate. In the afternoon cameramen from Berlin arrived. Several dead horses were thrown to the prisoners, and they tore them to pieces, glutted themselves and gnawed at the bones — so acute was their hunger. The cameramen filmed this revolting feast of ghosts so that the whole German world, all German women and all German children could see how bad and repulsive were these people against whom the empire had raised its sword.

It was getting dark. The captives crawled into their lairs, their teeth were chattering from the cold. Under the cold autumn sky the camp resembled a large cemetery of dug-out graves with the live bodies lying in the pits.

From one grave, a song softly rose to the sky. It was a song about grief, but not human grief, so bitter and plain, but the grief of a poor seagull that hatched her

nestlings by a heavily-travelled road a long time ago. It told about the long *chumak* forages for salt and about the merry, those seemingly carefree people who sang all the time following their oxen. They disturbed the seagull, and took away her nestlings. The seagull beat her wings against the road, pressed herself to the damp earth and pitifully implored: "Give my children back to me, I'm their mother."

The shots of the guards tore the song to shreds. Sweet smells and great, untold sorrow, hung over the camp.

Chaban was crying behind the barbed wire.

Who would call on him tomorrow? Who would support him with a kind word when his pain spilt over, when it started to outpour like lava from a volcano, when the light was extinguished, when his spirits would sink and he would have to cry out his last "Remember me"? And the village would shut its eyes with compassion and fear. Would he be able to properly celebrate that horrible tomorrow? Once a child, he often thought of the last judgement as a holiday.

The stars had come out, sprinkling the dark sky with light.

Chaban lifted his eyes. The sky was massive, solemn, eternal. The distant stars glowed on him with their cold, indifferent light. The feeling of eternity and boundless space emptied his weary soul and comforted it a little.

"What is my death and my children's death?" Chaban thought. "And what is my petty suffering when thousands of our people vanish into oblivion. Families perish, whole generations without measure perish."

Chaban lowered his head and began touching and stroking his arms and legs.

"What nice and strong legs and arms I have. How much wheat they have reaped, how much hay they have mowed and stacked, how many people they have fed, how many miles they have travelled..."

He kept covering his eyes with his hand and, looking up at the stars, would again uncover them, to experience blindness. He prepared for the next day like a wrestler for a competition with an unknown force.

"No, officer, you'll have to wait a long time until you hear me speak. A long time..."

He clutched his jaws so strongly that something cracked in his ear, and he released them with difficulty.

"Could the partisans rescue us?" he thought and even began to peer through the wire into the shrubs from where his boys might come.

But no, he wouldn't be rescued by the partisans. They are far beyond the river, in the thicket, down the ravines. Too many Germans are here for the night in the village.

Some day they would probably be told how their leader was dying, how he despised his death so that they don't forget him, so that they live and avenge his death on the enemy with their inherent generosity.

He had been their leader since childhood, when they were still taking out the geese, and then calves, then were promoted to horses and allowed to take a stroll down the street. Even then everybody recognized his authoritative personality.

He also used to go fishing with his buddies. As he remembered their fishing trips, he was suddenly overcome with nausea. Hunger had attacked him again, as a wild beast clinging to his stomach and throat.

How badly he wanted to eat. If only someone could bring him just a bread crust.

"Petro... Petro..." he heard what resembled a woman's voice somewhere in the distance.

Chaban stood up and listened.

"Petro... is that you Petro? I've brought you something to eat — some bread, potatoes, and mushrooms..."

He recognized Levchikha's voice. She was hiding somewhere in the shrubs, calling to him quietly.

"I'll put them by the wire and run away. You take it but don't give it to anyone. That's for you only, understand? You can finish it up in the morning. You'll be stronger then, alright?"

"Alright," Petro replied in a muffled voice.

"Now, I'm going," Levchikha warned him quietly and ran out from the shrubs right in front of him.

Shots rang out...

"Oi!" Levchikha cried as if scared, and collapsed dead in the sand. The momentum carried her bundle ahead and it fell down by the wire. Her generous right hand was also outstretched by the momentum.

Chaban pressed himself to the ground and quickly started toward the wire. With all his strength he stretched his arm toward the bread — but couldn't reach it.

"Woman," he whispered quietly, gripping the sand with his fist.

Levchikha didn't respond. She was lying there, small and tidy, dressed in her Sunday best. She wore a clean blouse which she must have long kept in a chest for her funeral, an ancient long sleeveless jacket, and a new black skirt with small blue flowers. She even put on a coral necklace with a silver coin — a reminder of her youth. She seemed to have sensed her death. Her forehead was already touched with eternal rest. It seemed to glow in the dusk.

*We won't come back, our dear seagull mother,
For we've been eaten, your children are lost for ever.*

The quiet *chumak* requiem rose from the pit and was carried over the camp. The undying echo of bygone centuries resounded in the darkness over the barbed wire. It no longer begged, incriminated, or damned. It only contained reconciliation with the incessant flow of time and purified, lucid sorrow brewed from the dry flowers of the past.

Over the dead Levchikha stood Maxim Zabroda, head of the security squad, with a blue-yellow armband. A sub-machine gun gleamed on his chest. Chaban stood up, and they instantly recognized one another.

"Good songs come out of misfortune," Zabroda said quietly. "I know it myself. I also kept singing through the nights in exile in Solovki, and those were good songs. Where did I get that voice? The people there would start crying, sometimes even the guards."

Zabroda stepped over Levchikha's body and approached the wire.

"Today you'd better sing something, too, eh? I've come to listen. Really, sing something, will you?"

Zabroda's heavy eyes stared at Chaban from under the bushy, furrowed eyebrows. They seemed to flare from within. Through them came the flame of Zabroda's dark soul, enraged and bitter for as long as a quarter of a century.

"Pass me the bread," Chaban said stepping forward.

"Hold it! Feel like eating? It's good to have a bite before dying."

"Did you kill her?" Chaban asked in a muffled voice.

"Whom?" Zabroda looked around, "Ah, you mean Levchikha... Well, Levchikha's nothing. It's you that I feel sorry about. Yet, tomorrow, I'll have to carry out the

officer's orders. What kind of pain it'll be, Petro! You'll go soft and tell about the partisans and the weapons, and it will be too late. Too bad."

"I don't need your sympathy."

"But that's the way my heart works. My hatred for you, Petro, is as old as the hills, but since your hour of death has come I feel quite sorry... Maybe we'll make a deal, eh? Tell me, where the partisans and the weapons are?"

Zabroda looked Chaban in the eyes very closely. Chaban clenched his teeth.

"Leave me alone, you dog! Go and tell the officer that you can't make a deal with me. There he stands by the tree, I can see him. Off!.."

"Well, may you rest in peace, then, together with your principles. Of course, it was stupid of me to think..."

"To think what? You don't make a deal with the partisans. You judas!"

"Well, look at this Christ. I've already made my part of the deal in Solovki. Who sent me there with my parents, my whole family? Tell me, who!?"

Zabroda lifted his fist and began shaking it with anger.

"You scarred me first, Chaban. Now I'll get even my own way. Tomorrow it will be my feast. We'll drink to your Soviet rule and Levchikha... See, that bitch put on her Sunday best."

"Don't you dare say that," Chaban got furious. "She's a saint!"

"Who, she? D'you think I don't know where her sons are? They're in the woods with you."

Zabroda dropped his submachine gun on the sand and came up to the wire.

"Aha... you... you fear me?" Chaban growled.

"Who, me?..."

They couldn't bear it any longer and started a fight, gripping one another across the wire. They tried to break one another's arms and fingers, but then hugged and tried for a long time to strangle one another.

"Quiet, don't wheeze! Be quiet!"

"Quiet, I tell you!.."

They had been struggling a long time across the barbed wire. They grunted about power and land. They muttered about kulaks, exile, suffering in strange lands, hunger, death, betrayal.

They spat into each other's face with Siberia, suffering, hunger and death. They spat into each other's face with

Hitler, German-scorched land, the gallows, slavery and vicious hatred of the whole world toward Hitler. Hatred flared and exploded in their hearts.

They would break up, approach, and again would talk to each other and again would grip each other, and would stare at the glow of each other's eyes and teeth which sparkled in the darkness. They strangled each other and pressed each other's chest and head to the wire, and the sharp wire cut into their foreheads, and blood, and hatred, and passion began dripping.

"Quiet, quiet..."

They would not separate now. They wrestled and hated each other — in a whisper, lest anyone hear them in the silence of the autumn night, lest anyone interfere.

They mentioned Moscow and when Zabroda said that Moscow had already fallen and that Soviet power was dead, Chaban hit him with his fist as hard as he could. Lightning had struck Zabroda.

"You're lying!" Chaban shouted.

"I'm not... I heard it on the radio... Let go of me!"

"Your filthy radio is lying... Tell me now that you're lying. Tell or else I'll smash your head in!"

"Let go of me!.. Oi!"

"I won't! Pass me the bread! Pass me the bread, I tell you!.." Chaban wheezed.

"No... Quiet..."

They talked quietly and slowly, as if unwillingly, feeling tired, and the words leaving their lips seemed to be single shots. But suddenly, when a wave of antagonism again tore their flaming hearts apart, they would verbally shoot each other point blank with hails of fire. At such moments the words flew from their mouths with extraordinary speed and often collided on their way, stuck up into heaps, crushed each other and, when separated, were torn to shreds, to a yelp, to a wheeze, to a growl, to a gasp.

Foam then erupted on their pale lips, and the spatters that spurted from their mouths were like sparks flying out of the mouths of enraged dragons.

"Let go of me!"

"Let me! Oi-oi-oi! Ugh..."

At times in the heights of their struggle they relapsed into cursing apparently from great fatigue. As a gust of wind blew out the flame of passion from their lips, they buffeted one another with filthy, brutal curses.

“Let go... your mother... Let go, don't strangle me... Let go, you Jewish kin! You beggar!”

“Ah, you German puppy! You German lackey! Ah... Let go of me!”

“So you're begging, you bastard? Tomorrow we'll spin your guts on a stick. We'll cut out those stars from your damned skin.”

“Go ahead, cut, the devil take you!”

“The bones of your bastard children will crack. I'll slash them myself. Can you hear! I'll beg the officer on my knees, and I'll do it myself!”

“Listen, judas, you devilish kin. Was it really our land that gave you life?”

At this point Chaban pushed Zabroda away.

The fertile Ukrainian land gave life to many things. It has been generously fertilized from time immemorial. Many a knight and a peasant had furrowed it with their spears and plowshares. Much scum had fertilized it. The soul of the people is rich and complex. But people...

Many of them would ramble from now on in the mountains, over the hills, many of them would be scattered across strange lands...

“What have you done, you German henchman?” Chaban said after Zabroda got on his feet and approached him again. “Where did you get from, you carrion crow? Tell me, you devil's son. Your Hitler will be finished anyway. It's nothing that I'll die. I don't fear death. You hear me? But I'm really terrified when I think of where the bones of our poor peasants, those Hitler deceived, will rot. Maybe in Africa, or Scandinavia? Maybe in deserts, or in foreign seas?”

Zabroda caught Petro's hand.

“Oh... Don't twist my arm, you German slave!”

“Am I a slave? Was it slave?”

“Yes, I mean you. And who do you think you are?”

“I'm...”

“Aha, you're crying.”

“I'm not. It's you who's crying, bastard. Why are you crying? Over your lot, you devil?..”

“Let go of me. I don't want to talk to you,” Chaban grunted. “Leave me alone. I want to think something over before I die. Go away. I want to clean myself from your touch. I'm a people's partisan, I am. And you are a corpse. You're dead!”

Chaban looked at Levchikha.

"Pass me the bread now! Pass me the bread. I won't eat it. I'll only kiss it."

"No way!!!" Zabroda was furious and in a frenzy trampled the bundle of rye bread and Levchikha's dead hand.

Chaban turned into stone. He could see his own death. Here it was — trampling nearby, furious, inexorable. And human lust for life took over Chaban. From the vast Ukrainian steppes, in the gullies and dark ravines he could smell the ashes of history, the burned remains, the smoke, the bubbling blood.

The passion of struggle and revenge, all of his will and mind sparkled in him with such a tremendous force that in a split second he seemed to be verging on explosion.

"Stop you dog!" he wheezed out and his eyes glared menacingly.

Zabroda stopped moving.

"Ugh?.. Aha!.." he cried out and, his mouth open, turned to Chaban.

They threw themselves on the wire once again, now silently. Their chests thudded, they hugged one another and only then did Zabroda realize that he was already dead.

It was a different Chaban already. As if with iron pliers he clutched at Zabroda. He clenched him, tore him off the ground, lifted him, wheezed heavily and with all his strength pulled Zabroda to his side and pressed his throat to the wire.

The wire gave way. Then, gripping the torn wire with his bare hands, Chaban wound it around Zabroda and tied a deadly knot around his neck.

Then he threw himself at the wire like a lion. The iron barbs pierced his bare feet, arms and chest, they cut and tore his skin to shreds, but he didn't feel anything.

He broke out and was free.

"Halt!" the officer barked out from under the tree and, hastily pulling out his Mauser pistol from its wooden holster, started running to overtake Chaban. The officer hadn't expected this, and Chaban was already standing on top of the fence.

"Halt!" the officer yelled once again, already standing by the wire, and shot at Chaban's head at a sharp angle. He didn't have a second chance. Chaban was upon the officer like lightning and dealt him a severe head blow, killing him instantly. Yet, Chaban couldn't stop himself.

He spat a dozen of his teeth into the officer's face and kept pounding on his dead head with such brute force that his knuckles broke.

"Cry as you may, no one will hear... No one will hear..."

Shots cut the silence. Then Chaban snatched Zabroda's submachine gun and drew himself up. He was covered with blood, was ablaze, passionate.

"Hey!" he called. "Stand up all you strong and mighty! Hey, those who want to live climb out of your graves! Stand up, hey!"

"Halt!" The Germans kept yelling from the watchtower.

"Straighten your backs! Break up the wires!"

"Halt! Halt!"

"Hurrah!!!" The whole camp thundered.

"Forward, brothers! Hurrah!!!"

All who were behind the wire crawled out from the graves, the caves, the pits. All stood upright, rose and rushed at the wire fence with such a force that the fence dropped down and in no time sank in the sand, trampled by thousands of feet.

"Hail freedom!"

The front ranks had already reached the shrubs. Some already thought the escape was complete when a dozen nazis with submachine guns struck right in the middle of the crowd. Many men rolled down, moaning in the darkness. Some stopped.

"Keep moving, keep moving, for all of us will be lost! Not a step of retreat," Chaban was thundering, "Attention!"

Neither the Ukrainian moon nor the stars have ever seen anything like that. Chaban was like a passionate prophet. Nothing could stop him. He killed half the German submachine-gunners single-handedly. His cartridge emptied, he hit them with the submachine gun as if it were a mace, and killed each one with only one blow. Darkness ceased to exist for him. He could see everything and everyone. He was leading the people across the Desna River to where the weapons were cached.

"Not a step of retreat! Follow me forward!"

Their way paved with dead bodies, the captives darted after Chaban through the shrubs.

No one retreated, not a single man — such was their yearning for life. The yearning was so great that the waters in the Desna began boiling when the people set crossing it.

Even those who had never swam leaped from the bluff into the Desna. Unable, they nonetheless crossed, or rather crawled over the Desna, bewildered by their extraordinary ability. Only some whom hunger had deprived of strength or stamina, or those injured, could not overcome their inability to swim. They died in the clear Desna waters unaware that they were drowning. Even in their last conscious moment it seemed to them that they were aspiring to freedom, and the joy of liberation didn't leave them till the very moment of death.

Only now and then a work-weary hand surfaced on the Desna, as if sending to those living its last farewell.

"Farewell, comrades! Make it to the shore! Make it, brothers, and avenge our motherland the best you can! Be happy, always be happy!.. I'm sinking..."

And the work-weary hand disappeared into the grey waters.

As for Petro Chaban, he is still raiding with his brothers along the Desna, bringing death to the German invaders with his inherent Ukrainian generosity.

1942

Translated by Olexiy Solohubenko

MOTHER

This tale of a noble death has been written not to bring tears, or despair, or grief, not to bring bitter curses — for the curses have already been uttered by all the world — but for the glory of our people, in the name of love.

Though the losses we suffered at the hands of fate were countless, unforgettable, though it is more enjoyable today to read some entertaining, delightful story amidst the hubbub, let us now read about one woman, a mother, Maria Stoyan.

Who is he that runs past enemy corpses through the burning village?

Who is he that moans as he runs, heart pounding, bursting from his chest?

It is Vasil, son of Maria Stoyan, with submachine gun and hand grenades.

Who is she hanging by the cottage, lifeless beneath the sky?

His mother.

On Vasil runs, bathed in sweat from the long battle, racked with anxiety. As a scout he has fought hard on the approaches of his native village. One of his grenades sent sky-high a pillbox it what used to be his uncle's house. They have driven then enemy out. Vasil runs through the whole village, past everything that once was a village. What remains are two hundred smokestacks, charred stumps in orchards, fragments of crockery, shell holes, and many enemy corpses coated in dirt and blood.

"Mother, where are you? It's me, Vasil, I'm alive. Ivan got killed, mother, but I'm alive... I killed them, mother, about two hundred of them... Where are you?"

Vasil ran into the farmyard. Here, at the foot of the rise, the farmyard used to be.

"Mother, my dear mother, where are you? Why don't you meet me? Why don't I hear your quiet voice? Where are you, my gray-haired darling?"

He stopped by the house, but there was no house any more. Vasil turned to the farmyard — no farmyard, then to the orchard — no orchard. There was only one old pear tree, and hanging from it — his mother.

What inexpressible horror... What unforgettable grief...

When she was still alive and the cottage stood intact by the edge of the village, someone once knocked at the door at midnight in a raging snowstorm.

"Who's there?"

"Let us in, we're dying..."

"What's up, who are you, where are you from?"

"We're Russians. Pilots! They shot us down."

"Lordy, in with you quick, so I can close the door. No one seen you? The place is swarming with Germans."

Supporting each other, two cripples entered the house. They collapsed to the floor and immediately lost consciousness, sleeping deeply for thirty-six hours. She almost believed they had died.

She washed their feet with hot water, heated the house thoroughly, and warmed up their food about three times, but they kept on sleeping. She wept all those nights and days, thinking about her sons, Ivan and Vasil. Who would feed them, who would give them shelter at such a hard time? Where were they? Maybe they lay senseless somewhere in a field, or hung from gallows in a German POW camp with the crows pecking out their frozen eyes. And

never would they look at her, or ask something of her, or cry... There was so much death around. Children, my children.

Stepan Pshenitsin and Kostya Ryabov were both from the Urals. They belonged to that breed of Russian youth that for centuries would become the object of study and keen admiration of historians of the great human tragedy. Unshaven, seared by frost, wind and the gruelling experiences of life, they gasped and moaned deliriously in their sleep. In their dreams war troubled their hearts, war... They were simple boys from the Urals, educated to a certain extent, industrious Komsomol members from good workers' families. They had not wanted to go to war, but in accordance with the old Russian tradition they did not shun it, did not whimper. They left for the front as volunteers to get to the enemy as fast as they could and finish him off. They very quickly became pilots just as simply and easily as they might have become submariners or snipers. Nature had kindly endowed them everything in good measure, and they themselves were kind.

“At first, mother, we pounced the fascists with heavy bombs for some time, then we were transferred to educational work. We didn't like that too much though, but it was an order, you know.”

“What sort of work was that?” Maria Stoyan asked one evening as they were talking in low voices in her house.

“We dropped leaflets over Ukraine, so that people should know the truth about the war,” said Pshenitsin.

“I see so you were the ones... You were doing a great job, my boys,” she said with a sigh. “What are bombs — the devil take them — compared with good news in captivity. With all the ignorance around, with people's heads crammed with wily fascist lies it isn't worth living. It seems like the end of the world, that's it.”

Listening to those simple maternal words spoken in an enslaved land, Pshenitsin and Ryabov realized for the first time what a great mission had been entrusted to them.

In the twilight of the poorly furnished old cottage, to the howling of a snowstorm and the ominous rumble of the approaching front, they heard how people copied those leaflets by hand, how they memorized every word and passed it on from village to village in a revival of hope. The words of truth burned in the darkness like a fire on

a long, cold night. Thousands of people, deprived of freedom, hopeless, deceived, entangled in lies, were saved by the leaflets from rash and terrible deeds.

Pshenitsin and Ryabov sat for a long time, musing. Then they told her how they had been shot down over a forest at night, had bailed out and broken arms and legs in the process, how they had fled eastward through woods and gullies and hidden from the Germans in ravines, drifts and ditches. Relating all this, they were amazed at their own extraordinary strength and will to live.

"Where did that happen, my dears," she asked, clasping her hands in emotion.

"Far away. Five hundred kilometers away."

"And when?"

"More than a month ago. The bones have already knitted together," they said, showing her their scars and crippled limbs.

"My God, what..."

"Oh, that's nothing. Flesh will grow on a live bone. We're the kind that can stand up to anything. All we need now is some rest to gain more strength, and then we'll crawl through to the front line, even under the snow for that matter," the irrepressible young men comforted old Maria Stoyan.

"Now, what can I do with you. My boys are just like you."

For two weeks Maria hid the guests. She kept watch by the house, fed them, and when everything was spent, she went around the village begging for alms, and not just for anything, but for milk and lard. No one refused her, no one asked her any questions, although there was ample reason for suspicion: Stoyan would not have gone around asking just for herself.

But Maria was not destined to save the young men. One morning the village awoke to the roar of gun trucks: a battered unit had moved in to rest. The Germans scurried about. Maria went out of the house and returned immediately.

"They're coming!"

The Germans appeared on the threshold.

"Who are they?"

"My sons."

"You lie!"

"No, I don't, they're my children, I swear!"

"Search the house!"

"Don't touch them, they're sick and crippled... Oh my God!"

"Halt! That your mother?"

"Yes, my mother," said Ryabov.

"You lie, commissar!" roared the German reaching for his gun.

The mother stood in front of the young men, shielding them with her body.

"You won't! Beat me... I won't give them to you, you beasts! Don't touch them, you were born of a human being, a mother, and not a she-wolf, weren't you?" Stoyan cried.

"Why did you hide them?"

"I was afraid. You're so terrible! There's nothing as terrible as you in the world!"

"Ha-ha-ha! Are we? You've got a point there, old hag. There's nothing more terrible than us — and there musn't be!" the German roared in laughter.

Two hours later the nazis herded the whole village to the square, and made Pshenitsin and Ryabov stand before them all. They looked at the people, but there were no familiar faces in the crowd.

"Goodbye, Urals," Pshenitsin whispered, looking at his friend.

"Goodbye..."

"People, don't you see that's my Vasil and Ivan! Don't you recognize them!" Stoyan cried in despair. "Tell them they're mine! People!" she begged her villagers.

The people wept and nodded in consent. Even the village headman and the local *Polizei* did not dare deny it.

Only Palazhka, the widow the the *Polizei* chief who had been killed by the partisans, was ominously silent.

"Palazhka, tell them they're my sons, otherwise you'll be damned in this world and in the one to come," Maria Stoyan whispered to her. "God will ask of you, Palazhka."

"*Frau* Palazhka, are these her sons?" asked the commandant.

Everyone stopped talking and turned their eyes on her. A deafening silence followed.

The commandant became red in the face. His thick neck started to swell like that of a cobra. He had guessed the plot.

"Well?"

"They're her sons," said Palazhka with downcast eyes.

With all his might he slapped her across the face. Before

she could utter a sound she sagged to the ground like a sheaf.

"What's your surname?" he suddenly demanded of the pilots.

"Oh-h!" Stoyan moaned as if wounded in the heart. She had not told them her surname, and they, through a foolish oversight, had not asked it.

Felled by a blow to the head, she could not get up at once. As in a dream she heard Pshenitsin and Ryabov calling to her, "Farewell, mother! Thanks! With you it's not so dreadful to die!"

Then the gun fire erupted.

They lay in the snow, embracing each other. She was taken under the arms and, blows raining upon her from felt and right, was led away. The Germans blew up her house with a grenade and dragged her to the pear tree. Before her eyes the tree started to swim.

"Don't hang me, don't put me to shame. How can I, an old woman that I am, be hanged. Give me the bullet, one little bullet, I beg of you, I beg..."

But they would not listen to her. So she rapidly mounted a stump and crossed herself.

"Don't touch me, you scum. Don't you claw my neck..." She herself put the noose on her neck.

"My children..." and with these words she stepped into the air.

For a long time Vasil lay on the snow by the pear tree. There was no one to hear him moan and lament and grind his teeth. In the early hours of morning, when the cold had numbed his heart and a din proclaimed the advent of dawn, Vasil calmed down as if he had dropped into an exhausted sleep. Then, rising from the ground, he kissed his mother's cold hand.

"Farewell, mother... All your kindness and gentle nature, which you gave me, I leave here with you by the pear tree, mother."

Then he went to the ruins of the house, picked up a handful of ashes and wrapped them in a handkerchief.

"This I will take with me, mother, so that neither my feet nor my hands and heart should grow weary."

Fighting units were moving along the road to the west.

"Private Stoyan!"

"I'm coming!"

"Who's the woman hanging there?"

"My mother!"

"Your mother?"

"My mother, friends, my dear mother..."

"Com-pa-a-ny, halt! Caps off! For-wa-ard march!"

The troops went past her with their caps off. On the way to battle they paid tribute to motherhood. The guns roared. The sun tinted the snow red. The roar of guns sent the rime falling in fairytale flakes over the mother's wide-open eyes.

And who of the living or those yet to come would not bow in reverence to the imperishable beauty of Maria Stoyan, the mother who begged mercy for children not her own. Take a look, there she hangs above the dear frozen earth. Her hands, small and gentle, with long beautiful fingertips, those industrious hands that had grown so much grain and spun so much yarn, are stretched out palms upward.

"I've nothing left, my children. I've given you everything — happiness, the future."

Her little figure seems to fly in the cold wind, her gray head, turned to one side, touches the oncoming spring clouds.

Glory to you, mother Maria, to the beauty that is yours.

Not for you expensive boots, not for you Parisian perfumes — naught but the scent of wormwood and hemp. Not for you fine silks or the latest in hats, not for you a locked hoard of valuables. Not for you foreign travel, you had no time for that. Like a bee, from dewfall to dewfall, you carried honey to the Soviet hive till the misanthropes of Europe took your life.

But the world will yet come to you, it will come to look at the ruins of your hearth beneath the sky, to the dried gillyflowers you placed in the oven niche to ward off the evil eye, to look at your monument; and if there is but one drop of conscience in the world, those from abroad will bow to your beauty, our dear Slavic mother, dear Ukrainian woman.

Where you a communist or not? Did you carry a Party card? Probably not. But the seed planted by the great Lenin took root and grew in your heart.

So let the whole world know how you were hanged from an old pear tree for the sake of your friends during the great world war in a blood-stained Ukrainian village in a blood-stained Ukraine.

MODRY KAMEN

1

I see you coming out of your mountain cottage and stopping to look down the slope.

"Teresa!" your mother calls, but you stand there, taking no heed.

"Teresa!"

But you are smiling to someone unseen.

The wind is sweeping over the Rudohorie. The noises of spring resound joyfully in your ears, green oak-woods are humming on the hillsides, and boulders, licked smooth, are grinning at the sun.

"Teresa! Is someone coming?"

And you raise your arms like wings, as if to fly.

"Oh, Mummy dear! Our good Lord sees who's coming!"

The wind is booming in the sky high above you, the blue dome resounding like a giant bell.

2

What do you see there? What sounds do you hear?

The night was cold and dismal when I tapped on the window of your cottage. I could hear that the people inside were still up, but there was no response. They were evidently arguing it out. Gusts of snow coming around the side wall blinded me. The white wind groaned in the emptiness of the hills.

I tapped again, warily, as if the sound might be overheard by those patrolling on the road far below.

"Please, who's there?"

Who were we? What answer could I give?

"Friends," I said, scarcely hearing my own voice: for the third day running we had been quenching our thirst with snow.

"Friends," I croaked as loudly as I could.

And then the words, "Mother, they are Russians!" rang out clearly, like a sunbeam breaking against a window pane.

The door was opened timidly, fearfully. I stepped into the room, finger on the trigger of my submachine gun.

Then I switched on my flashlight and the bright shaft of light revealed your frightened mother, rooted to the spot beside a table, and you, tense with excitement, in front of a large bedstead, your hands pressing your long, loose hanging hair to your breasts.

Switching off the flashlight I told you to do what I said.

The match trembled in your mother's fingers as she lit the lamp. You climbed barefoot onto a chair to draw the curtains.

The sight of your shapely white legs embarrassed me and I turned away, but it was no good: they remained there, before my eyes, no matter which way I looked.

You jumped down and stood facing me. It was then that I became aware of the rents and holes in my white camouflage overalls. You were dressed in white, too, and you wore a black armband.

"So this is what the Russians look like!"

"You thought we'd look different?"

"N-no..."

You held out your white hand to me. And mine was moist, red and clumsy, swathed in soiled bandages. Besides serving their direct purpose, the bandages did duty for the mittens which I had lost while pushing my way through that rocky hell.

"Have you any visitors here?"

"None nowadays, Soldier," your mother said.

She stood in front of a tiled fireplace, looking at me sadly.

"You are in mourning?..."

"For our František," your mother said.

And you said, "For the Czechoslovak Republic."

I went out, walked past the sheepfold with its sounds of quiet shuffling, and gave a low whistle. Ilya, ghost-like in his white cloak, detached himself from a haystack swearing as he did, for he was freezing. "Well, what've you found out?" he asked.

"All clear."

"Shall I take along the box?"

"Sure."

We entered together. The sight of the fireplace im-

mediately put Ilya in a happy mood, he put his "box" down on the floor by the door and shook off the snow, listening curiously to the melodious flow of the Slovak language.

"My, it's just like home!" he exclaimed, amazed. "I can understand everything they say!"

"And we can understand you. We are Slovaks."

"Well, at last we're through with that 'Nem tudom *'," Ilya said. "Makes it kind of homey, eh?"

Your mother pointed to our box by the door.

"What have you got in there?"

You made a correct guess, "It's a radio."

"A radio!" Your mother flung up her hands. "Oh, please, please, I don't want to have it in the house. You two may stay, but, please, take the thing away. It's caused us so much grief already. Because of it we've lost our František."

František, her son, used to stay up far into the night listening in. He would tune in to Prague or Moscow, and then, reckless as he was, would go around telling the things he'd heard to his fellow workers. So one day Tiso's cutthroats broke into the cottage, smashed the radio and led František away. Last Thursday they shot him in the quarry. The Standartenführer said the boy was a partisan. They think every Slovak is a partisan. For the love of God, could anyone in his right senses call her husband a partisan? He being just an ordinary forester! Yet they took him away, too, and drove him to dig trenches for the Germans. So, please, we don't want any more trouble here.

"But look, Lady, our radio's deaf and dumb!" Ilya said placatingly.

"No, take it away, soldiers, please!"

Ilya picked up the radio and carried it out of the cottage.

Waves of warmth from the fireplace enveloped me, and I felt groggy. I was shivering, but I knew that it was because the cold absorbed out there in the mountains was now seeping out of my body. Playing safe, we had lit no fire during the three days up there. We had either crawled among the rocks high above the road, or climbed to the top of the ridge to get a better view of the batteries stationed deeper in the enemy rear. From time to time we called up the "Symphony" and radioed the data.

* I don't understand (Hungarian)

We had to keep changing our position, and that was the worst part of it. After nightfall, groping our way among the rocks, we often lost our footing. But for the deep snow we would have broken our necks. We did skin our hands, hurt our knees and rip our clothes, though, and, what was much worse, our radio got damaged in a fall.

"Here's what these pirouettes add up to," Ilya had said ruefully on satisfying himself that the radio would not work.

But by that time the main objective of our mission had been achieved, and that night we decided to cross the front line back to our territory.

You filled a wash-basin with warm water. I tried to remove the bandages, but my fingers were too stiff and unwieldy.

"Here, let me do it!"

Your fingers were deft and full of gentle warmth. I felt no pain when you peeled off the blood-stained bandages. You threw them into the corner and bandaged my hands, which felt so much better and lighter after you had bathed them in warm water, with your own gauze, deliciously soft and dry.

"Russian gentlemen, may I invite you to our Slovak table," your mother said. "We'll have hot coffee."

You served it.

"Please, have another cup," you said after I had drunk mine. "We've been waiting for you a very long time... Comrade!"

You were looking straight into my eyes, and at that moment I felt that you entered my heart.

3

We sat smoking... dozing... nodding drowsily. We hadn't had a wink of sleep for the last sixty hours.

"You sleep and I shall keep watch," you said.

We got up from the sofa, laughing.

"Kam?*" you asked, your eyes pleading.

Your mother, wan and sorrowful, whispered fervently, like a nun. I knew that she was praying.

"Look, Mother," Ilya said, "We'll be back soon! With

* Where to? (Slovak)

cannon and Katyushas. I'll bring you a new radio-set, and you'll be able to listen to any station in the world!"

"God help you!" she whispered. "Terry, see the soldiers out."

We went out into the blinding snowstorm, leaving the light, and the warmth, and human kindness behind us.

Far below, in what looked like a deep dungeon, the front line thundered away incessantly. Yellow fires, dull and hazy, glowed beyond Modry Kamen. Modry Kamen was the name of the town, but our soldiers called the place "Murder Kamen," because all our attempts to seize it had so far been unsuccessful. It was flanked on both sides by unassailable bastion-like heights.

Wrapped up in a shawl, you led the way, skipping gracefully from boulder to boulder. We came to a point overlooking the highway which was like a white abyss in the darkness. Down below black German cars dotted the road; their drivers hopped around a bonfire, swinging their arms to keep warm. White gusts of snow whirled in the light of the fire.

You showed us a short cut to the hills and pulled off a mitten for a farewell handshake.

"What's your name?"

Your slender, sensitive hand trembled slightly, its warmth penetrating my very heart.

I glanced at the mountains, at the windswept rocks, and felt that they were no longer strange to me.

"We'll meet again, Teresa. It's just impossible for us not to meet again."

You stood there lost in thought.

"I have a feeling that it was Providence that brought us together here."

"Will you wait for me?"

"So help me God, I will."

4

I did in fact return.

Modry Kamen was ours by that time, and so was the highway, and so were the mountains.

I saw from afar that your house had been burnt down. The bared chimney rose above the black heap of fire-ravaged ruins like a trumpet announcing unspeakable sorrow.

I approached the ruins and saw your mother. Bent low she poked the ashes with a stick. After examining whatever she came across she let it drop and went on poking; it was quite clear that her thoughts were elsewhere, she wasn't looking for anything in particular, and was doing that just to keep herself busy.

"Good afternoon," I said.

"Good afternoon," she replied and went on rummaging. She had not recognized me.

But when I reminded her who I was, she gazed at me, and her tightly compressed lips trembled. She staggered and steadied herself against the tiled fireplace which alone had survived the fire.

With tears streaming down her face she told me her story:

"They came the very next day looking for my husband.

"'He deserted his work!' the policemen raged. 'And spent the night here.'

"No, he didn't," Teresa told them.

"'That's a damn lie!' they shouted. 'There are footprints in the snow. And you accompanied him and someone else to the road, 'cause your small footprints are there, too!'

"After that they ransacked the cottage. They searched the attic, and the pantry, and all the rooms, smashing all our crockery, and finally they found the blood-stained bandages.

"'Whose blood is this?' one of them demanded.

"'Mine, sir', Teresa said. 'I cut my finger some time ago!'

"'D'you think you can fool us?' they raged. 'The stains are fresh! You were hiding partisans!'

"There was an old German policeman with them, and as soon as he heard the word, he told Teresa, 'You'll have to come with us!'

"And so they set out for Mikulov, taking her away with them.

"I could hardly keep up with them climbing the path. But Teresa was walking ahead of them, and she didn't cry, only looked back from time to time.

"'You'd better go home, Mummy,' she told me. 'The climb will wear you out.'

"The nearer they got to the top of the ridge, the more often she looked back.

"'Hey, what is it? What are you looking at?' they jeered.

"'I want to have a good look at Modry Kamen.'

“ ‘Got a lover there, eh?’

“ ‘Yes.’

“And then they came up to the very crest, to the highway where it turns toward Mikulov. A few steps more and our countryside would have disappeared from sight. That’s when my Terry turned chalk-white and stopped to have a last look at it. But they yelled, ‘Get moving!’

“ ‘Please, let me have one minute more. Let me take Modry Kamen along with me, in my heart.’

“ ‘You are not looking at the village,’ they said, ‘but at something else. Your lover must be hiding somewhere else.’

“And I, too, noticed that she was looking in another direction.

“Then suddenly, one of them shrieked out, as if bitten by a snake, ‘I know! She wants to see the Russians!’

“And they lashed out at her with their whips. But she fended off the blows and kept looking. From the crest we could already see the Russians firing far below, on the horizon...

“Then, they grabbed Terry by the arms and flung her forward. They pushed and shoved her and snarled, ‘Don’t look round!’

“But she wiped the blood off her face without a word and kept looking round.

“ ‘Now you’ll get what you’re asking for!’ the policemen shouted, and drove her on with their whips.

“I ran after them, then stumbled and fell on a stone. And there I stayed crying till nightfall...”

Memories fade and vanish. Even of the first love, so often said to be unforgettable. Why then is the memory of this chance meeting, this fleeting vision, this brief episode in the great drama of war so vivid in my mind, vivid, and bright, and unfading?

I think of you as if you were still alive. The distant Rudohorie follows me everywhere, growing nearer with every day and unfolding wider and wider in all its tragic beauty. In my mind’s eye it is no longer packed with snow. It is green and lush, warmed by the springtime sun and the valleys, looking so like blue lakes, are abloom with the first flowers which you call “nebovy kl’uc” — the key to heaven.

You come out onto the carved wooden porch wearing a light white dress with a black armband and stop to look into the distance, beyond Modry Kamen, where we once

held our position. The battlefield is already overgrown with riotous grass. And Slovaks ride in wagons driven by placid oxen along the asphalt highway running across the former no man's land. As they ride, they look at the vines that once were crushed and bullet-torn, stretching now, reaching for the sun, and growing...

At a time like this we often meet, you and I, and sit on a sunwarmed boulder, talking happily.

T e r e s a: It took you so long to come back!

I: That's all over now. I'll never part with you again.

T e r e s a: Never?

I: Never!

T e r e s a: And we'll always be together! That's all I could wish for. I've been waiting for you ever since that winter night. And time was creeping so slowly: I think it must've been a thousand years!

I: And I felt the same making my way back to you!

T e r e s a: But now we've met as last! Give me your hand. I know that those thousand years have now shifted to lie ahead of us! Isn't that so? We've got a thousand years before us! A thousand years all our own. We'll live on and on, till these mountains stop turning green and the sun stops shining! Oh, the wonder of it makes me breathless!

I: And we'll never have to hurry anywhere, like we had to that winter night. We didn't even have time to talk about you and me. The wind was howling so fiercely between the rocks.

T e r e s a: But now we have all the time in the world! And I'm going to tell you everything that was left untold that night. So listen! Do you hear the green backs of the mountains peeling as they bask in the warm sunshine? And the high blue dome of the springtime sky above us is booming, windswept, like a giant bell!... Listen to it! Listen!

THE TEACHER

I heard this story one night to the light pattering of a summer rain.

We sat on the roofed veranda of the Zeleni Hai bus station at the 1088-kilometer mark of the Moscow-Simferopol motorway, and talked about all sorts of insignificant things as travelers usually do.

There were four of us at the table: an elderly agronomist who was waiting for a car from his collective farm to pick him up, a black-haired young man with a pale face, a stout man with brown hair who had missed his bus to Kharkiv and had to stay overnight in Zeleni Hai, and me.

Three of us had already supped on what the local restaurant had to offer and were having a leisurely smoke, while the stout man was eating watermelon with a loud snuffle. For some reason he was eating it with a fork, chocking constantly on the seeds and sputtering without so much as covering his mouth.

Suddenly the electric bulbs in the glass balls of the chandeliers started to blink and then went out. Black mountains of darkness closed in on the people and hid them from one another. The darkness dissociated and oppressed them. Confused as they became, they stopped talking and grew reticent and reserved. After a while, the waitresses brought in tallow candles but they barely lit the place at all.

The night was dark, and there wasn't a single star in the sky. The rain sluggishly rustled down the roof into a pool right in the center of the yard and from there, onto the asphalt walks. Although it had been drizzling for quite some time, it didn't freshen the air, which was sultry and made us feel somewhat cramped.

"It's like being covered with a blanket of cotton," the stout man grumbled and started demanding the guest book so he could write a complaint that the station's management had neglected to provide proper lighting.

We kept our peace. The young man was pensively drumming the table with the fingers of his right hand;

the agronomist made himself more comfortable in his chair and heaved a sigh that betrayed a weariness of a man sick of tramping about the steppe, and discontent at having to sit around like this with nothing to do but wait for a truck with a plywood cover or even just a dump truck to pick him up; or perhaps it was chagrin at having to waste so much time in such bus stations as this one, listening to the tedious whisper and pattering of rain drops or the predatory whistling of torrid steppe winds.

From the first floor came the sounds of a grand piano: someone was playing Chaikovsky's *Barcarole*.

"Beautiful music," said the agronomist, moved, after listening to it for a while. "It's beautiful and gentle like spring flowers. But I know nothing about music. What a pity. I know about flowers, about music — nothing."

"To know anything about music you must eat only radishes and black bread," said the stout man and, going off into a peal of laughter at his own joke, again sputtered almost into the face of the young man.

The latter put up his hand protectively and said in an unexpectedly angry voice, "What do radishes and all your jokes have to do with it? If you want, I'll tell you a story and you'll see for yourself that it's improper to speak so disrespectfully about music and the people who devote themselves to it."

The rain kept pattering on, the whites of the young man's eyes gleamed blue in the semidarkness, and it was completely unclear what he wanted to tell about or what his story had to do with the shadowy darkness the pointed candle flames were trying desperately to dispel, or what it had to do with the beautiful music floating from upstairs and the stout man who was still working away at the six-kilogram Kherson watermelon, spearing its slices with a blackened restaurant fork.

"So you'll understand everything, I'll start from the beginning," said the young man.

He stopped as if he wanted to ask whether he should proceed with the story.

"Go on, go on," the agronomist encouraged him. "It's sure to be interesting."

It happened in the south, in a small town where the sea peeps into the windows of little houses and the air is always filled with the tang of salt, algae, iodine, and fish scales. Nobody in this town of fishermen knew where

Hrihoriy Matviyovich Sobolenko had come from, but it was certain he wasn't a local. As far as anyone remembered, he had always been a teacher at the music school which had been established not long before.

So the town took an interest in Hrihoriy Matviyovich as a music teacher. The interest was especially heightened when it became known that he would be marrying Marina, the prettiest girl in town and the daughter of the old boatswain Drabina. Nobody could understand what had made Marina fall for such an oddity who couldn't do anything but play his violin. On the whole, he wasn't handsome; he was a lanky, clumsy fellow who wore glasses with thick lenses through which he probably couldn't see much anyway.

When the young couple moved into their first apartment, all their belongings consisted of a fiber plastic suitcase, an old charcoal iron, a whicker armchair with a sagging seat, a bundle of sheet music, and the violin. Marina's easy, carefree life came to an end. Now she had a lot of new responsibilities. She had to go to the market, cook the meals, do the rooms, and help her husband copy his music and articles which from time to time he sent to the magazine *Music and Revolution* in the capital.

Hrihoriy Matviyovich had a lot of work to do at the school, because the fishermen's children, who were more accustomed to the unruly music of the sea than to the sounds escaping from the wooden confines of the tender instruments, had not made any particular progress thus far. He dreamed that at least one of his students would become a great musician in the future and bring fame to his little town. "For every little town has a right to have a great man," Sobolenko liked to repeat.

"They say all of us are endowed with talents by nature, but so far no obstetrician has ever seen those talents," said the stout man with a tittering laugh.

The young man fell silent, obviously displeased at being interrupted.

"Go on," the agronomist asked him to continue.

"Well, back to Sobolenko," the young man said, jolted out of his silence.

Sobolenko held additional classes at the school, spent hours in the little town library, rereading old books on art, and frequently came home very late in the evening. Marina

was at home alone most of the time. When she grew sad from loneliness, she would pull the armchair over to the window and look onto the sea. The monotone of the sea was gentle and soothing; it made Marina take her loneliness with a light heart. In this way she would drift into slumber to the sound of the sea. Hrihoriy would come at night, moving noisily around the house, banging pot lids in search of a cold meal, and saying in a disgruntled voice to his poor wife who was half-asleep by then: "I wonder how you can sleep so much. Remember what Napoleon said: a man must sleep four hours a day, a woman five, a child six, and only strait-laced fools sleep more than six!"

Marina couldn't care less what Napoleon had said. She got tired doing housework, and now that Hrihoriy had disrupted her first slumber her head ached terribly; but so as not to offend her husband, her lips, puffy from sleep, curved into a smile and she kept her fingertips pressed to her eyelids lest they shut close as she sat there in the armchair.

"How could you have fallen in love with him?" Marina's girl friends wondered. "It's so dull with him!"

"Oh, you don't understand anything," she would say in reply. "He's an unusual man!"

Then a boy was born to them, as light-eyed and risible as Marina herself. The young mother was completely at a loss: she had hoped that eventually she and Hrihoriy would start a new life, merry, carefree, easy like a summer breeze, but now it was an altogether different picture. Hrihoriy worked even more, spending sleepless nights and ignoring even days off and holidays.

"I don't understand how people fail to see what a lot of time they waste away," he said, amazed. "Fifty-two Sundays in a year, dozens of holidays, half a hundred anniversaries and red-letter days! How many books could be read and what a lot of other things could be done!"

When they went to parties at their acquaintances or relatives, Hrihoriy did not dance, nor did he laugh or joke; he stood somewhere to the side with knit brows and tightly set lips which lent his face a look that seemed to say: "I know you loafers all right!"

At first Marina tried to stir him somehow to distract him from his sharps and flats for a while, but he doggedly resisted his wife and said discontentedly, "Please, leave

me in peace. You see for yourself that I work day and night. So why expect me to be full of pep as if I were a young billy goat and not a music teacher."

"But must a man's life consist only of work and nothing else?" Marina asked in a whisper.

"I don't see anything else of interest," Hrihoriy Matviyovich rejoined with a shrug.

Her girl friends were right: for such a woman as Marina, Sobolenko was a bore.

A more fitting mate for her would have been Stepan Zhivodyor, a witty, plucky navigator, who occasionally visited their town and shouted to Marina, "Marina, let's sail to Rio de Janeiro!"

"Ha-ha-ha," Marina laughed.

"Marina, let's take off to Buenos Aires!"

"Ha-ha-ha," came her reply.

"Marina, what about going out to Bab el Mandeb?"

And again there was an irresistible peal of laughter that carried like an echo through a silent night.

Stepan knew a countless number of exotic names that could have turned any woman's head, let alone Marina's. His sturdy build exuded the breath of marvelous distant towns, islands and oceans, and his words held for her promises of boundless happiness, joy and good fortune.

So one dark autumn night she ran off with Stepan Zhivodyor and orphaned her light-eyed son, leaving behind a ruthless note for her husband: "Don't look for me. I won't come back!"

How could she have known that happiness doesn't consist of drifting around the world like a tumbleweed whipped along by the wind. Moreover, it proved that Stepan Zhivodyor wasn't a high-sea navigator at all nor even a coaster navigator, but an altogether common boatswain on a seiner that fished for blunt-snouted mullet.

Hrihoriy Matviyovich realized that he had been too self-centered and overly chilly in his relations with his wife, but it was already too late to undo the damage. He was prepared to live alone and vowed to bring up his son a real man.

"Children must be brought up like Chekhov was," the stout man suddenly cut in. "If you don't bring them up that way, a child's sure to become a good-for-nothing and scamp, take my word for it."

“Did you ever have children?” the agronomist asked angrily.

“No chance yet,” muttered the stout man. “As the Apostle Paul put it, it’s a good thing to be married and even better not to be.”

“Please go on,” the agronomist said to the young man.

Well, Hrihoriy Matviyovich suffered a great deal. His heart froze with grief like a river in winter. He took to work with an even greater pluck and started teaching his son Yuri what he considered to be the most precious occupation for man — music.

But he did not take into account one thing, and this led to a tussle of wills. He forgot to allow for the fact that you can’t thrust your likes on all people without their consent. His failure with his wife hadn’t taught him anything.

As it transpired, his Yuri absolutely had no desire to study music. He hated the violin and the school of Bériot, according to which his father was teaching him; he couldn’t stand playing scales for hours on end while the sun was shining outdoors, when the blue sea sparkled, and the boys angled for plump black gobies. He was unlike his father and had completely taken after his mother, being just as restless, frolicsome and irrepressible. He was always drawn off somewhere, and more and more often he ran away from his violin, scales and dull exercises.

Once in the springtime when the ice was breaking up, the boys were playing around the waterfall that had formed in the local stream called Kalchik. The game consisted in those at the top of the waterfall pushing off large lumps of ice, while those below who were the bravest caught the lumps, thereby demonstrating their extraordinary courage. Of course, Yuri Sobolenko was among those below the waterfall. He had drawn out the largest number of lumps, so when a thick chunk of green ice came hurtling down, all the boys stepped aside to let Yuri through, for he alone could snatch it out of the churning stream.

Yuri leaned over and grabbed the edge of the chunk, but it slipped from his grip and rushed on. So he ran along the shore, bending over the water from time to time as he tried to catch the chunk. At one point he almost was on top of it; the cold, unwieldy chunk began to approach the

shore. But suddenly it dipped, the boy lost his balance, and for the noise of the waterfall no one heard either the boy's cry, the splash of the little body hitting the water, or the crack of the ice that broke in two and surged right out to the sea amid the froth and spray. Yuri rose up out of the water for a fleeting instant, waved his arms, went under, and then surfaced again. The boys ran along the shore, shouting and waving their arms helplessly. But what could they do? The black dot of Yuri's head showed once more in the maelstrom — and then the boy disappeared, carried out into the sea.

“What a horrible thing,” said the agronomist in a whisper.

“Fortunately,” the young man continued, “there were some fishermen nearby. They heard the children's shouts and rushed to the rescue.”

Yuri was pulled out of the water more dead than alive.

When Hrihoriy Matviyovich was told what had happened, he broke off his class and without so much as putting on his coat or cap he ran home.

For a whole week thereafter, the teacher's hands trembled and he could not even touch his precious violin.

Everyone expected that Hrihoriy Matviyovich would not force Yuri to study music anymore, but it happened quite the opposite. Yuri was again at his music-stand, sawing away at his fiddle and wrenching sounds out of it that had little in common with music.

If anyone had asked him then whether he would become a musician, Yuri would have blurted out, “You must be kidding!” But as it proved, the father was more foresighted than the son. Eventually, Yuri grew to love music; he showed a real talent for it; at the age of twenty he enrolled in a conservatoire, and many predicted a brilliant future for him.

“So are you telling us about yourself?” the stout man remarked caustically.

“Hear me out to the end, if you've got the patience,” the young man waved off the remark, and continued:

No one was surprised when Yuri volunteered for front-line service as soon as the war broke out. After all, he had been reared by his father, and his father valued a man's readiness to perform his duty to society and country above all else.

Hrihoriy Matviyovich was happy about his son's conduct and told to all his acquaintances: "You know, my Yuri volunteered for the front. As an infantryman! A marvelous musician, an extraordinary talent — yet a common infantryman! That's something to think about..."

The old father's eyes gleamed with pride for his son, he let everyone read his letters from the front, but he didn't show anyone the letter in which Yuri's comrades informed him of his son's heroic death, and the same day he received it, he disappeared from town.

It seemed no one needed an old, lonely, nearsighted musician, who had been hounded by misfortune all his life, at a time when the whole country was living through its greatest trial. Where could he find a place for himself in those difficult days?

Some time later Hrihoriy Matviyovich Sobolenko appeared on the front line.

He wore a uniform with the insignia of a senior lieutenant, and soon after, the entire front line knew the awkward, wry senior lieutenant who was awaited with impatience and joy everywhere, because he was the conductor of a frontline orchestra.

The orchestra performed right next to the trenches, giving concerts at the firing positions of artillery regiments, in the marshaling areas of tank units, and in the battle dispositions of the infantry. Its music boosted the morale of the troops, fortified the spirit of the battle-weary soldiers, communicated to the young combatants the beauty of first love, and reminded the older men of their dear homes.

In his orchestra Sobolenko had brought together the most gifted men at the front line; as before, he spent sleepless nights practicing with his pupils — and his glory equalled the glory won on the battlefield.

In one of the artillery regiments, Sobolenko came across a peasant boy, Yuri Nechiporenko, who had been adopted by the regiment as a son, and persuaded him to join the orchestra. It might have been that the thirteen-year-old boy reminded him of his dead son, or the fact that Yuri never parted with the simple pinewood violin he had

inherited from his father, a partisan until his death. Soon everyone noticed that Hrihoriy Matviyovich started to single him out of the orchestra, something he never had done before.

Yet this attention on the part of the orchestra conductor proved too overbearing for the little boy. Hrihoriy Matviyovich started to teach him according to his own system compared with which the Bériot school cursed by all music students seemed like a game. He tormented Yuri night and day, during rehearsals as well as concerts; he did not give him a day's rest, which seemed the more absurd here at the front line where a stray mortar shell could deprive both teacher and student of life any minute.

But Hrihoriy Matviyovich was a strict disciplinarian, and no one dared point out to him that he was wrong.

To make a long story short, Yuri was not killed either by mortar shell or bullet, although he was frequently on the receiving end of enemy fire and performed with shells bursting all around him. No, he was not even wounded. Hrihoriy Matviyovich also went through the war unharmed, and only toward its end, in April 1945, was he wounded in the chest and spent a long convalescent leave in his home town.

After he recuperated, he became director of the music school where he had started his career, while Yuri Nechiporenko, like many of Hrihoriy Matviyovich's students, went his own way.

"A dull story I'd say," the stout man remarked. "Nothing interesting in it. Your teacher probably wasn't even awarded a medal. Some hero."

"Listen, sonny, the likes of you wouldn't get any handsomer even with a chestful of medals," said the agronomist with a reproachful look. "You better just keep eating your watermelon."

"I've already finished," said the stout man and burst into a loud peal of laughter for no obvious reason.

"Now here's the last part of the story," continued the young man.

Hrihoriy Matviyovich's students went their own ways in life. Yuri Nechiporenko was probably the luckiest of them all. He became a famous violinist, winning awards

at many competitions in our country and abroad; he was kissed by the eminent French violinist Jacque Thibaud, and his Polish friends called him their second Wieniawski. In short, Hrihoriy Matviyovich's student enjoyed the fame his old, hard-working teacher had won for him.

"Each of us had his own teacher," said the agronomist, moved.

Now imagine Yuri Nechiporenko coming to visit Hrihoriy Matviyovich unexpectedly. He wanted to see his old teacher, and long before the meeting, he saw in his mind how he would kiss the work-weary hands of Hrihoriy Matviyovich. But at the same time he was somewhat ashamed and embarrassed that he, so young and comparatively inept, had become known all over the world, while the only thing his teacher knew was this little drowsy town by the warm seashore.

But his anxieties vanished the moment he saw Hrihoriy Matviyovich. He hadn't aged at all and seemed to be even more lively than he was years before. Instead of being nearsighted he was farsighted now, as sometimes happens with old people; he didn't wear thick-lensed glasses anymore, and his eyes shone with youth and joy.

"Well, I'm proud of you, Yuri," he said to Nechiporenko. "You've probably forgotten all about your teacher, but I still remember how I used to wake you at dawn and shove the bow into your tired hands. You're a famous musician and virtuoso now, but for all that I'm still your teacher, and you have to play with me once more in front of the people I've spent my life with. We'll play together one last time. Agreed?"

"Of course," Nechiporenko replied. "Just as you say, Hrihoriy Matviyovich."

That unusual concert drew almost all the people in town.

The first to perform was Nechiporenko — how Hrihoriy Matviyovich had wanted it. Well, the famous violinist played no better and no worse than a virtuoso should, and he was applauded like our audiences applaud virtuosos — sincerely and stormily.

The last claps died away. Nechiporenko left the stage and sat down in the first row where a seat had been reserved for him, thereby transforming him from a performer into an ordinary concertgoer.

His neighbors whispered to Nechiporenko that he stand up when Hrihoriy Matviyovich appeared on stage and

applaud him standing: let the audience see how the student respected his teacher, thus greeting the old musician in a befitting way.

The curtain did not rise for a long time. At long last when it finally went up, Nechiporenko rose to his feet, because what he saw took his breath away.

On the stage, ranked in five rows of eight musicians each, stood forty young boys and girls holding violins in their hands. They wore white shirts and blouses, red Young Pioneers ties, and stood quiet and still, all looking as one at their teacher Hrihoriy Matviyovich, who stood modestly to one side.

From behind Nechiporenko's back came what sounded like a loud sigh and the audience began to stir as everyone stood up. A moment later the dead silence was disrupted by a clapping of hands and then a stormy, overwhelming ovation thundered through the auditorium.

The teacher had stolen the show even without playing a single note on his violin.

But he did not want easy victories — it was not to this end that he had braved difficulties all his life.

When silence fell in the auditorium at long last, Hrihoriy Matviyovich put the violin under his chin with a precise, swift movement. That same instant forty violins were put between tender chins and poppy-red ties. The most exacting judges could not have made a single negative remark on seeing these young musicians. The body's center of gravity was on the left foot, the elbow of the right hand was opposite the musician's heart, the left thumb supported the fingerboard so it would not lie on the palm — everything was like it should be with a maestro beyond compare.

Then Hrihoriy Matviyovich tipped a nod and forty bows flashed through the air like forty white sabers and struck the strings; the strings cried out as if afraid they would be cut asunder by those white sabers, but then they burst out laughing at their power and strength and went off in a song as beautiful and sweeping as the sea.

Nechiporenko had heard many famous quartets, sextets, and groups playing in unison, but this was something he saw and heard for the first time.

It was the triumph of the old teacher's life, it was the triumph of human endeavor, it was something which could only be called by the great and sacred word *immortality*.

The young man fell silent, and we could hear the distant traffic on the motorway.

By that time, the stout man had left the table. He had imperceptibly and quietly slipped away as if he were afraid he would be stopped and made to listen to the end of the story about a man so different from himself.

The agronomist looked intently at the young man for some time, and then asked, "Excuse me for my curiosity, but aren't you Yuri Nechiporenko?"

"What difference does it make?" he said with a smile. "I'm also a student of Hrihoriy Matviyovich. Isn't that enough?"

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