

**MIKHAILO KOTSYUBINSKY**

**FATA MORGANA  
AND OTHER STORIES**

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МИХАЙЛО. КОЦЮБИНСЬКИЙ

FATA MORGANA  
ТА ІНШІ ТВОРИ

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Mikhailo Kotsyubinsky (1864-1913), a classic of Ukrainian literature, talently, in an artistic manner, described life of the Ukrainian people at the turn of the 20th century. He showed how the people's revolutionary consciousness matured, taking after the revolutionary and artistic traditions created by Taras Shevchenko and Ivan Franko. Even today he is near and understood for his ideals of good, humanism and justice. In Soviet Ukraine Mikhailo Kotsyubinsky is introduced to people before they start school. His children's fairy tales are the result of his own pedagogical practice, they elaborate Soviet didactical literature. From other works by Kotsyubinsky, young and old alike learn from true literature to admire beauty, and adore man. His name is connected with public love and respect. There are monuments and memorial museums to the writer in Vinnitsya, where he was born, and in Chernihiv, where he lived for several years and lies buried.

The writer was born into the family of a petty official. At the age of fourteen, after his father's death, Mikhailo became the breadwinner in the family, to support his sick mother and four younger brothers and sisters. At this time he also devoted his free time to self-education. He read much, acquainted himself with the creative works of Russian and Ukrainian writers, as well as with social-economic and philosophical literature.

Mikhailo Kotsyubinsky later recalled these years: "Reading influenced my world outlook so much that from an extremely religious boy that I was up till 12, I became an atheist at 13, and at 14 — a socialist. Family misfortunes (my mother became blind, and my father lost his job, as a result we became poor) made me the moreso collective and serious, so that for my age I seemed to be very thoughtful and mature. At 17 I already had political charges against me and from then on until my dying day the gendarmes kept me under their 'kind' surveillance. At times they tauted with me, keeping me in a certain locality, forbidding me all kinds of work (except for physical labor to which I was of no use)."

With the development of the social and liberation movement at the end of the 19th century, Kotsyubinsky was in the heart of the struggle on the side of progress, democracy and socialism. His world outlook evolutionized rapidly and to the understanding of the illusions of the

*narodniks*, the activities of which did not go beyond cultural programs. They did not understand the necessity of establishing revolutionary social justice. This was promoted by the acquaintance and continued friendship with the great Ukrainian poet, writer and public figure Ivan Franko, which started when they met in June 1890 in Lviv. Later Kotsyubinsky's revolutionary-democratic convictions were cemented by the friendship with the great Russian proletarian writer Maxim Gorky and the acquaintance with Vladimir Lenin which took place in 1910 on the Isle of Capri.

The writer's first work appeared in April 1890 on the pages of the Lviv children's magazine *Dzvinok* (The Bell). He started his early poetry with naive maxims and his first prose attempts were imbued with *narodnik* ideology (*Andriy Soloviyko, or Science Is Light, Illiteracy Is Darkness*). The writer arrived at deep revolutionary-philosophical outlooks in the story *Fata Morgana* and the stories written in 1906-1912. Leading characters in his works are Ukrainians, Tatars, Moldavians, though Mikhaïlo Kotsyubinsky was not interested in describing the ethnography of this or that representative but wanted to show the social side of human life, to fill imagery and thoughts with deep emotions.

Scholars studying the works of Mikhaïlo Kotsyubinsky note his manner of using the "artistic word." He followed traditions of the school of realism of Nechuy-Levitsky, Panas Mirniy. He used manners characteristic of the naturalistic school of Emile Zola, or resembling certain works by Guy de Maupassant. Kotsyubinsky was also under the influence of the literary school of Scandinavian writers. At the same time the writer's style remained strictly individual.

Kotsyubinsky's literary and esthetical outlook was worked out on the basis of knowing life and the literary process. Mikhaïlo Kotsyubinsky's creative sources came from the deepest layers of social and cultural life of the people. Resembling some times as momentary reflexes, on the author's mood (*Apple Blossoms, Intermezzo*), Kotsyubinsky's works always have a proper analysis of social relations, showing the abyss which separated the rich from the poor (*Fata Morgana, The Horses Are Not to Blame*), differentiating artists according to the class they serve (*Intermezzo*). Mikhaïlo Kotsyubinsky first in Ukrainian literature created images of a representative of the industrial proletariat, a hero of the new times who organized the peasantry and rural proletariat for revolutionary struggle for the establishment of a just social order (Marko Hushcha in *Fata Morgana*). Kotsyubinsky's realism lies in his new attempts to expand expressive endeavors by creatively employing modernistic methods, especially impressionism. Thus, in one of Kotsyubinsky's longest stories *Fata Morgana* the author gives the subheading "A Story of Peasant Life and Sentiments." Every character in the story is expertly portrayed by the author to represent features

of a definite class of those various social forces which appeared during the 1905-1907 revolutions and became even more expressive during the Great October Socialist Revolution and the Civil War.

*Fata Morgana* (1903-1910) is simultaneously a political and artistic document of national history. The turn of the 20th century came to the Ukraine with new revolutionary tides, which predicted a social storm. The organized proletariat gained strength. When the first part of the story was completed (1903) there was already a revolutionary Marxist party of the Russian proletariat—a bolshevik party. Under the influence of the proletariat and its avant-garde, the revolutionary awareness of the peasantry also grew.

A tempestuous state of mind, expectations of a change were characteristic of all the peasantry just prior to 1905. In the first part of the story, the writer presented an impressive reflection of rural sentiments which lead the revolutionary outbreak. Their apotheosis was the psychological picture of autumn, which were associated with the sentiments of the Volyk family, and their close neighbors, the whole village, and lastly, all of the Ukraine.

The second part was written in 1909-1910 when triumphant reactionary forces decorated this land with "Stolypin's neckties" as gallows were then called in Russian. Scenes from kulak lynchings were taken directly from life.

The start of the 20th century brought to literature just as much turmoil as was in the social and political life. New tendencies appeared in the literary process which took modern trends. New methods were looked for to expand the expressiveness of the word, and literature as a whole. Under new historical conditions, new and various tendencies were taken as to the role literature and the artist play. Kotsyubinsky took a strong stand against the theory of decadence. The writer was against alien conceptions of hopelessness and escape from life, which were characteristic of a great number of Ukrainian literati, especially after the suppression of the 1905 Revolution.

Presented in this book are writings of Mikhailo Kotsyubinsky, gems of Ukrainian prose. They represent two periods of his writings: 1890-1901 and 1902-1912. The latter ten-year period of his work reached the zenith and is a substantial contribution to the national literary treasurehouse.

This collection of works will give the reader a chance to understand the varied thematic, and high literary-esthetic level, the artist's rich sound, color and psychologically saturated palette. From Kotsyubinsky's very first publications it was clear that a genuine artist of democratic tendencies came into literature. He understood the need "to enrich our literature with new talents," "to go beyond the tight boundaries of present literary tendencies." Paying tribute to traditional portrayals of

peasant life, the writer still in his first creative period expanded the thematic field of Ukrainian literature. With the creation of *The Witch* (1898) and the historical story *At a High Price* (1901), Kotsyubinsky passed his final examination with his teachers of the ethnographic and peoples' customs school. In *The Witch*, which the writer did not dare publish during his life, he came out strongly against superstitions which took deep root in the minds of the people. Kotsyubinsky let this work be put aside, for he was no longer interested in superstitions, but took to a more detailed psychological treatment of character (*The Doll*, *The Duel*).

Ivan Franko called Mikhailo Kotsyubinsky's generation of writers "Young Ukraine." A favorite genre of its representatives became the short story, which dominated Kotsyubinsky's writings.

In 1902 Kotsyubinsky wrote his short story *On the Rocks* which can be a sort of boundary of two periods of his creations, and the transition to the new, impressionable elaboration of topics, began yet in 1899 in the story *In Satan's Grip*.

The gray cliffs, the monotonous roar of the sea, the plaintive sound of the lute in the story *On the Rocks* add to the psychological tension in the love drama between Fatma, a girl from the mountains who became wife of a butcher, and his laborer Ali. The sea gazed at Fatma with the hateful eyes of her husband, then it looked at her as something dear. Colored in gentle and soft tones are scenes of the mountains which are associated with her secret inner feelings.

No less rich in poetry, deep philosophical thought, color and beautiful psychological descriptions is the story *Apple Blossoms* written also in 1902. As far as Kotsyubinsky's artistic-esthetical conception is concerned, this is a kind of separation from bohemian decadence. The writer remains true to the principle of understanding life and human feelings. At the same time the artist sets greater esthetic demands in reflecting the finest changes in human psychology showing rich human imagination employing varied artistic means from color to sound inclusive.

In an appeal to leading Ukrainian writers Kotsyubinsky wrote that our intellectual reader has the right to expect from his own native literature a wider field of observation, a true description of various walks of life, would like to see all, and not only a certain section of society. The reader would like to read the works of our writers dealing with philosophical, social, and psychological topics. Readers had a chance to receive such a work in the story *Apple Blossoms*, where an entirely new topic had been dealt with in Ukrainian literature.

Maxim Gorky in his reminiscences about Kotsyubinsky stated that as a person of high culture, Kotsyubinsky knew well natural sciences and carefully followed everything that was done in the struggle with

death. He also subtly sensed the poetry of dying as a continuous change in nature.

*Apple Blossoms* shows the psychological state of a person who learns of the death of his beloved child, but he is a person who is both a father and an artist. The tragedy brings the parent's feelings to the breaking point, but as an artist he remains unmoved and notices the slightest changes in his dying daughter. In this encounter the artist remains unconquerable. His inseparable feature is the ability to keenly make observations, to notice that which the average person suffering with his entire soul, heart and body would never even notice, for he is an artist "sensitive as a tuned harp which strings sounds with every breath of air." But he is not a bystander nor an indifferent observer.

*Apple Blossoms* shows that the writer was able to penetrate the depths of subconsciousness where conscientious behaviour and human realities were formed.

Another group of stories may be characterized as a kind of documentation of national history at the beginning of the 20th century. The characters of these stories serve to depict social and political phenomena as well as a human psychology which can be seen in this phenomena.

In the story *The Duel* (1902) Kotsyubinsky reveals his talent which appeared in *The Doll*. Acquiring satirical overtones he brands philistinism and hypocrisy which under other conditions reappears as liberalism, a betrayal of public ideals. Continuing this theme of *The Doll* and *The Duel* are his stories *The Birthday Present*, *Persona Grata*, and *The Horses Are Not to Blame*.

Kotsyubinsky's satirical methods are varied and extensive. This permitted the writer under conditions of strict censorship to clearly express his ideas. Employing a sharp satirical psychological analysis, the writer mercilessly exposes the masks of blunt philistines with hard-crusted souls. Self-exposure of these personages leads to their self destruction, showing that there is nothing in common between that what they think of themselves and that what they really are.

Classical as to artistic satirical exposure is the character of liberal landowner Arkady Malina in *The Horses Are Not to Blame* (1912). The hero symbolizes the treacherous nature of false liberalism. In quiet times he teaches the peasants to live "a decent life" and when the peasants came "to take away the lord's land," that is from him, liberalism in Malina disappears like a blossoming dandelion in the wind. He continues to say that "he won't stand cossacks at his place," that the report to the governor asking for cossacks to keep down the peasants is against his wishes, but these appeals are not protests, he soon agrees with the idea to leave a detachment of cossacks on his property,

because the horses are "tired" and "the horses are not to blame" — but the horses have nothing to do with it.

The story *Persona Grata* (1907) shows the spiritual breakdown of professional executioner Lazar. Exposing the inner world of this barbarian who was haunted by the ghosts of those revolutionaries he killed, the writer convincingly proves to readers that the real executioner is the czar, resembling the prison guard nicknamed "Morda" (Mug), having a rough unmustached mug with tiny cruel eyes which seem to hide the torturer's nature. It was he, the czar, whose portrait was hanging in Lazar's cell, who made the rugged, dark and wild person of Lazar into a distinguished untouchable in the country.

In the story *Laughter* (1906) Kotsyubinsky exposes the liberal sermons of a lawyer who "at meetings described opposite interests of those who provided work, and those forced to take it," but in reality he never stood up for the interests of the exploited. "The wild laughter" of his maid Varvara caused by Mr. Chubinsky's news that the "landlords were being beaten" made Mr. Valeryan look at Varvara with other eyes, to see her as a toiling woman, who worked her whole life for others.

Kotsyubinsky's humanitarian muse raised a voice of protest against reactionary jewish pogroms described in *He is Coming* (1906). This description "on the events of the day" fits in with other stories by the writer which show the panorama of social struggle. In this struggle Kotsyubinsky saw not only heroism, blood shed for freedom and land, but also deathly horrors of people whose despair causes the challenge to violence for why be frightened, as the worst has already gone through the heart with fire and burned everything there? The story *He is Coming* is directed against czarist pogrom policies. This is a protest against clericals, who in alliance with the governing rich and criminals found so-called black hundreds, who organized beastly massacres of the jewish poor, represented by old and blind Esterka.

The story *The Birthday Present* (1912) has superiority as to the way the plot works out. The father, a police officer, decided to take his son on his birthday, "to make it a holiday," to witness the execution of a revolutionary girl. The writer-satirist's pen exposes czarism's outrageous policies, its cruelty and servility of the henchmen. The unexpected, but natural and explosive son's reaction, frightened the officer Karpo Zaichik standing near probably only because he was worried about his own career. He didn't hear the cry of the wounded child's soul, but the "governor's anger" and the "snuffing voice of the gymnasium director, 'We don't need protestants'."

Kotsyubinsky is associated with the beginning and development of romantic elements in Ukrainian classical literature as a style which was passed down and creatively followed in the works of such Soviet

Ukrainian writers as Andriy Holovko, Yuri Yanovsky, Olexander Dovzhenko, Oles Honchar, Vasy Zemlyak. Remaining a writer-realist, Kotsyubinsky creatively used romantic methods as well as modernistic.

The writer's striving "for lightning and thunder," romanticism in storms and uprisings, poetical describing the heroic past, striving for "the new, wonderful life," creating heroic characters of women-revolutionaries in his stories *The Dream*, *Persona Grata*, *The Birthday Present*, as well as other romantic elements follow the trend of new revolutionary art.

Kotsyubinsky's romanticism is vividly displayed in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, created on the basis of folklore and personal impressions while visiting the Hutzul area.

By all means *Intermezzo* (1908) is the best of Mikhailo Kotsyubinsky's writings. This story is rightfully said to manifest the writer's ideological, esthetic views on the role the artist plays in the life of the people, on the social role of art.

As a talented master Mikhailo Kotsyubinsky was immediately noticed as a writer in Russia and in other countries. His works were translated into Russian and western European languages during his lifetime and gained popularity far beyond the borders of the Ukraine. "Swedish critics accepted you well," wrote A. Jensen, a translator of Kotsyubinsky's works into Swedish on December 23, 1909. "You are an artist *par excellence*—it is for your sake alone that everyone should study the Ukrainian language," wrote to Kotsyubinsky Czech scholar Dr. V. Charvat. Kotsyubinsky's works appeared in German, Czech, Polish, Rumanian and Swedish. On the initiative of Maxim Gorky, a three-volumed edition of Mikhailo Kotsyubinsky's works were prepared and published in Russian in 1910-1917.

Today it can be stated that the works of Mikhailo Kotsyubinsky are a phenomenon of not only national Ukrainian literature but of world literature. Kotsyubinsky's works have been translated into some 20 world languages, representing, the best achievements of Ukrainian classical literature. Some works by the author are already known to the English-speaking reader. The first English language translations appeared back in 1925: *Zamfir Neron's Vineyard* (*Living Age*, June 27, 1925, p. 768). Other translations are *The Horses Are Not to Blame* (*International Literature*, 1939, No. 12, p. 3-15); *The Life and Works of Ivan Franko* (*The Ukrainian-Canadian*, June, 1955, No. 15); *The Birthday Present* (Kiev, 1973); *Fata Morgana* (Kiev, 1976).

There is also hope that readers in English-speaking countries will find this collection interesting.

VASYL YAREMENKO

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# FATA MORGANA

## PART ONE

As Andriy Volyk walked past the main building of the burnt sugar factory, the crows flew cawing from the ruins, and he heard the sound of loose plaster and brick falling down inside. Though the sugar factory, long abandoned, was going to ruin and the grass had grown high, he could always hear noises in its empty work-shops, as if the sound of machines and the workers' voices were still there at the old site. Passing piles of broken bricks, white spots of lime overgrown with wild weeds, dilapidated troughs and vacant but staring windows, Andriy remembered the past. A metal hoop, shining in the grass like a slithering snake, or a wrought iron wheel, half buried in the ground, brought back scenes of boisterous factory life and he could see himself now at the truckloads of sugar, now at a machine. Then he earned thirteen roubles a month!

"Those were the days, good Lord!" he said aloud to himself stroking his blonde moustache.

Andriy walked towards the old elm on the hilltop. The factory buildings sprawled down the side of the hill.

To his left, on the pond, silver ripples played in the sun as if fish were swimming in it, and beyond the pond, on another hill, a church was hiding in the trees. Behind the elm, below, lay a lush meadow cut by the river's bends. Pussy-willows and broom rolled over the meadow like grey-green clouds, in places blocking the water from view. On the horizon, white belfries could be seen in the outlying villages.

It was a bright Sunday morning the second week after Easter. Church bells were ringing. The distant peals sounded calm and soothing as if the gold of the sun were ringing.

Andriy gazed at the ruins of the factory and nodded his head emphatically.

"Eh, it can't go on for long like this! When they take it into their hands we'll soon see the sparks fly!"

"They" — were the Germans or Czechs, or maybe even Jews, who had come here to inspect the former factory site. In spite of the fact that since then no one had shown any interest in the ruins, Andriy never gave up hope that sudden-

ly the owners would appear from nowhere, repair the factory and put it in operation again.

But now he was certain: it was none other than the landlord's cowherd, Khoma Gudz, who had told him. Though he only looks after the cows, still he's closer to the masters, always around them. There will be a factory, that's for sure!

Otherwise, good Lord, how's a man to survive: there's no place to earn money, we've never had any land, the taxes have to be paid, poverty all around, and you have to eat. Anyway, what good is a patch of land! Working on their plots all the time black as the earth itself... And they don't eat better than those who have nothing... Landowners, ha!

Andriy spat through his teeth in contempt.

Now, the factory was another thing. You're not afraid of the drought or the rains. The work is clean and you're busy all year round. When the time comes you get your money.

Then he drank beer. Paid ready money for it! Clear, golden, cold beer. Damn! It makes a man's mouth water just to think about it.

His mind wandered on: when Hafiyka grows up, she'll get a job at the factory. Where else could she earn so much money? And then she was more likely to get married. Sure... There would be a lot of people there. Someone's sure to propose. A machine worker or mechanic. My old woman ought to stop fooling herself and the girl; a rich peasant's son would never marry a poor girl — that's not the way things happen these days. Sure...

His thoughts drifted on: they were light and clear like the spring air.

There were no more ruins: new work-shops everywhere, the sound of machines working and steam hissing, a crowd of people, and a hell of a lot of work to be done. All bustle, commotion, he liked it so much. And he felt the strength in his hands and the taste of cold beer in his mouth.

The last peal of the bells was left suspended in the air. People began to come out of the church. The crowd moved slowly down the hill sloping all the way to the dam. He could hear the peasant boots tramping, the dresses rustling and the girls' ribbons fluttering in the wind.

There was Malanka, small and thin, in a clean blouse and old coat. Andriy couldn't see her face, but he knew that her eyes were downcast and lips pursed. Though we're poor

people, we're honest. Though we earn our living by work, there's a place for us in the church as well. Hafiyyka was next to her. She's like a young flower from the lord's garden. Andriy smiled through his moustache. He knew that there wasn't a better girl in the village. She was sixteen last Christmas.

"Ho, so that's where he is during church service. Hello!"

The coarse voice sounded from below and the worn, bare face of the landlord's cowherd Khoma Gudz appeared from behind a rickety fence.

"Where'd you think I would be? Hello."

"The hell I'd be sitting here — I'd rather be at Mendel's. The bastard got some fresh beer, if he's not lying. 'I hope the plague gets you and Sura and your brats as well,' that's what I told him."

"Why don't you buy some and then we'll see what it's like."

"I wish they'd all keel over, their beer is as bad as their ways. Do you think I won't buy it? Let's go and have it, goddamn."

"Will you really buy it? What about the oxen? The landlord'll look after them himself?"

"I hope they all croak before night, damn him, does he think I'll take his cattle out on a holiday? He can go to hell. You know, there's something I wanted to tell you."

"Well, what is it?"

"Come around to Mendel's after noon, I'll tell you then."

"But what is it?"

"We'll have a talk then, over a mug of beer, damn —"  
The end of the phrase was lost behind the paling.

\* \* \*

Andriy hurried home. Though it was only early spring, the road was dusty already. Grey-green fields lay on both sides. His white hut stood above the road as if it had been walking somewhere out of the village and stopped for a rest. There were people moving along the road with sticks and bundles. There's Hafiyyka giving one of them some water to drink. Now they're talking. Another group came up. And another. More and more people walking by. But that man's still standing. Why, there's a whole flock coming and coming. They're heading somewhere like Taurida or the Ku-

ban. What kind of landowners' sons and tillers are they? Their land needs the plough and they've gone... But what's there to do on your own piece of land? There are too many people, that's the trouble. What we need is a war or an epidemic of cholera. Some of them are leaving, others coming back to the villages, like that fellow Marko Hushcha, brought here like a convict. He got, honest to God, seventeen roubles a month at a factory but started to make trouble. Not enough pay, too much work, he said.

And so he argued with the bosses. Well, if that's what you want, you'll get it — and they gave him the knout and sent him home under guard. I know what I'd do with such troublemakers...

That man's still standing there. Who is it she's talking with so long? Looks like Prokip Kandzyuba. Yes, it's him all right. Malanka came out on the threshold and went back in so our girl could stand with a rich man's son. Who knows, he may even propose. Ha! Sure!

Andriy approached the hut. The crooked, lopsided hut with a black roof and whitewashed walls stood among houses which had been built for the factory workers and now had their windows boarded up; it resembled a warm, living body next to cold corpses. There were carefully kept vegetable beds around the hut and a path led from the gate to the door. But the neighbouring gardens were full of refuse and rubble; the beds were covered with last year's weeds and the crows were always sitting on the blackened ruins.

When Andriy came in Malanka was meek and gentle, as she usually was after church service. That meant that today she would scold him not as she did on weekdays, but with a sweet smile and tender words. Looking sideways at his wife's tightly pursed lips, he threw off his coat with unusual haste and sat down on a bench like a lord. Hm, wasn't he the master of his house? Yet he hoped that it would blow over and his wife wouldn't scold him.

But at that very moment, taking a bowl from the cupboard, Malanka threw a glance at him.

"Did you get a job?"

"There you go again!" he thought but assumed an innocent air.

"What?"

"Did you get a job at the estate, I asked you?"

Damn woman, she knows I wasn't there, but still asks.

"Can't you leave me alone with that estate, it's not what

I have in mind now. You know, Gudz said they'd be building the sugar factory soon."

"Listen to Gudz, Andriyko, keep listening to him, and you'll be begging for your bread, and so will I."

She pursed her thin lips and looked up to the ceiling. I'll remain silent, she thought, it's a sin to swear on a holiday, but if all those people who were lying about the factory had their tongues withered away that would be just fine. Where is the factory? Anyway, when the factory existed who got anything from it? Only Mendel. Wasn't it true that Andriy left his whole pay at Mendel's? What do they have, what do they live on? Her hands were worn to the bone from work, she was on her last leg just trying to save them from starvation, God forgive.

And she showed him her arms bared to the elbow, her dry and darkened skin as if coated with iron.

"My husband won't earn anything, no he won't, my dear. He only thinks about beer, and not a thought about —"

And it went on. She scolded him, and she sermonized, and she abused him, and she castigated him and she made reference to the devil as carefully as was only possible after service on a Sunday, while he turned red in the face. At first he remained silent and then also began to vent his grudge in a tremulous voice.

Finally he won.

"Damn, damn, damn. Damn your earth. I hope it disappears. I won't get a job and I won't dig the earth. It took away all my strength and left me naked in my old age. Damn it again...."

Then Malanka stood up straight and stretched her arms high.

"What are you saying, you ungrateful man! Why, you should get on your knees and kiss it — eat it, the earth is holy, it feeds you — you'll be buried in it, old man."

She turned pale as chalk, suddenly truly frightened.

A swallow dispersed the gathering clouds. Hafiyka ran in hurriedly, concealing something in her bosom. This wholesome, well nourished child — this animal licked by its mother, taut as a spring with round bronze arms and legs covered with golden fluff — this golden, spring bee brought into the hut something that made the white walls under the low roof smile, the pigeon in front of the ikons turn on its thread, and the cossacks, cut out of red paper and pasted to the walls, put their hands on hips.

“Should I set the table?”

“Yes, go ahead, Hafiyka.”

Malanka immediately calmed down.

“Why are you fussing about like that? You’ll break all the dishes. And you were fidgeting in the church too, looking back — ”

“But he wasn’t in the church.”

“Who wasn’t?”

“Oh, nobody.”

“What’s wrong with you today, girl, you almost spilled the borshch.”

“It’s frightening the things he told me: there were so many people, as if it were war, thick as pudding... and the horsemen were moving in. ‘Disperse,’ they yelled. The others answered: ‘We won’t go, give us our due. We’re in the right.’ ”

“And who told you?”

“Why, it was Marko, he recently came from Odessa.”

“You mean Hushcha? They say he got caught in a theft, stayed in jail, then they brought him here for his old father to see.”

Hafiyka flared up.

“It’s a lie. They’re lying. He never stole anything, God knows!”

“Will you keep still!” Andriy screamed, “Theft my eye! The sergeant told me everything when I went to the post office. That Hushcha didn’t steal anything, he was inciting the people to rebel. Men like that should be rotting in jail, the sergeant said, not walking about free.”

“But Father, they were badly treated.”

“What do you understand! If I ever see him making trouble here reading books to people, I’ll tie him up and deliver him to the sergeant.”

“Why are you all picking at him?”

“It’s none of your business. Don’t you have anything to do with him. If I see you with him, honest to God, I’ll — ”

But he didn’t have time to finish: just at that moment, when Hafiyka bent down to take the pot from the oven, a book fell out from her bosom to the floor. Hafiyka blushed, left the pot, grabbed the book and ran out, her eyes brimming with tears. Andriy looked in surprise at Malanka.

But Malanka was no longer meek and godly. She had forgotten that it was a sin to swear on Sundays and she glared at her husband with her green eyes.

Andriy's Sunday dinner was well seasoned with spite, especially since Hafiyyka refused to return to the room in spite of all her parents' pleas.

\* \* \*

God made Sunday for rest: Malanka sat down near the house and put her hands on her knees. Andriy had wandered off somewhere, Hafiyyka had gone to the dances: it was sad in the hut.

The sun was low, hovering above the horizon: the empty and dingy huts threw dark shadows on the ground. The dusty road led from Malanka's feet into the fields. There was nobody about. The young people were having a good time on the village square, the old were chattering at their gates, and Malanka was entertaining her usual guests — thoughts.

Oh God, it's a short life but it's so hard to live it. Andriy's out of work again, and it's the same thing year after year. He wants to win his bread the easy way. He says he's given all his strength to the earth in vain and wants no more of it. He'll start fishing again, he'll run errands to the post office if the landlord sends him, he'll shoot an odd hare. Others work in the fields while her Andriy strolls along a path, leather bag hanging off his shoulder, straw hat cocked up, and stick in hand.

She sees rising dust on the road. Who's going so fast? Oh, it must be Lyolyo, the landlord's son from the nearby estate, coming to visit the manor. Yes, it's him and Mistress Tosya — and humpbacked Hanna and the other son Petrus. The skewbald horses ran on, young faces were laughing in the cloud of dust, nodding to her. Malanka stood up and bowed low, as if to the ikons. Her glance followed them, watching as the dust raised by the carriage became gilded in the sun.

They had all grown up before her eyes. Suddenly she could smell the delicious, nourishing borshch she had eaten when she had worked for her masters. That was a long time ago, but she remembered it now that their only food was potatoes. Malanka sat down and put her blackened hands on her knees again. These hands had been so deeply soiled working for her masters. When she was eight years old her father died, and by the time she was twelve she had no one left but her masters. Her mother left her an old trunk, some

rags and an old patched sheepskin coat. That and nothing more.

At first she remembered herself dirty, always in the pigsty with the pigs. Afterwards she worked in the living chambers, she was always breaking dishes and the masters beat her; the landlord's sons were always after her. Later she was told to prepare food for the hired hands and she cooked and cooked until she turned into an old maid. Meek and gentle, she obeyed everyone and cried in the corners. She cried because she was working for other people, because she was losing her strength and no one would marry her. She cried because she loved the gardens, the fields, the earth and was forced to cook for a whole herd of gluttons. All around was the black, mellow, and fertile earth, magnificent in spring, rich in autumn, and nobody called her to it, and none of the peasant sons wanted to make her his wife. Then she married Andriy. Even now she couldn't understand how it happened that she married him, that chronically poor, old bachelor, a peasant who lacked not only land, but even his own house. Poverty met poverty and bred misfortune. The way she cried at the wedding, it was as if she sensed how things would turn out.

The groom's relatives were singing on one side, the bride's girlfriends on the other, the hut was like a beehive, the bees looking into the windows.

She had felt something in her throat strangling her, and she beat her head on the table, sobbing, and the tears had come running down on her hands, which even then had been black.

She was crying over her fate.

The years passed by uselessly like leaves floating down the Danube.

"Shoo, damned chickens, shoo!"

Malanka jumped up and tossed a few pieces of earth at the hen digging in the garden beds with its chicks. Frightened, the hen cackled and ruffled up her feathers and the chicks scattered all over the yard like beads. The rooks on the neighbouring roof flew up frightened by the commotion and flapped their wings above the loose thatch.

Malanka calmed down and sat back again. The sun set still lower.

Hafiyka was a bit late from the dances. So why shouldn't she enjoy herself while she's still with her mother and father? Even so people were annoyed. The blacksmith's wife

said: "Keeping Hafiyka like she was a lady not making her work — you think you're so rich..." I wish, God forgive me the sin, for as many illnesses to come down on you as we have misfortunes. It's fine for you to talk when your whole house is full of girls, and I have one and she's the only comfort in my old age. I've been nursing her, caring for her, washing her and combing her hair, and now they want me to give her away. As if people haven't bullied me enough taking away all my strength and sucking out all my blood, now they want to take away my child. Never!

This was not the lot she had chosen for her; she'll marry her to a rich peasant's son. The girl was as healthy and pure as spring water. No wonder the boys couldn't take their eyes off her. Prokip will take her, that's why he's gone off to Taurida, to earn some money for the wedding. He'll send the matchmakers in autumn, she, Malanka, knew what's what and where things were going.

Malanka imagined a lush and merry meadow above the river. They were picking hemp with Hafiyka. She was such a good girl, Hafiyka, humming as she picked. There was a baby sleeping in the cradle. Prokip brought in the barley and was arranging it in a stack. And she felt so gay and easy, as if she weren't old any more... The vegetable beds were covered with curly garlands of cabbage heads. The beans had already yellowed, the wind whispered through the tall poppy heads, the pumpkins lay on the ground like fat hogs, and the potatoes had grown so well that the stalks had become entangled. Her darkened hands had worked here, she had planted every single beet and onion head and she would gather them, if it be God's will. Now she was the mistress of the house; it wasn't her land but her daughter's. Now, finally, in her old age her dream had come true. And she would buy herself some red boots, made out of soft goatskin like those the blacksmith's wife has. Ever since she married — eighteen years must have gone by since then — she has never for a moment stopped dreaming about these boots, saving money every year, but the money would always be spent on something else and she had no boots. She would put on those boots and a white gown and go to church and they could bury her like that.

"Sitting around, are you? A good Sunday to you."

Malanka was startled. Oh, it's the blacksmith's wife.

"Sure I am! And a good day to you too. The Lord's given us Sunday so we can celebrate. Don't sweat, don't

work. God said you can work on weekdays but on Sundays don't even clean your nails, that's also work. Lie around, sit around, but don't budge a finger..."

Malanka was sweetness itself. She smiled as if she were talking with her masters at the estate.

"I was just at the dances. That's all we have left to do — look at the young people. Your Hafiyka is with that fellow from Odessa all the time — I don't know whether people are telling the truth about him — Marko Hushcha I mean. Always together like a pair of doves. Well, that's young folks for you. So long."

Malanka was still smiling sweetly, though underneath she was furious.

"The fat hag running around spreading rumours!" she thought as the blacksmith's wife went away. For some reason she recalled the morning scene with Hafiyka.

Meanwhile the shadows were lengthening outside.

Near the paling the girls were playing games, their bare feet were kicking up the dust — three jumps to one side, three to the other. And it seemed as if a flock of sparrows were playing in the dust. The distant fields were taking on a rosy hue. The storks were flying from the lowlands, their white wings shining in the sun. The spring wind provoked thought.

"How beautiful you are, earth," thought Malanka. "It's a joy to sow grain, to dress you up with greenery and flowers. It's wonderful to till you. The only trouble with you is that you don't care for the poor man. Your beauty is for the rich, whom you feed and clothe, while the poor man only finds his grave in your bosom. We'll have our day yet, we'll till our own fields of grain yet, our own gardens... They'll divide up the land yet, they will. My old man'll get some too, honest to God. That'll be the end of his fishing, and he'll have to push the plough whether he likes it or not. O my God, to know such happiness at least in my old age, to see my child happy."

There was a commotion in the street. The young girls were running, children were waving sticks and twigs. Dresses rustled, bare feet pattered and dogs barked. Stepan! Go get the sheep! Get them yourself! Mother told you to do it, damn you! Father told you to do it, I wish you'd drop dead! There are six of ours, take care Mariyka! Don't lose the lambs like you did the other day or I'll give you a thrashing! What? Where?

The red sun was setting. The windows were ablaze like fireplaces, the walls of the huts reddened, and a rosy hue poured over the white shirts of the villagers. A cloud of dust was moving towards the village from far away. As it approached it grew, reaching up into the sky until the sun dived into it, turning everything into a rosy haze. Disturbing sounds came from within — as if children were crying or a flail working — and suddenly the flock of sheep invaded the street and their incongruous bleating shook the air. The living mass of the sheep's bodies shuddered and shivered like jelly; a forest of thin legs flickered before the eyes, the bare stupid muzzles with open mouths in a chorus of bleatings. People scurried like shadows in the fog, the vague outlines of houses stood out, then were erased, a medley of sounds were lost in the sea of bleating, the noise and tumult was like a dream sequence. Behind the flock walked the swarthy shepherd, who, because of the hazy light, looked even taller than he was. Like a mythological god, he cracked his knout and cried in a wild and gruff voice which stood out against the din:

“Hey ho, hue, hue!”

There was nothing in the street, everything had disappeared like an interrupted dream, the dust slowly settled to the ground but the evening air still vibrated with fading sounds.

The quiet stars looked down on the earth.

\* \* \*

Blue walls, pillows and blankets in the corner, spilt beer on the tables: it was crowded at Mendel's.

“Stop beating about the bush, Khoma, tell me quickly whether there'll be a factory or not?”

The beer was sparkling in the green glasses and heads were spinning from the hops.

“I told you there would be.”

“Hm. Then why did you advise me to send Hafiyka off to work?”

“But that's what you should do. The girl's got no choice anyway. She'll eat and drink you out of house and home; it'll only be worse for you. There's but one fate in store for her — to work for somebody. Do you think anyone will marry a poor girl? She'll die an old maid. Let her work

while they'll still take her. Take her to Yamishchi to the housekeeper, he's a fine lad, blast him. Will we be match-makers? That's what I called you to Mendel's for."

"Don't talk to me about it. I don't like it. I could never think about a thing like that."

"Let her work, Andriy."

"Knock it off Khoma, we'd do better to have a drink."

"What are you putting on airs for, anyway? You're poor, miserable, your ribs are sticking out from hunger, and now you're trying to prove something.... I'm telling you, she'd better hire herself out — you'll be sorry later."

"No, I don't like that. There's no use talking about it."

Andriy blushed and stood up from the table.

"All right, sit down. But isn't it all true? Do you think you're a human being? Why, you're a dog, in fact. What kind of a life do we lead? A dog's life. Come on, sit down."

Gudz put his enormous hands on Andriy's shoulders and sat him down. Then he brought his bare face close to Andriy, it was flushed and hot from the beer.

"Don't try to fool me. Tell me, how many years have you lived? Fifty? Your life's coming to an end? And where is your youth, where is your strength, show me what you've got from working. You'll show me your horny hands, you'll soon be hunchbacked as well. All your life they've been tanning your hide and you have to pull the plough like an ox. Our lot is to work all our lives — yet we're still not human beings. Look at me. Do you think it's Khoma you see? No! It's an animal. Since childhood I've been looking after the cattle and I'm still doing it. I've spent my whole life with beasts and now I'm a beast, too. All my life I've seen tails instead of people; I've been shoveling dung, sleeping in dung and I'll die on the dung heap. I can't remember what it's like sleeping in a house, damn it all. The shirt on my back is like bark on a tree, my pants are in the blood of oxen because I let the blood out of them, I can't wash my hands clean of the shit. When I sit down with the other hands to eat, they all turn away. D'ye think I smell? No, I stink. I run away from people to the oxen. I talk with the oxen, I turn to them to unburden my soul, and they chew and moo and twitch their tails. That's the only fun I have. You think my wife talks with me and embraces me, the children chatter and the home warms me. Ha! I've turn-

ed a grey bachelor with the oxen, damn them! Now I can rejoice in my old age, dammit, the hell with — I wish —”

“Hey fellow, what are you swearing about?”

“Eh, what? Why am I swearing? I feel better that way. When I can’t stand it any more, I swear and get it off my chest. If I didn’t swear I would just burn up. There’s so much hatred in me that my soul’s ablaze — it burns and burns and then I could take a club into my hands and kill everybody off. I’d go from house to house and just bash their heads in one by one. I’d murder some of them for drinking other people’s blood, and the others for allowing it. Then I would burn the whole works down for the ashes to be scattered so that there would be nothing left but the bare ground and the clear sun....”

Khoma stood high in the room, his head almost reached the ceiling; his eyes were staring beyond the walls, his bare face wrinkled like that of an old woman, was distorted with hatred and he even shivered. Then he suddenly faltered, took a seat and gulped down a whole mug of beer.

Andriy’s pride was hurt. He also wanted to attract general attention, and tell his life’s story as it seemed to him now in this crowded pub. He’d lived till old age and never saw anything good, never at all.

“You know what, Khoma, if a man works — ”

But Khoma was getting worked up again.

“Go to hell! One fellow gets everything, another nothing. Didn’t I see how the old landlady — ”

“If a man works he has to get something for it. And if the earth doesn’t give me anything — ”

“ — the old landlady used cloth to heat her house all winter, the cloth which was still left from the days of serfdom — ”

“ — and since the earth doesn’t give me anything, what the hell do I need it for? It makes no difference whether I’m a poor man on my land or on someone else’s. I’m still a poor man. You’re right that — ”

“And you see there was this cloth in the storerooms. People were begging — give me just enough for a shirt, why should people’s work be wasted. Listen to me.”

“I’m listening. You’re right there: it’s really a dog’s life. They’ve drained all the strength from my body. All my life I’ve been feeding other people. When there still was a factory I managed to live somehow, but when it burned down — ”

"But I told you it was burned, she burned all the cloth."

"What cloth?"

"What do you mean, what cloth? I told you —"

"Oh yes — let's have a drink. Your —"

"How about Hafiyka? Aren't you going to hire her out?"

"Ah, stop it, let's drink."

"All right, the hell with you, if you don't want to, you don't have to." Khoma gulped down the beer and smashed the mug against the floor.

At the sound of glass breaking, a worried Mendel came running.

\* \* \*

It was a holiday. Hafiyka was sitting behind the hut. The chickens were cackling near her feet to be fed. An open book lay next to her.

"Shoo, shoo, go play near the paling," Hafiyka was trying to chase them off. "What are you cackling about, you silly hens? And you, spotted one, why are you stretching your neck and looking into my hands? I've already fed you. All you want to do is eat. Are you angry with me for saying that? You can ask Marko about it and listen to what a clever man has to say. He would say: stupid, you've always been stupid. They give you a handful of grain but they take away all your eggs or slaughter you for soup. And you, rooster, why are you flapping your wings so stupidly showing how brave you are? If you were as brave as Marko, you wouldn't sell your children to the lords to be eaten. Isn't it true? Oh, but you're a rooster and Marko is an eagle. You should hear what he says, he says — what's the use, you don't understand anything. If you were more clever you would see that people are just hens. And what are you cackling about, whitie? What are you laughing about? Do you think I don't know how good it is for you? Do you think you can love anyone you want and I have to marry Prokip because mother wants me to? Silly, silly hen. They can burn me and carve me, they can bury me alive, but they'll never make me do it. Do you hear me, spotted one? You can go away, if you shake your head and don't believe me! Don't you worry, Marko'll never let anyone have me, he's an eagle, and all about him are chickens and crows and they'd all like to peck him to death. The peasants are against him, and

the village elder, and even Father — and he wants to do good to people. Not Father, but Marko. Hear how kind he is, hens. My Marko — that's why the boys and girls like him so very much — and why they listen to him — And where are you going? Shoo! Look what you've done, you've made the book dirty. What will Marko say to me when he sees a rooster's traces on the book? He'll say that the rooster read more of the book than I did. Now go away all of you: I have to read. I'll move closer to the sun so it can look into the book too — let's read together!"

\* \* \*

There was something wrong with the weather. Spring was dry and windy. The vegetables in the gardens were drying up, the grain in the fields was not growing, there were clouds of dust along the roads. People were begging for rain because it looked like there might be a famine. The price of bread rose suddenly, and this worried Malanka so much that every night she had nightmares. Yet, the worse things got, the less hopes the tillers had, the greater became the hopes that Andriy pinned on the factory. As Malanka dreamed about flour, so Andriy dreamed about the factory. Sometimes he would jump up at night and ask Malanka in a terrified voice:

"Was that the whistle?"

"What whistle?"

"The factory whistle," he would say in an irritated voice.

"Come to your senses, you're hearing things, that whistle's keeping you from sleeping at night," Malanka would say annoyed and worried, then she would yawn, give a sigh, and wouldn't be able to sleep until morning.

Andriy was devoured with impatience. He would often run to the ruins, thinking something out, calculating. Then he would make the rounds inquiring and spreading rumours. And when the rumours, now embellished and more positive, would come back to him he was overjoyed, bragging to Malanka and believing them. He no longer tried to find other ways in which to earn money.

Malanka grumbled. The further things went, the harder it was to find some kind of work. The grass was now parched and they stopped hiring people at the estates. When she approached the oven she just flew into a state not knowing what to cook. There was nothing to make soup with,

everyone, even Malanka herself, was tired of the endless borrowings. Most of all her heart ached for Hafiyyka — so young and her only child going hungry. By some miracle she would find a dish of berries or a bit of fresh bread and bring it home under her apron. Andriy would seldom pay any attention to food — he was so busy thinking about the factory, but sometimes even he would put aside the thin soup and start complaining. Those were the moments Malanka was waiting for. She would flare up and spit all the venom in her heart at his face.

They were enemies living under one roof, and though each of them was engaged in his own thoughts and even avoided the other, any trifle was enough for the hatred to boil over and make them tremble, as if racked with fever.

Only one thing kept them together — their response to Gudz's idea that they should send Hafiyyka out to work.

"Did you spit in his eye?" Malanka would inquire, smiling and thinking: just wait, just wait, autumn will come and then we'll see.

"I was so angry I almost beat up Khoma, really," Andriy bragged, "To think of such a thing!"

\* \* \*

"What is it you're doing?"

Malanka stopped aghast at the threshold. Some wood was burning in the hearth and a pot was boiling on the fire. Andriy was looking into the fire; he was flushed and carried away. Unexpectedly caught in the act by Malanka, he produced an uncertain and silly smile. Malanka came up to the oven, moved the pot closer and looked into it.

"Are you cooking fish?" she asked in a frightened voice and grew pale.

Andriy started to fuss about, pushed the pot back into the fire and smiled without saying anything.

"Hafiyyka, do you hear? He's cooking fish!" Malanka exclaimed. Judging from the terror in her voice, she had found human flesh in the pot.

"He's gone mad! He's gone mad! So help me God, he's mad!". Malanka cried running about the house as if it were on fire.

Suddenly she stopped next to Andriy and stood motionless with arms outstretched, her staring eyes filled with surprise, indignation and horror.

He's cooking fish! It's a huge tench he caught this morning... weighs at least four pounds! He didn't take it to the estate to sell to the landlord! It's the end of the world! Nothing like this has ever happened since Andriy's been fishing. They've never eaten a big fish which the masters eat. They could have gotten two *zlotys* \* for it and he cooked it!

There were tears running down her face as she screamed all this at Andriy's back while the water in the pot bubbled and the dry wood crackled in the fire.

Andriy pretended it was a joke.

"Stop nagging, old lady, sit down and have some fish. There's no meat better than pork, there's no fish better than — "

He put the pot on the table and poured some soup into a bowl.

"You can gobble it up yourself, damn you! We're starving, there's not a single bread crumb in the house and he's cooking fish!"

Andriy was embarrassed; Malanka was right, but he wanted the fish so much, the soup emanated such a mouth-watering smell that his nostrils twitched and expanded.

Snorting and panting he sat down to eat the fish soup, slurping it down loudly as if to drown out his wife's lamenting.

Malanka was furious. Besides being upset about the wasted fish she was just plain hungry. Weak with hunger, she so wanted something hot, delicious and unusual. The aroma of the tench tickled her nostrils and caught her breath; she was so hungry she felt nauseous. But Malanka just couldn't start eating and instead continued screaming.

"Don't be upset, they'll build the factory then I'll earn some money."

"I hope your life is ruined just like the factory was!"

Andriy looked up. For a second his glance froze, looking beyond the wall and outside the house: suddenly it dawned on him that there would be no factory, that his hopes were in vain and he shouldn't have cooked the fish which he could have sold to the landlord to buy bread. All of a sudden the fish lost its taste, he didn't want to eat it any longer and felt like going out...

\* *zloty* — Polish monetary unit

Andriy took his hat and went out.

The remains of the fish were getting cold on the table while Malanka and her daughter were sitting in their corners brooding in the twilight of the fading day. Sorrow was in the house embracing stillness.

Later, mother and daughter stood up, approached the table in silence, as if by tacit agreement, and started to devour the fish. They ate it all, savoring the bones, gobbling up the soup and licking the bowls like hungry cats.

\* \* \*

Andriy was getting ready to go to the post office: he slung his leather bag over his shoulder and took his stick in hand. At that moment Malanka ran into the house. By her expression, something awful had happened. Her face was pale and she couldn't catch her breath; her eyes were burning and she shivered all over.

"Come, they're dividing up."

Andriy stared at her.

She couldn't say more, holding her hand to her labouring chest. With her other hand caked with earth — Malanka had just been weeding the garden — she gestured before his eyes and pointed to the door.

"Come on, they're dividing up."

"Who's dividing what?"

"Oh, the masters. They've come and they're going to divide up the land."

"What land? What are you talking about?"

"Different land, among the peasants. Go and make sure that they give us land nearer to the village or we'll end up with swampland."

"God almighty! Are you in your right mind? I have to go to the post office."

Malanka turned green in the face.

"Are you going, you?"

She jumped at him like a wildcat, her mouth was twisted, eyes burning and she was pale as a ghost.

"You're going now," she shrieked. "It may be all the same for you, but for me it isn't. You've got a child. Do you want to kill her? You're killing all of us. Go right away, or the best land will go to the others. Do you hear? Well?"

Seeing that he was looking at her without understand-

ing anything, she grabbed a rolling-pin from the hearth and swung at him.

“If you don’t go I’ll kill you here and now.”

She really could kill him and Andriy knew it.

“Dash it, silly,” he shrugged his shoulders, “can’t you see I’m going.” He snorted like bellows in a forge as he tried to keep up with Malanka.

That night Malanka returned home in a joyful mood, almost happy. She ran about the house, as if regaining her youth, and her thoughts soared like white pigeons in the sun. Smiling, she thought, what fine masters, just walking through the fields and taking measurements. She had fallen on her knees in front of them: my masters, dears, take pity on a poor woman, give us the land where grain can grow, and they laughed. Go home, old one, that’s not what we’re doing. And they laughed, God give them all the best. They think if she’s a stupid old woman she can’t understand anything. Wait and see, the head on her shoulders is not for anything. Didn’t she realize they were pulling her leg? If you tell the peasants right away that the land is going to be divided up among them, there would be such an uproar. The peasants would be at each others’ throats trying to get the best land. But they’ll remember the old woman, they won’t pass her by.... Now if Andriy had only pleaded with them, but he stood there like a rock, damn —

She didn’t finish because now she couldn’t swear. She was so generous and joyful today she felt sorry for everyone. She even hummed a tune while cooking supper, and the dry sticks crackling in the fire seemed to share her happiness. She served Andriy his food respectfully as if he were a landowner and master of his household, and she didn’t want to eat anything herself. Everything she did, she did solemnly as if in church; she smiled at her own thoughts. Before going to bed she washed Hafiyyka’s hair with a soap solution, combed it till it shined, and plaited it into pigtails: so that her daughter’s head would shine like the sun, and her girl would be no worse than any of the others.

“Perhaps you’ll put on your new vest, the old one’s falling apart?” she asked Andriy and took his only Sunday clothing from the trunk. “Treat yourself to some berries, the blacksmith’s wife gave them to me.”

It was a long time since Andriy had seen her in such a sweet mood. Her heart softened and everything was song.

The grain in her own field was singing, the larks were singing above, the sickle was singing as it mowed the grain, the peasants were singing while cutting grass, and finally her heart, full of hopes, burst in song. Happiness was in sight, not only hers but Hafiyyka's as well. Her legs and arms surged with strength. Her dark sinewy arms were made of iron.

From that day on Malanka often went to the fields to see what the masters were doing. They tromped about through the fields for two more days, then left. Malanka thought about it all the time, asked people and lived in hope. There were different stories, but Malanka was certain she knew what it all added up to and prepared herself accordingly. When she weeded a rich peasant's garden she refused to take money but asked him to pay her in grain so she would have good seeds for the planting. When she ate an apple she would carefully collect the seeds and dry them on the window-sill. They'll come in handy soon enough, she thought. Nothing could make her as happy as a handful of seeds given to her by a rich peasant woman or in return for work. She even went so far as to search other people's gardens for seeds, breaking off a plant top or cutting off a yellow cucumber and hiding it in her bosom unnoticed. Now there were a lot of small and large seed bags in the house and there was always something being dried on the window-sills.

"What are you going to do with all this?" Andriy asked in surprise. "We've only got a couple of garden beds."

She would smile mysteriously and nod her head condescendingly.

"Don't worry, that's my own business."

On Sundays she would go to the forest where they had timber; she would look it over, pick out the best wood, think things out and ask the forest warden about prices.

She would return home in a thoughtful mood, her eyes staring into space; caress Hafiyyka's hair and smile to herself.

Once she even went to a fair after which rumours circulated about Malanka in the village — the old woman must have money — only she's hiding it, because she went round the fair trying to buy a pig.

One evening Malanka left the house and came upon Hafiyka leaning against the wall near the door.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, but froze when she had a better look at Hafiyka.

"What's the matter with you?"

Hafiyka didn't respond. She stood there slightly bending forward, pale as death and shivering.

"What is it?" Malanka inquired and took Hafiyka by her cold hands.

Hafiyka remained silent, shivering as if in a fever. Malanka took her into the house and lit the lamp. The dim light cast dark shadows on her pale face and her eyes, wide open with fear, shining as if made of glass. Malanka's fear deepened. She sat Hafiyka down on a bed and caressed her face and head with trembling hands.

"What's the matter with you? Were you frightened? Does something hurt you?"

There was no answer. Malanka could feel her cold body shivering.

She called for Andriy but he was out somewhere.

Malanka couldn't understand what had happened to Hafiyka. Had the evil eye fallen upon her? Was she frightened? Had she caught cold? Where had she gone? Oh Lord, whatever has happened to the girl? If only she'd say something instead of keeping silent as death.

Hafiyka's glassy stare and sullen drawn face suddenly terrified Malanka and she herself began to tremble, repeatedly making the sign of the cross over Hafiyka.

Fortunately Andriy returned at this point. Drunk and merry, he rambled on loudly and excitedly.

"Yes, that's it — I said so a long time ago — they came and took him away."

Malanka hissed at him.

"Where were you hanging about?"

"Where d'yt think. I was in the street watching them lead Marko Hushcha away — they came and took him away. He had it coming. Honest to God, I'd string him up on the first tree and that would be the end of him."

Hafiyka moaned on the bed.

"Shhh!" Malanka attacked Andriy, "Can't you see she's ill, run after Maryana right now, maybe she'll remove the spell, whatever it is. Run off and hurry up."

Andriy went for the healer.

Maryana must have helped Hafiyka because in two days she got up out of bed. She was thin, her skin a dark yellow, and her bearing sad and silent, as if she were a widow. She kept leaving the house to avoid being with her parents. In particular, she avoided her father, as if afraid of him. When alone she cried, and thought and thought until she couldn't bear thinking any more.

\* \* \*

All was not grief, though, there was happiness as well.

After a long summer day, as the sun was setting and the scorched earth was casting off its golden apparel, when shy and stealthy stars stood out against the sky, pale and tired after the day, when the midges played in the last ray of sunshine, and the soft, gold and rosy air took on a lilac hue in the distance, adding depth and width to space — Malanka and Hafiyka walked along the dusty road, tired but content that the day had ended. Homeward they trudged, their bodies hot like the earth, and the smell of ripe grain in the folds of their clothing. Swinging their sickles, they proceeded along in silence. Their backs were finally straight, arms hanging freely, though still lightly trembling after a full day's work, and the touch of their wet dresses cold with the evening dampness, the soft dust under their feet instead of the cut grain now seemed to spell happiness. At home they would rest and have a sleep, brief as a summer night but pleasant as a leaf applied to a wound. They wanted to get home as quickly as possible, not to eat, not to sit or talk, but to fall into bed like a stone into water and doze right off.

Bleary and heavy-lidded Malanka makes the fire in the oven and boils the water to make supper for Andriy. The fire cackles and drones and she closes her eyes and it seems to her that it is the sound of the ears of grain in the wind and the sickle cutting the stalks. How hot the sun is, oh no, it's the heat of the fire because she's too close to the oven. Now she's gathered a sheaf and is fastening it... her back hurts so it's hard to bend down. Ah, she's kneading dough for the dumplings. Reap, Hafiyka, reap — it's hard to work when you're reaping for the eleventh sheaf\* while you

\* A system of payment in kind according to which every eleventh sheaf was given to the peasant as a reward for his work

need — Have you cut your hand, why are you hissing from pain? Oh no, it's the water boiling over.

Andriy is eating the soup — he's saying something — is he in the house or outside?

"Why aren't you having supper?"

"Huh?"

"Come and have supper."

"Have it alone, I'll eat later."

The spoons ought to be wa... ah! washed. My feet are so heavy, feels like I'm wearing boots, and my head — I can hardly keep my head on my shoulders!

Well, at last... It feels better to lie down near the house. "Are you asleep, Hafiyka? Take a pillow — all right sleep as you are if you've already fallen off." Oh my aching bones, my poor aching bones. Oh my poor arms, my poor legs. Our Father who art in heaven, give us this day... Oh, I'm sleepy. The stars are peering down from the sky. The frogs are croaking, calling us to sleep. The blue vault descends lower and lower, pressing down on the body and closing your eyes. It's so sweet and serene... I couldn't get up if doomsday came or if heaven itself beckoned. And the sky came lower and lower, caressing and fondling, the stars tickling you as if they were kissing. The soul dissolved in the blue, the body growing light and melting like wax on a fire. Nothing exists, non-existence, total non-existence! Is that not happiness itself?

\* \* \*

Right after the harvesting it became apparent that the winter would be a lean one. Drought had hit hard. The rye had dried out and the grain was sparse and weak. It was pitiful to see what Malanka and Hafiyka had earned and to think of the masters eating all the ducks and hares that Andriy had shot. This winter it would be even harder than the last to earn a living, and the people who had been measuring the land had not been since they had first left. Andriy kept quiet about the factory too.

The villagers were talking about Gudz. They said that he had killed an ox in a fit of rage. Hit him with a club just below the ear and broke his skull clean apart. The landlord had chased him out of the estate for that and Gudz was out of work now selling his last clothing for a drink

and bragging that he would do the same with the landlord. One day Gudz dropped in to see Andriy.

"Fishing, you sucker?" he greeted him with drunken laughter. "Catch some fish, maybe the people who eat them will choke on them. Factory man! He thought they'd build the factory for him. The devil they will. The owls and crows will live there until the whole Goddamn thing falls to pieces. Tell me, are you sending Hafiyka out to work or not? You aren't! Do you want to starve like a red mouse in winter? All right, you can go hungry with your whole God forsaken family, what do I care? We'll find another!"

He banged the door in anger and went out but in a minute stuck his flushed and stubborn face through the door again.

"Listen, you industrialists! Remember one thing: the goat will come to the trough yet and say baa... but Gudz will tell them where to go, so there!"

Andriy could stand it no longer.

"Drunkard, fleecer, what do you want from me!" he rushed for the door but Malanka kept him back.

"Leave him be!" she screamed in a high voice and glared at him with her green eyes full of malice. "Don't touch him, he'll maim you, how will you work at the factory then?"

"The factory?"

"Why, yes, the factory — "

"The factory, you say?"

"Didn't you hear? They're going to build it for you."

She hissed like a poisonous snake.

Andriy went into a rage.

"Nagging at me, you old hag? Go on nagging until I give you a good thrashing. Why don't you tell me if you've sown your fields? Did they give you a lot of land? And where are those masters whose boots you licked?"

"Where? They're building your factory."

"Won't you ever be still?"

Andriy beat Malanka. She lay on the bench groaning loudly while he walked the bare grey fields indifferently and aimlessly, just to stay away from home.

Hafiyka was crying. She would rather hire herself out.

Prokip returned at the end of October. There were rumours that he had had ill luck. At first he couldn't get

hired because too many people had come and prices had fallen, then he had become ill in Kakhovka and lay around for a month; after that he had headed for Taurida and then reached the shore of the Black Sea. He came back in rags, ill and penniless. Malanka took it with a grain of salt. What don't people say. Without saying anything at home she ran off to see Kandzyubikha on some pretext. It turned out that the rumours were true. Prokip looked awful, he was sullen and weak. He lay most of the time and old Kandzyubikha almost cried when she told how she had hardly been able to rid her son of lice. There was no question of marriage now: he had wanted to earn money for a wedding, but the year had turned out so bad that there wouldn't be enough bread to go around.

Malanka came home in a very sad mood and didn't tell anyone of what she had seen and heard. She would keep it to herself till she died.

\* \* \*

As Christmas drew near, Malanka's apprehension grew. She wouldn't let Hafiyka alone. A passion for neatness and tidiness completely overcame her, and she worked for whole days on end. She whitewashed the house twice both inside and out, rubbed paint on the oven every day and applied red clay to the hearth.

Hafiyka had to cut new cossacks and flowers out of paper and paste them to the wall from the ikons to the door. The doves' wings, quivering on fine threads in front of the ikons, were replaced by new, even brighter ones, and they bargained away their very last egg to get a piece of wallpaper with red roses to put behind the ikons.

"Why are you going around so filthy?!" Malanka thundered at Hafiyka and made her change her gown almost every day. She combed Hafiyka's hair herself and plaited new ribbons into her braids. Those autumn evenings she would light the lamp early, smarten herself up as if for a holiday, and glance frequently at the door, listening to the barking of the dogs and fretting in expectation.

In the daytime she would often leave her work to move out Hafiyka's trunk from the corner and look through her wretched clothing, unravel the embroidered towels, and throw a thoughtful glance at her daughter. Then she would adjust Hafiyka's necklace, smooth her gown, set the pleats

straight on her skirt and nod her head sadly while hiding a tear.

But if there was one thing she couldn't hear calmly, it was the tambourine. As soon as the muffled sound of the tambourine could be heard from the far side of the village, she would run out of the yard trying to guess which house the wedding was in, and was so curious who was getting married — it was as if she soon hoped to get married herself. She was in a state of perpetual anxiety, her movements became jerky and nervous, and her small black eyes darted uneasily.

And the tambourine played on. From the middle of the week brides, their hair loose, would go about the village bowing low to invite people to their weddings, and the wedding procession would trudge through the mud, filling the cold air with songs. Malanka would run out in just her smock, put her head in her palm and avidly follow the procession, paying no heed to the cold. Then she would become extremely irritated.

Each boy who was betrothed and every girl who had consented by offering the towel suddenly lost all value in her eyes and she wouldn't say a kind word about them.

"He's betrothed that girl! Found himself a treasure!" she would hiss with a wry smile. "He'll have to feed someone else's children and a negligent wife. Doesn't everybody know that she can't even bake bread, she only likes to have a good time with the boys, the bitch!"

"Married to that good for nothing. He's got pock-marks and he speaks with a twang, and he's a thief to top it off: stole a sack of grain from the threshing floor last year."

Yet when she met women who had grown boys, she would turn on the charm and brag about her daughter: thank God she's so hard-working, so kind, obedient as a calf.

Time went on.

Night after night she would sit with Hafiyka in the sparkling, tidy rooms dressed in neat attire and waiting for the guest who would come and stomp in front of the hut, making all the dogs bark, then would open the door. Malanka had even furtively hidden a bottle of vodka in the closet among some old rags.

There was music in the village, tambourines were ringing and drunken voices singing. No one came. Inside the lopsided hut with bulging walls, the wrinkles of shadows winked in the corners, the paper cossacks stood in a row

with their hands on hips and watched the faint light of the lamp, and the bright doves turned in front of the ikons as the long shadows cast by their wings swept over the low ceiling.

Anxiety gnawed in Malanka's soul and surrounded her like a vine. Could it be that no one will come? That no one will marry her? She searched her memory for all the village boys — both rich and not badly off, and even poor, but most of the time her thoughts dwelled on the rich. She thought and counted and continued to hope. Sometimes she thought that Hafiika herself was to blame.

"Hey, you clumsy thing!" she yelled at her when Hafiika would drop a spindle or knock something down by accident. "What kind of a housewife will you be, you can't make a step or do anything properly. You're God's punishment, not a girl," she complained. "Is that the way to comb your hair? Who'll take you if you're slovenly? Why don't you say something? Don't you know how to talk? You'll see, you'll lose your happiness by keeping quiet. You do everything the wrong way."

But noticing tears in Hafiika's eyes she would stop talking as pity filled her heart and would let out a long sigh. She already knew what fate awaited her child, she would have to take the same road as her mother had, oh yes, she would.

With head bowed heavy from bitter thought, she listened to the fading sounds of the wedding music in the village signalling the evaporation of her last hopes and dreams.

\* \* \*

It is raining. The cold autumn mists curl in the sky and come down to earth in thick wet braids. Anguish and despair drift along into the grey unknown, grief sobs quietly. The bare trees and thatched roofs cry, the wretched land bathes in tears and knows not when it will smile. Dark nights follow bleak days. Where, pray, is the sky? Where is the sun? Like lofty hopes laid low, myriads of tiny drops pour down and trickle on the ground, mixing with the earth in muddy streams. There's no place to find consolation. Dark thoughts, heavy grief, drift about above, rolling in the mist, and a plaintive, dirgeful wailing can be heard.

Through the tiny, grey tearful window both Andriy and Malanka can see the dark figures of people walking in

search of a pittance, drenched and dismal, like a wounded crane which has lost its flock, like the autumn rain. They walk past and disappear into the grey mist.

The hut is immersed in darkness. The small windows filter in the darkness, the damp corners frown, the low ceiling bears down and the heart weeps in sorrow. The relentless patter of droplets provoke a stream of recollections. Like these drops, the days of life, the powers of youth, and puerile expectations had trickled down and disappeared in the muck. All that strength has been used up on others who are more powerful and happier, as if that is the way it's supposed to be.

The way it is supposed to be....

The rain continues. Like two hunchbacked shadows, the old couple sit in the twilight of the room solving the question which was asked by Gudz: will the goat come to the trough?

Maybe it will....

## PART TWO

There had been a deep snowfall and Andriy was eagerly clearing a path from the door to the gate. This was work at least; anyway it wasn't much good for a person to stay around a house where hunger shows its empty eye and poverty stalks the damp corners. Honest to God, these are the worst of times: you'd be glad to earn some money but it's nowhere to be found. I don't know how we can survive the winter. Malanka's face has blackened and she's become thin as a splinter. Her burning glance bores me — and it stings, and she coughs so loudly that the glass in the windows tinkles. Do you still remember the wedding, Malasya? Sure. When Master Lyolyo from the neighbouring estate married our landlord's daughter my old woman almost went mad: how will I greet them when they return from church — with rye bread? She had served those masters and Lyolyo had grown up before her very eyes. She ran about the village until finally someone gave her a bun — must have been the blacksmith's wife, and she was so wet and cold. Master Lyolyo gave two *zlotys*, but they had to pay old Maryana one *zloty* when first Malanka's chest began to hurt her and then the pain almost finished her off. Now you're getting

your due, cough my dear, cough and remember the kindness of your masters.

Andriy straightened up and stuck his shovel in the snow. He had warmed up and steam poured from him like smoke out of a chimney. His moustache and eyebrows turned milky.

The village was half buried in snow. The low huts under the blue sky squatted even closer to the ground, like women kneeling in church; beyond the fence the eye could run over the snow-covered fields without finding anything to dwell upon.

Andriy took the shovel and picked up his lost thread of thought.

The way he saw it was that once a person had ill luck, his luck would be bad from that time on. His old woman had told him she had expected it but he hadn't even hoped. For the son of a peasant with means to marry a poor girl? For Prokip to marry Hafiyka? Well, he did propose. No sooner had Christmas left the house when the matchmakers entered, but nothing had come of it. The girl refused and nothing could make her budge. He didn't care much himself but it was a tragedy for Malanka. She dreamed of her daughter being married to a rich peasant's son, she saw herself pushing the plough and planting vegetables. Ha, ha, you can forget about all that, Malasya. The girl doesn't want to. Take care that it isn't that Marko she's got in her head. Maybe his bones have already rotted, maybe he's died somewhere in jail. The girl used to be gay as a bird, now she's like a nun. She's lost weight, keeps silent and holds a grudge against her father. And it's not my fault. Was I the one who put Hushcha in jail? Anyway, that he's a rebel is the truth, and, honest to God, they knew what they were doing when they took him away.

Hm, I'm tired already, I've really grown weak over the winter, not enough food. In the summer it's not so bad: you can always have a beet or an onion and catch some fish.

Prokip didn't wait, betrothed another girl. Sure. Malanka had even wept with anger....

"Hey, factory man. Going to all those pains so his wife won't get her feet wet, damn — Hullol!"

"Damn you, Khoma, you really startled me. Hullo. You know I'm so meek I'm afraid of my own shadow now."

"Yours isn't a soul, you've got the guts of a hare."

Khoma was mocking him. The hatred was deeply entrenched in the wrinkles of his bare face.

Andriy was used to this kind of treatment. He knew that since the landlord had chased Gudz out, he had been having a still harder time than before, but he said:

"It's all very fine for you when you're alone and I've got three mouths to feed at home."

"For me!? I hope it's as easy for you to die as it is for me to live. Buy me some beer, I'll tell you some news."

"How could I? I've forgotten how it tastes. The news is surely about the factory. You told me about it many times —"

"You don't believe me? Master Lyolyo is building a distilling factory."

"You don't say?"

"I'm not just saying, it's the truth. They'll make a distillery out of the sugar factory and Lyolyo will also build himself a house, I hope he makes you happy by kicking the bucket."

"What are you talking about? Where did you learn this?"

"Hell, he doesn't believe me. Leave your shovel and let's go."

"Where?"

"Don't ask, just move!"

Andriy fingered the shovel and looked at Gudz in disbelief. Finally, he stuck the shovel in the snow and found himself outside the gate.

"Why did you leave the shovel, someone'll steal it, hey you," he heard Malanka's voice but didn't even turn.

He trudged through the snow hurrying to keep up with Khoma, who was taking resolute and angry steps, matching the mood and tempo of his speech: he made the snow fly like a horse would. Andriy's breathing became laboured, his eyes raced ahead towards the stone walls which already seemed to be teeming with workers and the chimneys which seemed to be breathing smoke.

"This time Khoma is telling the truth," Andriy's heart pounded.

They were walking through the deserted snow-covered village as if it were an uninhabited forest, through which they wanted to pass as quickly as possible to behold the wide open spaces.

When at last they saw the black ruins of the sugar factory on the hill Andriy clearly spied some smoke for a mo-

ment and heard a familiar noise. The smoke disappeared, though, but there were people working and carts standing near the sugar factory.

“What’s the hurry? There’s plenty of time.”

Andriy only waved his hand. Now he couldn’t be worried about Khoma. He could already see a row of sleighs with logs and beams, bast baskets filled with red brick like bowls full of berries, shaggy horses enveloped in their steam, bent backs, the snapping of knouts. Ho, hey, hup team! the voices rang out.

The foreman stood in the yard and inspected the material being brought in amongst the din and shouting.

Andriy ran from one sleigh to another feeling the wood with his hand, knocking on the bricks, looking into each person’s eyes as if inquiring — is it true? He took his hat off in front of the foreman and stood in a long silence.

Then he came up to Khoma and smiled.

“Will it be?”

“It will.”

“A wine-making factory?”

“I told you already.”

Andriy’s bleak greenish eyes shone like ice melting in the sun. They lingered on the black, soot-covered walls of the sugar factory, and the round yellow logs on the white snow, smiled at the stacks of brick and the foreman’s beard, grey from the cold. Now, honest to God, they’ll get it going. We won’t be dying of hunger, sure — when the time comes the money will be there. That’s right, Malasya, and you calling me an industrialist.

“Well, Khoma, it’ll be? Look, look!”

But Khoma’s eyes shone with a green malicious light.

“What are you so happy about? Do you think they’re going to distill vodka? Not at all, they’re going to distill your blood. You want bread. You’ll be hunch-backed before you earn any! Look around. Some have bellies hanging over their belts, and they’ll sap all the strength from your body, damn it all.”

“Wait a second, Khoma.”

“I hope they burn and the wind scatters their ashes together with human injustice.”

“Wait a second, Khoma.”

“What should I wait for? You think it’s a distillery they’re putting up — it’s your grave, four boards and a hole in the ground. That’s all.”

“You do carry on, Khoma!”

But Gudz couldn't be stopped now. He was caught in his own momentum.

“I would take all of it and — wham, wham — I'd bust up the whole place, I'd flatten it to the ground so there would be nothing left to remember it by.”

Khoma waved his arms and stamped his feet. Every wrinkle twitched on his bare face and his body writhed like a coil under his old coat.

Andriy stared in fear at Gudz. He seemed to have swallowed his tongue.

What's the matter with Khoma? What's he talking about? You have to earn a living some way. Is it better for those who muddle about on their plots of land and sometimes even fail to gather enough for seed? Or those who bury their strength in the master's field and when they're ill, old and crippled, die like dogs in the gutter? What a thing to say, oh God!

But Khoma was slowly regaining his composure. The hatred and swearing suddenly burst out in a hoarse laughter.

“Ha, yeah! Well, are you treating me to some beer? You owe me a bottle. Let's go to Mendel's.”

Andriy smiled sheepishly. Why not? He'd like to have a drink himself, but —

“Do you trust me, Khoma?”

“Yeah, yeah, your pocket's empty. The hell with you — industrialist! I'll be seeing you.”

Andriy followed Khoma with his eyes, but even before the bent figure had disappeared from sight, before the green lights in his eyes and the offensive words had disappeared from memory only one sound resounded in Andriy's mind — winemaking factory!

He wanted to hear those words once again and squeezing his hat with his hands stood in front of the foreman.

“It'll be a distilling factory?”

“Yes, it will.”

Now he was certain. He felt pride and self-respect as if it was not Master Lyolyo but he himself who would make the dead walls of the sugar factory come alive again, would get the wheels and driving belts moving, make the machines and people work.

The village, the tillers, the earth.

It was all so poor and miserable.

They were moles and they had burrowed into their white holes for the winter, and when the spring comes they'll get out and start torturing the earth cutting its bosom. Feed us earth! But the earth moans, thin, weak and torn to pieces. It doesn't feed people, it gives them its blood to drink. On it grows burdock and other wild weeds, not bread. Try to eat that!

Meanwhile hungry man grows, multiplies, writhing like a snake that's been chopped up into many pieces.

There are too many of you! If only merciful God would reduce your numbers by war or epidemic. Maybe it would be easier to live then.

But what did he have to worry about? He had no land. The distilling factory would provide him with bread. Khoma was talking nonsense.

And you Malasya, you had no reason to laugh. Andriy Volyk said there would be a distilling factory — and there will!

\* \* \*

Hafiyka came into the house and held her cold hands against the oven.

"I forgot the oven was cold," she said in a guilty voice and smiled.

Malanka turned her bloodshot eyes to her.

"Who were you talking to at the door?"

"Prokip came in."

Prokip! Since he had married, Malanka couldn't stand to hear his name.

"What did he want?"

"He came to see me."

"To see you? What for?"

"He brought me some books."

"Why doesn't he bring them to his wife instead of you...."

She wanted to pierce her daughter with her glance, but she couldn't. She felt tears rush to her eyes and burn her, so she covered her face with her fists.

Now Malanka's eyes wept of their own accord. She had shed so many tears during the autumn and winter that they had grown accustomed to crying. When the cold set in there was mire and foul weather not only in Nature but in her heart as well. Hopes had flown and vanished without a trace

and now there was nothing in her heart, it was as bare as the forest, with the snow and the wolves howling. The Lord gave no sign of his justice: the land had belonged to the landlords and it still did. Malanka had collected seeds and cherished hopes in vain. The bags of seeds had been hanging below the ikons for such a long time that everyone was sick of them. At last she had taken them down and put them into the closet. She'd been fooling herself for long enough. "What are you taking them down for? In the spring you'll sow them on your fields." Andriy really knew how to hurt her.

Malanka bit her dry lips in pain just at the mention of the subject.

There were three of them but they had one fate in store for them — cold, famine and despair. For whole days they would sit in the unheated hut without cooking a scrap. They glared at each other in hatred and hurled bloody words at one another. They were like wild animals. In order not to freeze, at night Andriy would chop down the pussy willows on the road or tear down the roofs on the vacant neighbouring houses. Only his conscience didn't let him steal. Then his chest began to hurt and he started to cough. His whole body seemed to be turned inside out, no one could sleep at night. They were encircled by emptiness and grief. Hafiyka walked about like a nun, not saying a word. But Malanka understood without words.

"See, he brings you books. If you had married him, you would be reading together."

"Stop that, Ma."

"Who are you waiting for? Hushcha? What misfortune! Your father won't earn much, I'm ill and all black from work, but it hasn't helped. But Prokip —"

How dull it is to listen to one and the same thing all the time!

"Don't fret, Mother, I'll get hired."

Malanka bit her tongue.

"I'll get hired at the estate or at Pidpara's, they say he needs a girl to work for him."

Malanka's eyes again showed fright and opened wide. Something she had long since forgotten flashed for a second before her.

She raised her hand as if wanting to drive off the vision.

"Not another word about it."

"I will, so help me God!"

At this point Malanka suddenly relaxed. Why should she worry since things were getting better. They've almost lived through the winter and spring was not so far off. Andriy will probably be hired by the master, the peasants will start planting their gardens and we'll be able to earn a living.

Malanka's voice grew more affectionate as if the sun, resting quietly in front of the hut, were warming it up. The golden horizon turned the window into a church altar, the oven seemed to turn red hot, as if a fire were blazing in it, the tender words came pouring out like the last rays of the sun slowly fading in the evening shadows. Only isolated words reached Hafiyyka, for whom this sweet voice brought back the past and encouraged her thoughts....

"If I knew where to go. I'd walk all the way to see him. I only hope he doesn't think I've turned away from him. I would say: "Marko, I haven't forgotten what you've taught me; where you sowed one word, ten have grown. They've thrown you behind bars, but your words are going around —"

"— when harvesting time comes, we'll work to earn our bread and in the autumn —"

"She who loves faithfully would want to sow the whole world with the words of her loved one. They're tormenting you and haven't I suffered enough as well? See what I'm like now. Every day I grieve for you, every day my thoughts take flight —"

"— Someone will betroth you yet — your destiny is still behind God's doors —"

"I am waiting for you. If I won't be yours I won't be anyone's. My only comfort is that I can talk with you though you don't hear me...."

The light in the window faded and slowly went out.

The earth had supper on the sun and was getting ready for the night. The blue shadows opened up their depths to enclose Hafiyyka's thoughts and Malanka's hopes.

\* \* \*

Malanka refused to believe it. Gudz was lying again. Andriy turned so angry his face contorted. He had seen it with his own eyes. It wasn't only Khoma, the foreman also had said so. His moustache turned even whiter against his flushed face and his eyes bulged. Malanka shrugged her shoulders but put on her jacket and ran to the estate. Now

it was up to her. Master Lyolyo was sure to hire Andriy, because she had served and worked for them. Malanka coughed in the kitchen for a long time waiting for Master Lyolyo to come out. He made fun of the old woman but still hired Andriy as an assistant-foreman.

This was a great joy. Now every day the fire burned brightly in the oven, there was a delicious smell of borshch or dumplings in the house, and when Andriy returned home in the twilight and brought the freshness of the cold with him Malanka did everything to please him and all her movements showed she was the mistress of the house.

After supper Andriy sat near the oven and took out his pipe. The red of the fire winked at him with its bluish eye shooting out stars, and finally settled for the night in the blanket of its grey ashes. Hafiyka rattled with the spoons and splashed the warm water and Malanka folded her arms on her breast listening with respect to the account of how many bricks had been brought, which wood had not been accepted and why, and how the foreman didn't understand anything and how, if it weren't for him, Andriy, things wouldn't be moving along.

When spring set in and the work began in earnest Andriy's stories became more variegated and longer. Andriy seemed to be in a fever. He thought that everything was being done too slowly and building would never be completed. Now it was his distillery and even Malanka caught his mood and often went to see how the work was moving on. She even forgot her dream for land and lived one life with Andriy.

At last, some two months after Easter, the high factory chimney let out clouds of smoke and the shriek of the sugar factory whistle reached the village.

Andriy jumped up. He leaned forward, stuck out his neck and carefully listened to the whistle as if afraid of missing a single note. Then, beaming, he turned to his wife; sweat stood out on his forehead.

"Do you hear, Malanka?"

Malanka heard it all right.

"That's not land to be divided up sometime or another, it's no joke, honest to God, it's a real factory."

Malanka sighed. She only looked at her smeared dry hands, which wanted other work, and felt her dreams plunge deep to the bottom of her heart.

That very evening Andriy went to work on the night shift.

Though not much time had passed since Prokip had married after Easter, it seemed to Hafiyka that Prokip had matured and even grown old. He was standing in front of her talking and she looked at his wide shoulders, and the calm face on which a beard had unexpectedly appeared, reflecting the staidness of a married man. It seemed to her that his slightly cold eyes looked not so much at her as somewhere inside himself, and, therefore, his words had more weight, like good grain. She had also heard that the rich were sore at him.

"Pidpara is the one who's most vexed at me. On Sunday, at the village meeting he kicked up a storm: 'They should send people like Kandzyuba to Siberia,' he said. 'He gets newspapers, and books, reads them to the poor folk, stirring up the people. Throws papers around'—those were his words. But when he meets me, he's the first to ask: 'What's new? What do they write about the war?' Mother also chides me: says I burn the lamp too late and it's expensive."

"How about Maria?"

Prokip gave her a trying look; with her strong body tanned by the sun, her arms and legs covered with thin fluff, Hafiyka looked like a golden bee. Her eyes were downcast and she tried to catch a stalk between two toes.

"Maria? She's all right, I suppose. She likes people, likes to listen to them talking and put in her own word. Things aren't the way I wanted them to be. I need a companion, but you refused."

The stalk wouldn't hold and slipped out.

"Stop it, Prokip, enough of that."

"Oh, it's nothing. You don't have to call for grief, it comes of itself. You're still waiting for Hushcha?"

Hafiyka looked up at Prokip.

"Last night I saw Marko in a dream."

"Oh yes, I almost forgot. Old Panas met me this morning and said he would come to my place to hear what clever people have to say...."

"I dreamed that I had just finished giving out the leaflets and took out the last one to put it in Petro's shed when someone grabbed me by the hand. I felt my heart sink. I looked up and it was Marko who seemed displeased. 'I'm sitting in jail for all of you and this is the way you spread around my words! Show me your hands.' And I'm ashamed,

afraid that my hands are empty, I can't raise my eyes and can't show my hands. I want to tell him what I've done but can't find my voice. Listen, Prokip, when'll you give me some more, I don't have any left?"

"I don't have any either. I'll bring some when I go into town. Drop by my place."

Prokip looked closely at Hafiyyka. She was taut, strong and neat mellow under the sun, like rich ploughland or ripe grain in the fields, and her eyes were deep and dark as a well.

He was fascinated by her eyes. Prokip let out a sigh.

But sigh or no sigh there was nothing you could do about it.

He wanted to take the weight off his heart and words flowed from him like rain pours from a cloud. His failure was nothing. The sorrow of the world was great. He had seen a lot of it both at home and in other places. Everywhere the poor were downtrodden and the rich were on top. There were tears in the valleys and arrogance on the summits, people were in the dirt like weeds on the roadside, trampled by the rich and powerful. And there's no one to cry out: rise up, people, and stretch out your hands to get your due. If you don't take it yourself, no one will do it for you. Seems the man who is to be heard hasn't been born yet. You need a strong voice. And what can we do? Where is our voice? We only whisper: get up, Ivan, and wash your face. Get up, Petro, there'll be more of us. If only we would succeed in waking a few then they would rouse the others. These wrongs have become so deeply set in each person's heart, just touch the sore and it'll ache.

There was something meek and humble in these complaints like the melancholy sound of a stream flowing over small pebbles.

No, Marko wasn't like that. He was like a turbulent torrent overturning boulders, washing away the banks, and uprooting the trees. Everyone would listen to him.

\* \* \*

Better times had come for Malanka. Andriy worked now and though he didn't bring home his whole pay, still they never went hungry. She didn't see Andriy that often: he worked on the night shift and either slept or wandered about with Khoma. Malanka and Hafiyyka also brought in

money, working as field hands. But Malanka was restless. In the spring, rumours appeared about the land as if they had sprouted and grown with the winter grain. So what if with her old hopes she had thrown out her bags of seed; now hope was knocking at the door again. The joyous news passed from person to person, from house to house and from village to village: the land was going to be divided up. No one asked who was the first to say it and who the last. Rumours floated like clouds in the sky, and spread like pollen from flowers.

“Have you heard? They’re going to divide up the land.”

“They’ll give it to the people. All our troubles will be over.”

“The land is already ours. They’ll start dividing soon.”

“Even the landlords say they’ll give away their land.”

“The landlords? Don’t believe them.”

“But it’s true!”

“Oh yes, they’re afraid.”

Malanka’s eyes shone.

And the land itself beckoned her.

The grain was singing to Malanka, the meadow was laughing with the morning dew and the ringing of the scythe, juicy plants in the gardens were calling, the rich earth was breathing its warmth at her like her mother’s breast had.

The earth’s call was answered by Malanka’s heart, and by the thin smudged hands, which had acquired all their strength from, and given it all away to, the earth.

Sometimes, while at work, she would stop to look at the land.

The grainfields rolled below, carpeting the hills; they were full, fresh and rich, but belonged to others. As far as the eye could see there was no end to them. And it wasn’t the peasant’s land, it was owned by the landlords. What could a landlord do with such vast holdings?

It was a heart-rending sight to see all this grain while the fields whispered in consolation:

“Don’t grieve, they’ll divide it, divide it...”

Thoughts about the land made Malanka wake in the night.

She would get up in cold sweat. All of a sudden she would think it impossible: the rich man would never share his wealth with the simple peasant, never! He’s got the money and the power and what does the peasant have? Just

his limbs — arms and legs. Nothing would come of it everything would stay as it is; the poor man would always spend his strength on the rich, Malanka would never have a better lot, and Hafiyka's beauty and youth would be wasted, just like her mother Hafiyka would wither working for other people. The earth would be yours only when they shovel it over you in the grave.

Perspiring, Malanka sat still and stared into the darkness of the night, as if asking: what'll happen? But the black night was deaf and blind, capable only of silence in response. Yet, at the bottom of her heart, a warm, small hope nestled in secret from the cold mind. It whispered something to Malanka and led her into the fields.

The grainfields waved in the sun, the flax blossomed in azure, like the sky looking into a lake, there was a cart in the meadow. Hafiyka was feeding her child and the other one was next to Malanka — grannie! And all this — the rich grainfield, the cart, the horse and the family had become a part of her. "Now why'd I put on my red boots today holiday-style? They look like poppies in bloom."

When meeting someone in the morning Malanka would ask:

"Do you know whether they're going to divide the land?"

She even stopped the blacksmith's wife:

"Have you heard, dear, that they'll soon be giving us land?"

"Of course I have, Malasya. Sure. That's what everybody's talking about, and it's the only thing on the people's minds. My man bought a *dessiatina* \* of land from the landlord in winter: gave him the first payment but doesn't want to pay any more. 'Why should we waste our money if the land will be ours anyway,' he says. In any case, we'll lose the money we paid already. But I don't want to lose that either. Why should we pay for what belongs to us? I won't give a kopek. I keep asking my man to take back the money but he doesn't want to. 'Finders keepers', he says. They will divide the land, you'll get more because you've hardly got any. I only hope they'll divide it fairly so that people won't squabble over it."

"Let it be as God wills. As for people, to God they're just canines, and they scrap like dogs. Thanks, my dear, for the good tidings. God help you in all your efforts."

\* Land measure = 2.7 acres

Malanka's heart melted like wax. It seemed strange that she had quarrelled with the blacksmith's wife so often.

\* \* \*

Maria threw up her hands in surprise.

"Look, old Panas has come to listen too!"

"Can't I? Do they say bad things here?"

A short stocky man stopped at the threshold, put down his rough-hewn staff behind the threshold and leaned on it, narrowing his eyes. He resembled the stump of a tree which had pulled its roots from the earth and waddled its way here, beaten by foul weather and smelling of the earth on which it grew. Old Kandyubikha invited her brother in:

"Come into the house."

Everyone turned to Panas and the stranger abruptly stopped talking, put his hands on the table and winked his eyes.

Panas was still looking around.

"The lighting is dim here, I can't make out the people."

But he had already recognized everyone. Next to Hafiya sat Olexa Bezik whom the villagers called Hard Luck. He had as many children as poppies, but not a bit of land. In the corner Semen Mazhuha leaned against the wall; he was tall, with a sunken chest and long arms, like a jack knife. His only earnings came from bringing Jews to the station on his mare. Also present were Ivan Korotky and Ivan Redka, Olexandr Deineka and Savva Hurchin, all of them were landless or land-starved.

Then Panas stepped over the threshold in his enormous boots, which had more foot wrappings than feet in them, and sat down next to Maria.

"Who's that dark fellow at the table?"

"He's from Yamishchi," Maria explained and looked curiously at the stranger.

"Go on," she asked him.

The man stopped blinking and everyone turned to him.

"So, we gathered together at a meeting with the village elder and decided to draw up a document. We, villagers of Yamishchi, have resolved that none of us will work for the landlord at the old wage. Now a man on foot would be paid a ruble, on horseback, two rubles. The working day would be a quarter shorter."

“Wow!”

“Quiet, let him finish.”

“To reap for every sixth sheaf instead of every tenth, to thrash for every eighth measure instead of every thirteenth....”

That’s fine! In the corners, heads were nodding in approval while Mahzuha was doubling up and stretching again as a sign of accord.

“And what if the landlord doesn’t agree?”

Old Kanzhyubikha squeezed through the crowd and carefully dimmed the light in the lamp.

Yes, what will happen if the landlord doesn’t agree?

The man from Yamishchi was silent for a minute, then looked around and suddenly uttered:

“If he doesn’t agree — we’ll strike!”

Maria raised her arms in disbelief.

“Strike! Lord almighty!”

Panas Kandzyuba faltered on his feet like a tree in the wind.

“To strike, how’s that?”

“Like this: the landlord calls you to cut the grass: all right, a rouble a day. If you don’t agree, you can do it yourself. No one will come to work. When it’s harvesting time — demand your price: if he doesn’t agree, he can put on his *postoly*\* and go out into the fields with a sickle himself.”

“Ha, ha! That’s a good one!”

Laughter shook the house from corner to corner. People doubled up with laughter like grass cut by a scythe. A landlord in *postoly*! Ha, Ha!

Hard Luck even perspired imagining a lord in *postoly*: his sweat-covered bald head reflected the light of the lamp.

The man from Yamishchi talked on.

Panas kept on seeing the funny figure of the fat lord in *postoly*, alone, awkward and helpless in the middle of a field. It was not gay merriment which filled Panas’ heart but rather the age-old peasant hatred which had finally found an outlet.

Put *postoly* on the landlord!

This single word contained a whole picture, a grand design, human and divine justice.

Put *postoly* on the landlord!

\* Peasant footwear, made of raw leather or hide

But how could it be done?

Yes, how could it be done? The lord's no fool. If his own peasants won't do it, he'll call in others. The landlord's always on top.

The very idea that others would get in the way and go against the village made eyes burn.

Everyone talked at once.

Mahzuha raised his arm like a stick.

"We won't let others come! We'll chase them away! Beat them with staffs!"

"Ho, ho, a man like that will really give it to them."

Maria raised her hands.

"Sure, if they don't listen we'll beat them."

Things couldn't be worse, they'd die anyway. It wouldn't be worse in the grave. People were starving and no one cared, no one would give them food. Not for anything! If you want to eat, drink water; if you can't stand it any longer, drink more water. Some live in wealth, others... Misfortune was born before wealth. Put *postoly* on the landlord...

But little by little Panas' fantasy faded as a worm of doubt ate away at him. How could they? Is it so easy to fight the landlord? He was no longer so confident that the landlord would put on *postoly* and go out to reap the grain. Once again he was the strong and cunning enemy, against whom it was hard to fight and who could overcome anyone. It's better to keep further away from the lord and temptation. Why, the district clerk once even knocked his tooth out!

No one listened to Panas.

Then he knocked on the floor with his stick.

What did he want?

No, you won't scare the lord. He has the power. He'll get himself a whole village of people, and those who haven't been touched yet by the whip will be painted black and blue. You're all yelling now, but what will you do then? In a pack, even a dog without teeth is mean. You want to kill a hedgehog with your bare hands. You can't do it, he'll prick you.

The old woman reduced the light in the lamp. It's all sooner said than done, meanwhile kerosene was expensive.

Ivan Korotky was trying to find out whether everyone had signed.

There was so much noise the man from Yamishchi couldn't say anything.

“Keep quiet, let him talk.”

Naturally, not everyone signed, the rich ones refused.

“What did you expect, a rich peasant’s sometimes hard to tell from a landlord.”

“But some other villages joined us — Piski, Bereza and Vesely Bir.”

“Do you hear how many joined them? Now it’s our turn. We’ll stand up for them and they for us.”

“Let’s sign! sign! sign!”

It was becoming stuffy in the house. The smoke hung in the air like low clouds, and the bluish waves mixed with the sound of voices drifting through the open windows.

They can’t force us to work for the lord. If you don’t want to, don’t go. We’ll make them see that it’s not wealth but blistered hands that makes people strong. Everyone should join. Everyone.

Panas was going against the tide.

He didn’t agree, it would be a revolt, he said.

“A revolt? You don’t say!”

“Yes, a revolt. It’s not praiseworthy. Better to wait for the land to be divided.”

“You can wait all you want, you’ll never get it.”

“They’ll divide the land very soon.”

Maria motioned, hadn’t she been saying just that?

The men were pressing Panas hard. Who will divide the land? Maybe the lords will?

But Panas wouldn’t budge. Firm and grey like a mound of earth, heavy in his enormous boots, he repeated one thing over and over again:

“They’ll divide the land.”

“All right, suppose they do, but what do we do in the meantime?”

“It’ll be a revolt.”

You can graze your horses on the lord’s field or set up fishing nets in the lord’s pond, but for the whole village to rebel against the master is quite another thing. One lost tooth, knocked out by the district clerk had been enough for Panas.

“Look here!”

He opened his mouth, sticking his rough and unbending finger, like a bark-covered twig, into the dark hollow in his pale gums.

“Look here!”

They let Panas go at that.

The thunder was still rumbling and an ochre-tinged cloud was embracing the sky with its wing-like tip. There were bubbles on the water everywhere and streams of water were flowing in the ravines and washing away the hay. The hay was lost. In her mind Malanka imagined tucking up her skirt and wading into the water when suddenly she heard Hafiyka say:

“Mom, someone’s tapping at the window.”

Window? What window?

Yes, someone’s tapping.

Malanka got out of bed, feeling for the walls, and that someone continued rapping on the window.

“What is it? Who’s there?”

Malanka opened the window.

“Come to the factory. There’s been an accident. Andriy has injured his arm.”

“Accident!” Malanka repeated after him.

“Did he hurt it badly?”

“I don’t know, some said his arm was torn off, others that it was his fingers.”

“My God!”

Malanka raced about like a mouse in a trap, and couldn’t pull her thoughts together. Finally Hafiyka gave her a skirt.

So that’s what the thunder was about!

The village was endlessly long. There had been an accident at the wine-making factory, Andriy was dead, maybe he was lying stretched out and motionless, and here were these sleepy and quiet huts, springing up one after the other without end. Fence after fence, gate after gate. She could hear animals snorting in the sheds and Hafiyka’s uneven breathing beside her. The factory was still a long way to go.

Only now Malanka noticed that a boy from the factory was running behind her.

“Did you see Andriy?”

It was someone else asking and the boy answered right away.

No, he hadn’t seen him, others had sent him the news. In his tedious way he began to describe something, but Malanka didn’t bother to listen.

She could feel the dampness of the night drifting from the pond and, all of a sudden, a row of lighted windows cut

into her heart. The factory, emitting clouds of smoke, was vibrant, bright, bustling and imposing against the deadness of the night.

A group of people was standing in the courtyard where a light shone. Andriy was dead! She screamed and shouldered through the crowd.

“Shut up!”

An angry voice stopped her, she suddenly fell silent, merely shifted her meek glance from one person to another.

They explained:

“You see, he was in the machine room.”

“So there he was standing next to a machine.”

“Next to a machine,” Malanka echoed.

“He was holding an oil can and the wheel — suddenly it turned.”

“It turned,” Malanka said.

“Then, to avoid dropping the can he grabbed it with his right hand, and the next thing he knew four of his fingers were gone.”

“All the way to the very palm.”

“Is he alive?” asked Malanka.

“He’s alive, the doctor’s there.”

Malanka could see a spot of light on the ground, but she did not know what they were doing with Andriy and how he was. Now she could hear him groaning — he was alive.

Finally the same angry voice cried out:

“Is the missus here? You can come up now.”

The workers let her through. She spotted something white as a pillow, and only when she came closer did she discern his yellow waxen face, small, dark and thin, with a distorted twist of his mouth.

“What have you done, Andriy?”

He didn’t answer, just groaned.

“What’s happened to you, Andriy?”

“Think I know? I’m a cripple. Pick up my fingers.”

“What are you saying, Andriyko?”

“Pick up my fingers and bury them. I earned my bread with them. Oh my God, oh.”

Two workers walked up and carried Andriy off. Malanka didn’t even have a chance to cry out.

In the machine-room Malanka looked for Andriy’s fingers. Three yellow stumps lay in the oil on the floor near

the machine, but she couldn't find the fourth one. She wrapped what she had found in a kerchief and took it along with her.

In the morning they took Andriy to a hospital in town and master Lyolyo summoned Malanka. He was angry and screamed at her for a long time as if at Andriy but, at least, gave her five rubles.

Andriy returned home in three weeks. He had grown thin, his face had taken on a yellow hue, his hair turned grey, and his arm was in a sling.

"My fingers hurt me," he complained to Malanka.

"What fingers?"

"When I wriggle them — and I want to wriggle them — they start to hurt. Did you bury them?"

"Sure. In the garden. What'll we do now?" Malanka lamented.

"Why, I'll work at the factory again, at another job."

But in the office he was told that disabled were not accepted. He was not allowed to see Lyolyo.

"It's a fine thing," Andriy cried out, "I've worked at the sugar factory for twelve years, damn it — and it belonged to your father-in-law — now I've maimed myself at a machine in your factory and you throw me out like so much rubbish."

Then Malanka went. She pleaded and begged but to no avail. She was told that they had spent a lot on him as it was: they had paid for the hospital, and given them five roubles, to say nothing of all the trouble they had gone to.

"That's the wine-making factory for you!" Malanka hissed at Andriy in an outpouring of feeling.

\* \* \*

"Mother, there's something I want to say."

"What is it, Hafiya?"

Hafiya hesitated.

"Out with it, girl."

"I'll go get hired out."

Malanka raised her hands. There she goes again.

Everyone was irritating her, she couldn't stand it any longer.

"Don't you worry, Mom. It'll be better that way. Father won't be able to work any more, he doesn't stand a chance the way he is. It'll be winter soon."

"Keep still! Stop pestering me. I'm on my last legs as it is."

Hafiyka lapsed into a bitter silence. Her mother was crying and she didn't know why.

For a long minute Malanka blew her nose and wiped away her tears.

Hafiyka thought aloud.

"Pidpara happens to be looking for a girl."

Malanka kept a stubborn silence.

As always, nothing came of the talk.

As for Andriy, he was always irascible. His voice became even shriller, like a woman's. When he worked himself up his face flushed and consequently his moustache looked whiter, even milky.

"Those rich people, factory-owners! They made a cripple out of me and then threw me out. Sapped all my strength, sucked my blood and now they don't need me any more."

Andriy showed his maimed hand to every person he met.

"Look what they've done to me. Twelve years they sapped my strength, twelve years I fed them. Is that fair? Goddamn them!"

Andriy had learned to swear from Khoma.

He boasted:

"They won't get away with this, I'll get back at them for it."

Andriy's boasting reached the owner and he stopped sending Andriy on errands. Now another man went to the post office.

"What can you do to the fat one?" Andriy thought. "Might makes right. We're just cattle to the lord. Not even that! He'd be more upset about losing cattle because he's paid money for them. Hushcha was right."

Hafiyka cast an affectionate glance at her father. Now he's remembered Hushcha.

There was no more talk about getting hired, but it went without saying that Hafiyka would have to work. Malanka fell ill and grew pinched; it was not every day that she went outside. Misfortune had returned. Malanka was bitter.

She had brought up her child, taken care of her; she'd be glad to do the impossible for her and now she had to give her away for other people to trample on.

She knew what it was like to serve other people. So did her overworked hands and her soul, stifled by her masters like a flower strangled by weeds.

Malanka's only consolation lay in the thought that they would soon divide up the land and then Hafiyka would be able to leave her work and come home.

When the time came to take Hafiyka to Pidpara, Malanka looked as if she had just been taken off the cross. She bowed low and begged them not to mistreat her child.

At Pidpara's Hafiyka worked from morning to night. The mistress of the house was a sickly and weak woman, who groaned all the time and could just barely drag along the floor her bare feet in worn shoes. All the work around the house had to be done by Hafiyka and most of her time was taken up looking after the pigs. The hogs lay in the pigsty while the young pigs, sows and suckling pigs dug up the yard. In the morning, while Hafiyka was getting their feed ready, all the pigs squealed, grunted and pushed their snouts against the door. Above her head, the mistress moaned endlessly, her voice squeaking and her feet shuffling in her shoes. It was a relief for Hafiyka to find herself among the swine. The pigs, always eager to eat, swamped her, knocked the food out of her hands, deafened her with their squealing and jostled her about. There was nothing she could do but watch them overturn the water trough, stomping on their feed and defecating. The swine which were fattened behaved better. Sleek and swollen, not caring to go to the trouble of lifting their hindquarters, they only stood up on their forefeet. They had to be asked to dine and ate only reluctantly. They screwed up their sleepy eyes, lifted their clean, round snouts and moaned just like their mistress. Hafiyka combed their pink and plump bellies; then they would stretch back their hind feet and their spiral tails would tremble like living rings, oh, oh!

Pidpara himself liked to come into the pigsty. When his tall figure appeared in the door and a shadow fell on the enclosures Hafiyka would shudder. She was afraid of Pidpara. He was sullen and stern; permanent trouble stalked under his brushy eyebrows and played in the silver of his dark hair. He poked the hogs with a stick to make them get up and felt their spines. Without so much as a glance at Hafiyka, he would say sternly:

"Be sure that you look well after the pigs. God's creatures like to be cared for."

There were two more hired hands besides Hafiyka. Pidpara really made them sweat. They could never do enough work for him. He himself did the work of two people. When

the hungry hands ate a lot he would complain to his wife: "When they eat they sweat, then, when they start working, they're cold and they try to get the work off their hands as quickly as possible." When the food was really bad and the hands would set aside their spoons Pidpara fumed: "Beggars! So what do they eat at home? Water and potatoes!"

Hafiyka felt he was talking about her.

Pidpara particularly hated the poor. He would knit his thick brows and hiss through his teeth: "Beggars! What do they have? If those lazy people would work better, they'd have something. But they only want other people's wealth".

At least the master was hardly ever at home. He was always in the fields, in the meadows where they were cutting grass, near the pigs. His tall figure cast a long shadow everywhere he went and his presence made the work go faster.

Sometimes, on Sundays, Pidpara would take his coat off the wall and girdle himself with a wide belt.

After Pidpara left the mistress would feel as if she were dying:

"He'd gone to the meeting, oh, oh, my chest hurts me. People listen to my man. His word is law. They respect him so. Wanted to elect him village elder but he refused. Didn't want his household to be left without a master. Oh, good grief, oh!"

It was the truth, but not the whole truth.

Pidpara would return in an angry mood.

"The devil knows what's happened to people these days," he complained to his wife. "Earlier they would all listen to anything I said, now they've become so insolent it's better to keep silent. Their ringleaders are beggars, hell!"

There were shadows under his brows.

On occasion guests would gather. On a holiday, by the time the heat had subsided, Maxim Skorobohatko and Pidpara's father-in-law Havrilo would come to his house. Skorobohatko was the village elder to whom people jokingly referred as 'the top'. They would sit down in the yard, in the open air, and Hafiyka would bring out the strips of fat and the fish. Though the weather was warm, the mistress would put on her sheepskin coat and join the company.

They ate and discussed where they could sell something with greater profit, how much they had grown, and who had swindled whom and how. The red-headed Maxim had the habit of gathering up all the crumbs on the table and swal-

lowing them, and he licked his fingers after eating fat. Not because he was hungry, but so it wouldn't be wasted. He winked restlessly, always laughing, and turned his broad, freckled face to all sides. He liked to switch the conversation from "respectable" talk to slippery ground.

"Soon the beggars'll divide the land, ha, ha! What does a rich man need all that land for? Everyone gets a fair share, ha, ha! How much have you got? More than your due? They'll take away the difference, ha, ha!"

Pidpara disliked jokes. But it wasn't easy to stop Maxim. He was already winking at Havrilo.

"As for you, relative, you would do good to give away even more. What do you need it for, you're old, let the beggars have their fill of bread."

"Sure, we're all equals now," Havrilo growled, "We'll have to work for our bread in our old age yet."

"And how! Have you forgotten how to reap?"

Pidpara was becoming angry.

The hell they'd take his land. He won't give away anything. They had no right to touch what had been earned with blood and sweat by his father and grandfather. What he had was his toil and the good-for-nothings had better keep still.

"I would kill anyone who dared touch what I own, on the spot and as you kill a dog, and I'd make no bones about it!"

The mistress would huddle in her coat and moan.

"Why don't you buy a good gun, good God, yours is no good, you tie it together with strings."

"This one's good enough, why should I spend the money."

"No, this man wouldn't give away even a bit of land as long as he lives," thought Hafiyka nodding her head.

After such conversations Pidpara would become even more sullen.

Going to bed he readjusted his gun on the wall and put an axe within reach.

Such behavior frightened Hafiyka.

\* \* \*

It was drizzling through the thick fog and Mazhuha covered his shoulders with a sack as he walked around the village. He doubled up and straightened out like a jack knife.

"Have you heard the lord refused to raise the price?"

"How do you know?"

"Prokip is back with the men from the lord's place."

"What did the lord say?"

"He said everything'll stay the way it was before. He won't pay any more than he did."

"What'll we do now?"

Mazhuha stuck a clenched fist into the air: the words burst out from his shallow chest as from an abyss:

"We'll strike".

"If we don't work the Yamishchi villagers will."

"No, they won't, they've raised the price too."

Olexa Bezik came out of his yard, his children following him like gypsies through the mud.

He wasn't afraid of anything. If it's a strike, well then.... Things couldn't be worse for him than they were now.

Mazhuha continued his rounds. In the gauze-like film of rain his figure lengthened, then shortened like a fish writhing in the nets.

Malanka hid her hands under her apron and her eyes glowed angrily.

"All right, chaps, get into the yoke, reap for every thirteenth sheaf. Serve the master."

She pursed her thin pale lips.

"The lord can reap it himself, we've had enough."

"He'll have to take care not to prick himself."

Olexandr Deineka let out a terrible oath. Everywhere there was cursing like the sound of a flail on the threshing-floor.

He was getting wet but wouldn't go inside: he felt better in the crowd.

"The lord's taken a firm stand and so will we."

"He can't fight the whole village."

"He can't force us to reap."

"True enough."

"We'll strike and that's that," Hard Luck resolved.

Meanwhile Mazhuha was already rousing people at the other end of the village.

"Have you heard?"

"We have."

"So?"

"We'll see what people do."

"They're on strike."

“Since they’re striking, we’ll join them.”

The lord’s grainfields dozed in the grey-green mist and seemed to dream of the sickle.

\* \* \*

Khoma sat on the hilltop with Andriy beside him. The sun beat down. A mist hovered over the village and fields; the factory lay to the left, the estate to the right. Andriy’s voice was shrill and whining. He looked into Khoma’s eyes as if he were begging.

“See what they did to me, Khoma.”

But Khoma’s eyes were as cloudy as soapy water. He stared into space and only rarely did a green and red light flash in his pupils as it does in a soap bubble.

“Where can I go now? What can I do without my hands?”

“Ha!”

“They don’t need people like me. They have plenty of healthy men.”

Khoma was silent.

“Am I done for?”

“You are.”

“Where’s justice in this world?”

“Keep your mouth shut and die.”

“No one with life in him wants to die.”

“Now you’re whining and before you were so happy about the wine-making factory. It was such a joy for you! I hope the bastard who got it running roasts in hell.”

Andriy faltered and then continued, more for himself than for his audience:

“They’ve devoured me, honest to God, just eaten me up.”

“Did you think they’d take pity on you? Look here.”

Khoma took Andriy by the shoulders and turned him to the left. “Do you see the ones over there?” Then he turned him to the right. “And those over there, the rich, the gluttons? They set traps for people as if they were wolves. When you’re caught they take your hide, cut you to bits and throw what they don’t need on the manure heap.”

“You’re telling the truth, Khoma, that’s for sure!”

“Do you think they build factories and set up estates? No, they forge chains for the people, they think up ways to sap the strength, drink the blood of the people. I hope

worms get them in their graves as the termite goes at a beam."

Andriy felt stifled. Gudz was saying the same old words but this time they were cutting into his soul like a sharp knife lifting the veil from his eyes. For a moment his glance penetrated the factory walls, the walls of the lord's manor and gained new insight to his mind.

"They've ruined the earth," Andriy heard, "They're only a handful, but look how they've fallen upon the earth, how far they've reached out with their hands. They've strangled the village with their fields as a noose fastens around the neck, the village is hemmed in: see how it lies like a manure heap on the lord's fields and see, above those fields the sugar and wine factories belch out smoke distilling people's strength into money."

Andriy was surprised that only today had he noticed for the first time how small and lost the villages seemed among the fields. It was as if bits of straw had fallen off a wagon along the way. And he was also surprised to see that the lord's cowherd seemed to have grown bigger before his very eyes. He was standing next to him like an oak, which had sprung up from the ground. The yellow waves in the fields were humbly rolling at his feet and even the sun stayed close to the ground in obeisance.

Andriy had forgotten his own complaints and was merely looking and listening.

"Take a look at me and I'll look at you. You'll show me your grey hairs and maimed hand and what will I show you? Maybe the soul which I buried in dung when I looked after the lord's cattle. That's when I buried everything that burned in my soul while you and the others looked on and kept silent, damn you all, blind moles!"

Is that so? But what could he, Andriy, do? Why are people to blame?

Khoma set his piercing, misty eyes on Andriy. A coarse and biting laugh made sparks fly from his eyes and their grey-green depths began to boil.

Andriy couldn't even wink an eye, he felt uneasy.

Khoma didn't say anything, but Andriy saw that laughter was gurgling inside Khoma like water in a cauldron.

The laughter burst forth at last and blotted out the sun.

Suddenly the big, feverish face loomed close to Andriy's ear bringing a wave of heat. The words came pouring out so quickly that he could hardly follow them.

“Couldn’t do anything? You liar! Can you see those fields of grain — the lord’s wealth — take a match, just one from the matchbox, and the smoke will rise to the sky and there’ll be nothing but ashes left on the ground. Can you see the houses and palaces, lots of cattle and riches? And then you come, small and grey like a mouse’s shadow, and leave nothing but cinders behind.

Khoma spoke faster and faster, swallowing his words, whistling and gurgling.

“From one master to the other, from the distilling factory to the sugar factory, from one lord’s lair to another, everywhere where wrong-doing has made itself a home — till the earth is bare.”

Andriy’s eyes bulged from their sockets and he shuddered.

“D’ye hear?” Khoma hissed. “Just the bare ground and the sun.”

Khoma’s gone mad. What was he saying?

Andriy had to reply but his tongue, timid as a rabbit, stuck in his throat.

Finally, Andriy could speak, but his words struck a discordant note.

“God forbid, Khoma. You can’t do things like that.”

Khoma looked haughtily at Andriy and said through his teeth as if spitting in the other’s face:

“You’re a swine, a worm. Die and be off as if you never lived.”

“So that’s what you’re like, Khoma.”

But Khoma wasn’t listening. He got up, tall and haughty, and walked into the tall grain as if it were water while Andriy stayed fixed to the ground like last year’s withered leaf.

\* \* \*

The steward had taken off his hat in front of the lord and his bronze face, normally smiling, now expressed concern.

“What’s wrong Jan?”

“Beg pardon, Sir, but we can’t start reaping today.”

“Why is that? Didn’t you give the appropriate orders yesterday?”

“I ran all about the village, beg pardon, but no one agreed to work. They don’t want to reap for our price.”

“What do you mean they don’t want to?”

The lord was startled. A strike against him? It was an insult. He knew that there had been strikes in some villages, but it couldn't be that they were on strike against him — he had always been kind to the folk, he had pardoned them when they grazed their cattle on his fields, his wife never refused to give quinine, castor oil or arnica lotion for the sick. He didn't believe his own ears.

"Did you say they didn't want to?"

"I did, beg pardon."

"It was to be expected. The simple folk are like that. Give them an inch and they'll take a mile."

The lord looked out through the window. The sun had just risen.

"All right, jump on a horse and make tracks to Yamishchi. Hire the Yamishchi folk. If they refuse, raise the price.

"Yes, Sir."

"Loafers!"

But the morning quiet had hardly absorbed the sound of a horse galloping when a rumbling noise penetrated the house from the yard, interrupted only by a high woman's voice which burst like flame from smoke.

What could that be?

The lord opened the window.

All the hands, even the cowherds, were in the yard. The kitchen cooks were running amid the rustling of dresses. There were also some people he didn't know.

"What's the screaming about? Who are those people?"

The lord wrapped his gown about himself, covering up his chest; he tried to find out what had happened but no one paid any attention to him.

"Maxim, who's there? Maxim!"

Maxim, at last, ran up, with an uncertain, frightened look on his face, others following him.

"Bed pardon, Sir, it's not our fault. My life's dearer, what'll my children do if I'm crippled for life."

"What is it? Out with it!"

The people answered in unison:

"It's a strike, that's what it is. They'll beat us if we don't leave work. What's the use of talking, let's go. Hey lads, let's go. It's not of our own choosing that we're doing this."

The lord saw blood.

"Where are you going! Stop!"

His angry voice gnashed like metal against stone, then

suddenly faltered. The lord felt as if he had lost his voice and couldn't say another word. But it would have done no good anyway: the hired hands were already crowding through the gates like a flock of sheep being driven to the meadow. The girls were running out of the house, the red of their dresses flickering in the sun. The boy who looked after the geese ran out, late and alone in the empty yard. He tucked the ends of his coat about him, his cap over his eyes and the knout dragging along the ground behind him like a snake leaving a winding trace.

"Where are you going, you rascal!" the lord stamped his feet, "Come back!"

The boy only quickened his pace. The lord stood still for a minute looking at the deserted estate.

"Swine! Rabble!"

He hurriedly pulled on his pants and ran out into the yard.

Empty.

He walked along the buildings. It was strange, as if it were not his own but someone else's estate.

He entered the kitchen pushing the door with his foot and crying out:

"Marina!"

No one was there.

"Olena!"

Silence.

The kitchen looked like a forge. The walls were covered with soot, the floor was broken, and the heavy and sour smell of sweat and leaven had settled down over the kitchen like a lazy cat in a warm spot. Some wood was lying near the oven and the help had started to peel potatoes. Things were scattered about every which way.

The lord walked out of the kitchen. The geese were running loose in the yard; the goslings were waddling from side to side, as if the wind were driving bits of yellow fluff over the sward. The boy hadn't taken them out, the lord shook his head. The cows were still in the shed. The gate of the coach-house were wide open, grinning at the lord like a toothless mouth. The trap stood in the yard and the blinkers were lying around near it. Swine! Rabble! The lord picked up the blinkers to put them back in place but then dropped them right away. Wasn't there anyone in the stables?

"Hey, Musiy!"

Silence once more.

“Musiy, you here?”

The voice fell on the unusual surrounding emptiness and disappeared without answer.

The lord folded his arms on his expansive belly and looked over the yard.

What could it all mean?

Could he be dreaming or was it all true?

Just before, the estate had been a living heart, beating and pumping blood through the body, now everything had grown to a halt and each closed door and the staring open ones seem to be a riddle.

The dogs spied the lord and rushed to his feet whimpering and jumping up against his chest.

“Away!”

“Swine! Rabble!”

He went back into the house. It was also deserted. His wife was still asleep. He walked through the empty rooms, looked into the dining room, searched for the maid — there was no one. He was overwhelmed with anger. He slammed doors, overturned chairs and wanted to yell so that the oaths he still refrained from shouting would resound through all the rooms.

“Rabble! Swine!”

“Where’s Jan?”

He stopped and listened.

These words suddenly made him aware of the fields with the ripe wheat. There was no one to reap them.

“Where’s Jan?”

Of course, he himself had sent Jan to Yamishchi to hire reapers. When the folk from Yamishchi come, everything’ll be over. But his own peasants — the scum!

The lord couldn’t sit still indoors. That deserted yard seemed to attract him. He walked the length of the yard once again, lonely and helpless, past the locked sheds, the open gates of the stables, the moist and shimmering eyes of the cows.

In a cloud of dust, wet with sweat, Jan came riding back. Both horse and rider breathed heavily.

He was greeted by cries:

“Hey toady, have you hired the Yamishchi folk?”

“Well, where are your reapers? How many have you got? Ha, ha!”

Jan rode on without turning and only shook his whip at them.

The village had retreated into its shell in waiting. Its eyes saw all, its ears heard all. The estate lay like a corpse in the midst of the village: silent, motionless provoking a feeling of uneasiness.

The news that the Yamishchi folk had refused to work flew faster than the steward's horse could run.

Though it was a weekday, everyone was at home. Groups of people stood at the gates, the doors to houses were wide open. Work had ceased in the gardens. The peasants stood between the vegetable beds with arms folded and talked over fences with their neighbours.

"Have you heard? There's not a soul in the estate. Everyone's left."

"They would have left a long time ago, they were only waiting for the peasants to begin."

"What will happen now?"

"He'll raise the price when the grain starts to fall."

"And what if he hires someone else?"

"Not a chance. Our lads will throw anyone else out."

Prokip insisted:

"Hold on. If we hold together we'll win."

The peasants avidly listened to him.

"When you're in a crowd it's easy to beat even your own father, they say."

The more well-to-do peasants were displeased.

They had sizeable holdings and they didn't like the way things turned out.

"Strike! You'll have a strike all right. More than one of you will get it yet. It's a disgrace, what you're up to."

But no one was afraid.

The young people were laughing.

"Well done!"

"Well done indeed!"

At noon the children brought the news that the lord was going to the factory. Hundreds of eyes followed him from windows, gardens and fences like stars peering from the sky.

"He's going to the factory to his son-in-law."

"He's going to dine, hasn't got any food at home."

"It won't get cooked by itself."

Even Panas Kandzyuba smacked his lips:

"Put *postoly* on the lord, ha!"

Then there was fresh news: Master Lyolyo had sent his factory men to the estate.

“Our lads gave the workingmen a thrashing.”

“That’s a lie. Nobody gave them a thrashing. They just didn’t let them in.”

“The lord can look after the cattle himself.”

“We’re not stopping him from doing it himself.”

Prokip told Deineka and two lads to stand guard and to prevent anyone from entering the estate.

Some time later the landlady left the estate on horses sent from Lyolyo’s factory.

One day dragged on as long as a year. It looked like the grain in the fields was falling, the lord wouldn’t hold out any longer and was on the verge of calling the peasants to reap on their terms.

In the afternoon, the steward rode through the village at breakneck speed. He lashed his horse and jumped up from his saddle as if he wanted to go faster than the horse. The villagers only saw the horse’s croup and the steward’s back.

“This time he’s going in the direction of Piski.”

“He won’t get anything there either. They won’t work.”

“Why not?”

“They’re also on strike.”

Evening was close and there were no changes yet. Only the cows were bellowing on the estate.

A red sun was quietly setting against the green sky, a sign that there might be windy weather ahead. On the earth trouble was brewing inconspicuously. The windows glowed and again the bellowing of the cattle rent the heavy air.

“Someone could at least feed the herd.”

“The cattle’s not to blame. The unfortunate cows are standing without eating or drinking.”

The bellowing was becoming louder. The cows were no longer lowing, they gave out a metallic roar full of anguish and suffering, a call for help. The horses were neighing angrily. They were jumping in their stalls and beating the ground with the hooves, their nostrils expanding from rage.

The women ran out of their homes in dismay.

“I can’t bear to hear them complaining.”

“I’ll feed them myself, I will.”

“It’s so terrible, my God, the children are even crying.”

In the twilight shadows crept out of their hiding-places and covertly lay down on the earth’s bosom.

Waves of commotion rolled to the village from the estate

as if a ship were sinking at sea, an ear-splitting siren sounding its death-agony.

Then Prokip sent his lads to the estate. The cattle were not to blame.

\* \* \*

The lord kept his silence and so did the peasants. They went to their fields and reaped their grain, and rejoiced when the lord's steward returned from the outlying villages empty-handed. The sun was shining and the wheat was drying up ready to fall. A police officer arrived. The ringing of the postal bells on the coach, the barking of the dogs, the foul oaths and cries — all this passed like a cloud in a fair sky. He also left empty-handed. Only took Khoma along — he abused the officer.

And the wheat began falling.

Then the steward became more pliable. He offered vodka to the peasants and tried to convince them. Some swore in answer, but others drank it. Why shouldn't they drink it? But they still didn't agree to work. Maybe some wanted to, but they were afraid. And the wheat fell.

Malanka went out into the fields. She lent her ear to the endless grainfields and listened to the sound of the over-ripe grain softly falling to the ground as if the field were shedding golden tears. Though it belonged to the lord, Malanka felt sorry for it as a woman for a child. She got down on her knees, moving apart the stalks and collecting the red grains as carefully and tenderly as one picks a child from its cradle. Holy bread!

Some of the lord's hired hands went back to the lord but the harvesting didn't start. At last, a week later, the lord raised his price. It wasn't what the peasants wanted, yet it was much higher than before.

"Should we go?"

"We should."

Prokip was also for it.

"It's time."

The folk fell on the lord's fields like thirsty men on a draught; soon the fields were covered with haycocks and stacks.

As to Khoma Gudz they soon let him off. As he came home through the lord's fields he took one look at the reapers and his mouth twisted in a contemptuous smile.

The storm clouds hung low and grew, huddling together, then bursting forth. In the night sky, the wind was gathering the clouds like hay into stacks.

The dark haystacks were dozing on the meadow like lazy oxen grazing. They dissolved and disappeared in the darkness, but Khoma could see all of them: there was one on the right, one behind him and on the left above him. The hay was so slippery and smooth, it smelled so fragrant that you felt like thrusting your hand into it, stirring up the dead stalks and letting out the dank smell of wild weeds.

A sharp, cutting laughter stirred in Khoma's chest and rose to his throat. Ha, ha!

It had taken a lot of sweat to gather this wealth.

And just one second —

He didn't finish. He could see the people setting up the haystacks. The lord was strutting about like a stork. He leaned down and brought his nose to the hay. "Beg pardon, is it good hay?" "Like pure gold." "Gather the hay together, so the rain doesn't get it," and he looked up at the sky. He put his hands into his pockets — his pants were black and jacket was white — and strolled on along the meadow like a stork.

Laughter danced in his chest.

Khoma lazily put his hand into his pocket and left it there.

He had plenty of time.

The wind, drunk with the smell of hay was whistling among the haystacks; clouds lay upon the meadow; the night was a lake bounded by the sky and Khoma once again imagined how the steward was standing before the lord, a whip nearby. "There's more hay this year." "Yes, beg pardon, enough to last through the winter and there'll be some left over to sell."

"Some left over to sell," Khoma repeated to himself.

He carefully plucked some hay from the stack and shook it. Then he took the matches from his pocket.

The flame flickered in the wind but Khoma bent down, cupping off the flame with his palms, and couldn't take his eyes off the rose petals of the flames in his hands.

The hay wouldn't burn. It crackled and the smoke went into his eyest. Khoma was irritated by this. But then it took.

In a calm and matter-of-fact manner Khoma walked over to the next haystack. His features lit up for a moment and then disappeared in the darkness.

Finally, he was through.

Now he could watch.

He lay on his stomach in the aftergrass, put his head in his palms and waited.

The dark haystacks stood out; Khoma could see them even with his eyes closed. When he opened his eyes the haystacks were no longer the same: they were enveloped in smoke, light and motion.

Small flames began to play above them like girls in red skirts. They jumped along their sides and climbed upwards until the dark mass first stooped down under them and then suddenly rose as if wanting to fly off.

Khoma's head lay heavily on his palms. A wonderful calm spread throughout his body, only deep down, at the very bottom of his chest, laughter bubbled forth.

Meanwhile, the haystacks were growing. The smoke spread out its wings, carrying along the flames. The fire was no longer children playing in red skirts but something enormous and stubborn, like an animal trying to shake off a heavy load. It stuck its paws out from under the haystack and grasped and trampled on it like a bear. Opening its bloody mouth it devoured everything, tearing in wrath with its teeth.

The haystacks were already withering away, settling, but it still continued to send forth stars as a cat spits saliva, breathed its blue fire, and splashed waves of flame against the shore of the dark night.

Khoma was laughing quietly. The laughter burst forth from his throat and swept across his wrinkled face and gave him a lift. The flame had probed and burned out the sore place in his chest.

Fire!

Red, gay and pure.

Just a little while ago Khoma had been lying in a dark shed, cold and unnoticed, inconspicuous as usual, but now he was avenging the wrongs inflicted upon peasants.

Burn, burn.

Khoma's misty eyes also poured out sparks. If they could, they would burn everything, turn everything into ashes — the hay, the lord's grain, the buildings, and the very earth.

It was all sin. Everything was sinful on this damned earth. Everything was sinful, only the fire was holy. Certainly, God himself hurls fire upon the earth in wrath.

You make profit on the peasants' sweat and tears, their misery, you cast filth on the earth, and then fire descends and where is your wealth? You can look for it in the clouds, or dig in the ashes. Ha, ha!

A malicious joy filled Khoma's heart. He wanted to get up and scream, to roar with laughter, which would merge with the fire. But something stopped him, something linked him to the fire and it seemed to him that if he got up or stopped looking, the haystacks would cease burning.

The haystacks finally succumbed. Meek and quiet, they burned steadily like candles in a church. The clouds in the sky turned rosy and the darkness in the distance beat its wings like a bat.

Shadows fell on the field, now lighted up, and trembled in fear. It was silent all around.

The remains of the hay were smouldering slowly and only now and then hails of sparks burst forth with a crackle or the wind pulled out bits of burning hay and dispersed them like stars.

All of a sudden, a distant noise reached Khoma. "They must be coming to save the hay." Khoma's mind worked slowly and he evinced little concern.

He didn't feel like getting up. "Who cares? And if they catch me? Let them...."

The voices were drawing closer. He could hear human cries, the heavy breathing of horses, and the sound of hooves throwing up dirt.

Finally Khoma got up. Dishevelled and blackened, he stretched his hands and feet and, slowly and lazily, disappeared into the darkness.

\* \* \*

They were harvesting late buckwheat when suddenly Hushcha appeared in the village. He was not recognized immediately. He had grown a long beard, looked older and alien. Hushcha was warmly greeted. The lads shook his hand firmly and they had a new look in their faces. Even Andriy was not the same. He patted him on the back, winked slyly and laughed.

"How did it feel doing time?" This was said with a knowing nod.

They asked him: How? What? What do they say about the land? What are people talking about? They believed he knew all the answers.

Hafiyka learned about Marko from Pidpara. He complained angrily; he was having a hard time with the beggars as it was and now they'd let out that Hushcha.

Hushcha?

Hafiyka's heart stopped still. Had she heard properly?

She could hardly wait for twilight to set in so she could run home.

When she finally came out, on the way she stumbled into Hushcha.

"Marko!"

Not feeling herself she stretched her arms out towards him.

They embraced passionately.

Everything happened so unexpectedly and simply, as if they had parted only yesterday.

Her ringing, staccato laugh sounded as if she were threading beads — she didn't know why she was laughing. Marko's hand felt warm on her waist. His beard tickled her forehead.

"Look, you've got a beard like an old man."

They walked under the pussy willows.

Marko took a closer look at Hafiyka.

She was different, transparent, seemed older.

"Have you forgotten me?"

"No, I haven't."

"Were you waiting for me?"

"I was."

"Did you hand out the leaflets?"

His voice trembled, like a spring wind when trees are in blossom.

"How do you know? Of course, I did. You know, Marko, people are not the same now. We also had a strike."

"You don't say!"

Hafiyka was very proud of the fact.

"Sure. The rich people were at loose ends, so much afraid. My master walked about as grim as the night, and even stopped eating. He put down his spoon and said: 'I can't eat.' And he was so scared."

"Is your father still sorry that I'm not in Siberia?"

Hafiyka started.

"No at all! He changed completely after the injury."

'Hushcha was telling the truth,' he said. It's wonderful that you returned. Now it will be easier for us."

"Who do you mean by us?"

Then Hafiyka told Marko how they had gathered all winter, how Prokip had brought books and leaflets from town, and how many people had joined them. Even Prokip's uncle, Panas. "Tell me about those democrats," he said.

Hafiyka laughed remembering uncle Panas.

"He's so funny!"

Marko took her by the hand.

"You're so good."

Hafiyka blushed; he could see it even in the dark.

"What — I — "

Soon young people started to gather round Hushcha. From him they learned for the first time that villages everywhere were organizing into unions. They held endless conversations and arguments during the long autumn evenings. He introduced a new idea in his small group — joint labour. They ploughed and threshed together and they did it better and quicker than the others. The drinking and fighting in which the village lads had engaged at night ceased of itself. Those who had only recently sown wild oats now worked or took part in the reading sessions. Even the old-timers praised Hushcha. They came to him to learn whether the land would be apportioned. He's sure to know, they thought. Marko laughed. No one's going to give away his land of his own will. What? They won't divide the land. What'll be then? What should they do?

Only Khoma the cowherd had a ready answer for every question.

"What do you mean 'what to do'? Hit hard and don't leave anything standing."

From behind Khoma's back Andriy lifted his maimed hand in a threatening gesture and screeched:

"Hit hard and burn everything! If you want honey, damn it, you have to smoke out the bees."

Whom should they listen to?

Hushcha talked about a union, Prokip about freedom and Khoma urged them to hit and burn.

Panas Kandzyuba, heavy and grey in his coat, the colour of the earth when turned over by the plough, seemed to ask with his sorry look: where should he go? Which was the right way?

He didn't believe anyone.

“How can a peasant know?”

Now if only someone else would come, someone who knew, and offer a helping hand to show the way.

And a peasant? What does a peasant know? He's got only one hide and even that's full of holes.

\* \* \*

Now there were fires every night. As soon as it became dark and the black sky embraced the earth tightly, in the distance the horizon would acquire a reddish glow and the autumn clouds would look like roses till morning. At times the glow would be distant, hardly noticeable, as if the moon were rising, but at other times the fire would start next to the village and even the huts and their windows would become reddish.

Malanka came out of the house, hid her hands under her apron and stared at the fire. What's burning? Where? People were not asleep though it was time for bed. They were standing next to their gates reading the celestial signs. Voices came from the darkness — God knows whose they were — and their sound drifted away into the darkness.

“The Pereorki estate is burning.”

“No, not at all, it's closer, in Mlinishchi or Rudka.”

“Someone must have set it on fire.”

The dogs were howling in the yards — the autumn nights were somber and frightening.

“Yesterday it was the estate in Huta that burned.”

“The day before yesterday they set fire to a grainshed.”

“Seems it was burned to the ground; nothing left but ashes.”

Sometimes one fire signalled another. As soon as the sky would light up in one place, a reddish haze would rise from the other side and take wing. Then the village would be a dark island in the sea of fire. At times the wind would carry the smoke, the distant ringing and commotion to the village.

What's happening? Lord almighty! The landlords and generals' houses are being burned down; before, people hardly dared come close to the rich and noble, and now there is no stopping them.

People wandered through the night like shadows, children cried and the cattle bellowed back from the sheds. The fire would rise and then fall like a heaving chest, stand up

like a haystack, dissolve like the mist, and clouds would bloom in the sky like roses.

Malanka trembled in fear.

"Go to bed," said Andriy angrily.

"I'm afraid, Andriy."

"What are you afraid of? They got what they deserved."

But Malanka couldn't go to sleep. For a long time the sound of running feet and voices could be heard outside, lights flickered in tiny windows and dogs howled plaintively.

In the morning, the smoke, tickling nostrils, hovered over the village. People breathed in the smell of burned wood and glanced at the estate.

Lukyan Pidpara's face had even grown darker. Every night he took his gun off the wall and went out to his grainshed in the field. He walked about, tall and intimidating, with his shadow following. The two were separated by the light of the fires. Pidpara listened: he threw a glance from under his shaggy brows into the distance, and he listened attentively to every sound. He walked round the shed and suddenly stopped; there was something dark in the field.

"Who's there?"

The field was silent, seemingly exhausted by the summer and in a deep slumber, reddish and stripped bare.

Pidpara walked on. All the fears and anxieties descended upon him from the sea of fire and he grasped his gun firmly as he called out into the blackness of the night:

"Who's there? I'll shoot!" He stood firm as steel aiming into the darkness.

Is there no one there or are they hiding?

A shot rang out. The darkness moaned over the field and the dogs in the village howled even louder.

Pidpara was walking again, guarding his sheds, stern and fearless, ready to defend his property with his bare teeth if need be.

\* \* \*

It rained every day. The sun would burst out for a second into a blue clearing, look at itself in a puddle and then let heavy tousled clouds cover it again. The days that followed the uneasy nights were hazy and colourless and the people lurked under their outer clothings and waded through the mud with their hats turned inside out. Earlier

bad weather had driven them home, now something drove them out to seek out people. They all wanted to see human faces and hear human voices. Few of the villagers slept at night. Some couldn't take their eyes off the distant fires, others drove their horses out to graze on the lord's fields and didn't sleep in expectation of trouble. However, after the steward barely managed to escape from the fields with only torn clothes, no one dared touch the horses and they chewed leisurely on the young rain-watered sprouts.

People seemed to have forgotten their everyday chores. The peasants were no longer interested in their own plots of land. They seemed so small and wretched, hardly worth the attention, and lay abandoned, unsown, and even unploughed.

The village hall was crowded: it was so tightly packed with people that steam rose from their wet coats. Rumours and speculations appeared from God knows where and swelled and multiplied before your very eyes. Dry and sleepless eyes looked into other's mouths and caught every word uttered. What will happen? How will it happen? Everywhere the people were rising, making demands, workmen were on strike and had quit the factories, trains were not running. Why should they sit around and wait for someone to help them?

Those who had come late crowded round the hall and tried to force their way to the door.

"What are they talking about? Everyone should be able to hear what they're saying."

"Can't you see there's not enough room for everyone?"

When one of the rich peasants went by, Mandryka or Pidpara, those who were standing in the rain round the porch made cutting remarks:

"Why don't you step in and listen how your land's being divided?"

"Don't, you'll get so worked up you'll only get that much older."

"Don't worry, nothing'll happen to him. While the poor sweat the rich grow fat."

"The rich get richer and the poor poorer."

"That's all right, the swine'll get his due yet."

"There's nothing like a roasted pig."

Mandryka let out an unhappy laugh and hurried along, as if forgetting that he was the village elder. Pidpara knitted his brows and swore.

Hushcha often left the village. He returned covered with mud and drenched but merry. Once Hafiyyka met him behind Pidpara's garden.

"I've been to the station. They're on strike. The train hasn't been running for two days. The workers have assembled to discuss the situation. We should also get together."

"Prokip thinks so too."

"There's no time to lose."

"Where should we hold the meeting?"

"We might go to the forest on the other side of the ravine."

"Let's call the Yamishchi folk."

"We'll call everyone together."

Marko was on the point of leaving.

"Wait a minute. I want to show you something."

Hafiyyka suddenly blushed and hesitated.

"What have you got? Show it to me."

Hafiyyka turned away from Hushcha and pulled something out of her corset.

"Hold the end."

He took it and she unfolded a red cotton cloth.

"Land and Free —"

"I haven't finished embroidering it yet."

She was embarrassed and her eyes brimmed with tears.

"It's really nothing, just in case we need it. Mariyka also made one from her new skirt, it's even better."

She fell silent.

She gave Marko a shy, guilty look.

\* \* \*

Uneasiness reigned in the village. A whole week had passed since that night in the forest when they had resolved to take away the lord's land, but the peasants were still uncertain. Everyone was waiting for something but nobody knew for sure what it was. There was sundry talk, a grape vine without a beginning or an end. The railway and factory workers were on strike. All seemed dull, hollow and empty and only the rooks linked the village with the rest of the world through the black chain of their wings.

What was going on around? As if a stormcloud were approaching: no one knew where it would come from, where the hail would fall and what it would destroy. The atmo-

sphere was heavy and troubled in those ominous days and each long autumn night dragged on endlessly and anxiously. If someone had cried out for help, the tocsin sounded in the thick air or a shot rang out, people would have run frantically out of their homes and pounced upon one another.

Hafiyka couldn't sleep at night. As soon as it became dark Pidpara locked the front door, checked whether the bolts were holding firmly and, before going to bed, took the gun off the wall and put his axe next to his bed. The light was extinguished but Hafiyka knew that he was not asleep. She heard him fidgeting and breathing heavily, getting up and listening. Then he went to bed again and suddenly jumped up and groped for his axe. After that it was quiet again and only the mice under the beds, which had settled in the house for the winter, squeaked and cockroaches rustled in the open cupboard. But Pidpara did not sleep and Hafiyka could see his open eyes staring into the darkness.

Finally, Pidpara got up and went out. Hafiyka's heart beat in unison with the sound of Pidpara's steps near the shed, around the haystacks or on the frozen pools near the house.

Sometimes Pidpara went out to sleep near the grainsheds for the night. Then the mistress walked about from window to window all night moaning in fright and shuffling her shoes.

On occasion, it became so unbearable for Hafiyka that she asked to be allowed to spend the night at home.

Malanka did not go to bed early. Andriy was always away, returning only late at night. Malanka would dream all evening. Something would happen. Something wonderful would occur and change her whole life. Something would happen, if not today, tomorrow. She did not feel like doing anything and instead sat about as if it were Sunday, weaving an intricate lace work of thoughts. Together with Hafiyka, she stood in the doorway and watched how all the windows in the village were lighted up. In each hut people were waiting: the village was ready to burst out in flames like dry wood. In each hut hopes and expectations ran high.

The lamps had never burned so much oil as they did in these long and anxiety-filled autumn nights.

The wind made running leaps, snatching up voices and smoke; the bleak sun, appearing for a second, poured its last wealth upon the earth from behind the clouds.

Hafiyka was running after the linen that had been scattered about the yard like a flock of white geese. The master's shirt was blown up by the wind and rolled along looking like a pregnant woman, grabbing at the ground with its sleeves. The wind was whistling in her ears and it seemed to her that someone was calling.

Someone really was calling her. She looked back.

Prokip waved his hand at the gate.

"What's up?"

She couldn't hear him.

"What is it?"

"Bring out your flag."

There was a crowd outside the gate. Malanka was here with her thin arms, and clumsy Panas Kandzyuba and children, jumping along the fence like sparrows.

"Hurry up and bring it out!"

"What has happened?"

Hafiyka rushed into the house.

Several hands stretched out to take the flag from Hafiyka but Prokip took it himself.

He was already tying it to a staff.

The crowd buzzed: the moment they had all waited for had finally arrived. The manifesto had come.

Pidpara stood on the threshold of the house, dark as a shadow and leaning against the side of the door in silence.

At last the flag was hoisted. The red cloth fluttered in the wind and the words on it came alive.

Land and Freedom!

Everyone raised their eyes and a sigh reverberated through the crowd.

Then the crowd moved on. Hafiyka forgot about the linen. She was moving with the crowd as if sleep-walking. Something had happened. Something that had been expected and vaguely desired... A manifesto had been drawn up.

Prokip walked next to her and it seemed to her that he had grown taller. His large horny hands calmly held the staff and his stride was resolute.

Words could be made out from above the hubbub.

"Thank God, it's come at last."

"There'll be enough for everyone," Malanka sang out. The wind snatched up and threw back the words:

"Enough for everyone, it's ours."

"Now, honest to God, the wolf'll pay for the lamb's tears."

Andriy's milky-white moustache stood out like two pigeons against his flushed face.

Panas Kandzyuba was beaming.

"We'll put *postoly* on the lord, Andriy!"

"Sure!"

The brown feet of children churned up dirt from under the fences.

The children ran ahead and yelled:

"Land and freedom! Land and freedom!"

The banner fluttered like a flame in the wind.

People ran out of the huts and, taking off their hats and crossing themselves, joined the crowd. The villagers going in the opposite direction turned and followed.

"To the meeting hall! The manifesto is there."

The road was filling with people.

There was a new element in the atmosphere. Deep-set eyes burned on grey faces like wax candles in the darkness of a church. Hafiyyka felt that she could understand every soul and every thought as well as her own. There was something solemn in the fluttering of the banner, in the sadness of the autumn sun, and in the bright, excited faces. It was like an Easter Sunday church procession with candles and singing: the words "Christ is resurrected" floating up to the stars.

Suddenly the people in front stopped.

Another crowd of people appeared from behind a corner and blocked the way. It was also headed by a red banner.

Prokip lifted his banner high in the air.

"Land and Freedom!"

"Land and Freedom! And a happy holiday to you all."

"Same to you."

The people mingled with each other.

Malanka was embracing the blacksmith's wife.

"My dear, my dearest."

She couldn't find words.

She kissed her. Malanka's thin arms wound round her broad hips.

“Thank God, thank — ”

The wind dropped a tear from the tip of the blacksmith's wife's nose.

They moved on. Now the two banners joined and fluttered and twisted like a flame beaten by the wind.

The people were packed so tightly in the meeting hall that their coats merged together into a single mass and it was difficult to breath. Hushcha was reading something from the porch. He was tired and his voice was hoarse, but the people who had arrived late wanted to hear it too. The ones who were further away strained to hear, cupping their ears. But those in front wanted to hear a second time and did not let anyone come forward. There were more and more people coming in and pressing from behind.

“What's he reading? Liberty, freedom, and what about land?”

“Can't you hear? Land is all he's reading about.”

Malanka was so short she was completely lost in the crowd. But she felt good; the warmth and smell of human bodies enclosed her. She did not even listen to the words. Why should she? Everything was clear already. Everyone knew that the people had got the land. Instead of standing here, they ought to go together to the lord's field and send a plough across it to see how it cuts the vast field, overturning the earth for the people. This is yours and that is mine. Everyone gets the same amount. Look. Even Andriy is holding up his mutilated hand showing it to the peasants so they won't forget him. Not long ago he damned the very same earth. But let bygones be bygones. Now she was in a benevolent mood, she was no longer angry at Andriy. The earth itself was smiling and speaking with her. Look at the yellow stubble playing in the sun!

The entire peasant community had gathered at the meeting hall.

The village was deserted. The dirt roads between the huts were winding like black snakes crawling along the ground, the wind was blowing bits of straw from the thatched roofs and clouds of crows descended on the gardens.

An old woman came out of her hut holding on to its walls and crying out angrily:

“Where are all the people? Is there a fire? Hey!”

There was no response. Only the wind slammed the doors of the abandoned huts, the cows roamed in the yards and dogs scrapped, rustling up piles of dry leaves.

People began returning from the meeting hall.

Two men were walking.

"Hear that? Liberty and freedom, but what kind of freedom?"

"Think I know? Freedom to do away with the lords."

"I understood that right away. Freedom means the simple folk can get rid of the lords. The rich who ride the backs of the peasant."

The women:

"When they'll start dividing up the lord's estate I'll just take the brown cow."

"I'd like a couple of geese to breed. He's got such good geese."

"There'll be plenty to take. If we don't, others will, and he's o u r lord after all."

"Of course we won't give away what belongs to us."

Suddenly the young lads filled the road with songs.

They stopped in front of the rich peasants' houses, raised the banner in the air and cried out:

"Land and freedom!"

They're hiding, let them hear. It's like pepper to a dog.

The peasants virtually tore Hushcha and Prokip to pieces with entreaties. How'll it be? When'll they start dividing the land? Will they take away the land that they had already bought?

Marko hardly had time to answer all the questions and his voice had become hoarse, but Prokip was as calm as usual.

Malanka tugged at the ends of his coat.

"Prokip, listen to me, it's me, Malanka. Wait a minute, let me say something. Listen, Prokip, have them give me a piece that's closer, where the wheat can grow. Don't forget. Hear me, Prokip?"

Thin and small, gripped by one irresistible desire, she bowed low again and again.

\* \* \*

There was something new every day. In one place they had razed an estate, in another they had burned down a distillery or sugar factory, and in still another they were chopping down the lord's forest or ploughing the lord's land. And no one was punished for it. The lords took to their heels and disappeared like straw in a fire. Every day the

wind brought fresh smoke and people brought new stories, which no longer caused any surprise. Yesterday they had been tales, but today they had come true. Now it all seemed normal. Yet the wine-making factory of Master Lyolyo and the lord's estate were still eyesores for the peasants. What were they waiting for?

"Are we worse than the others? We've already decided."

There were people who were displeased but Hushcha and Prokip prevailed.

And yet at night some peasants harnessed their horses and rode out of the village on empty carts. Others went out on foot. They tucked axes in their belts, grabbed a sack and went through the fields to neighbouring villages in search of gentry property. In the night, carts continuously rolled along the muddy roads loaded with sacks of grain, potatoes and sugar. Those who had left on foot came back on the lord's horses or driving a cow in front of them. The next day they would sleep till noon and the neighbours could hardly tell that they had gone out at night by the fresh mud on the wheels. Sometimes children played with new toys, pieces of broken bottles, door handles or a young peasant girl sewed a new garment out of an expensive fabric which used to cover the lord's furniture.

Malanka also went out.

With great effort, breathing heavily and sighing, she dragged in a sack of flour.

Andriy stuffed the delicious buns in his mouth and praised them but Malanka did not eat any.

"Why aren't you eating?" Andriy asked in surprise.

"I can't. It's not mine."

"Why did you take it then?"

"Because everyone did."

For Malanka the flour was like a corpse in the house; she didn't know what to do with it.

The rich peasants seemed to be hiding: they were not to be seen in the village.

"Our 'ringleaders' are not to be heard from lately, they're so afraid they sit at home," people laughed.

But when they gathered in groups they were not so taciturn.

Upon returning from his sister's in Piski, this is what Panas Kandzyuba recounted:

"I came into the village and people were going to church though it was a weekday. They stopped me and asked who

I was, why I had come and to whom. They looked at me as if I was a thief. Well, my brother-in-law was in church too, and my sister could hardly walk, her eyes were red and hazy. 'Good God,' I said, 'what's wrong with you, are you ill?' She started to cry. 'I'm not ill,' she said, 'but afraid. Can't sleep, haven't slept for five nights. We don't put out the light for fear of dozing off. We're waiting for the fire-bugs to come. For whom? Why, the panhandlers. They warned us that we should wait for them: they'd burn us down. So there would be no rich and poor but only normal peasants. People are afraid. It's not so bad in the daytime: you can see who's coming, but at night we're really careful. Yesterday my husband went out when the sun was setting and, all of a sudden, saw someone galloping. He ran up the belfry and sounded the tocsin. My heart fell. They must have come to set fire. The villagers came running, pulled them from their horses, tied them up and led them to the meeting hall. You want to burn us? Beat them! They cried out that they were giving chase to incendiaries themselves but no one would believe them. The church elder saved them. If he hadn't recognized them they would have been killed,' that's what my sister told me and she was trembling as she told it. Good God.

At that moment my brother-in-law came from the church. He had black circles round his eyes, must have been exhausted. 'All right, what holiday is it today?' I asked.

'There is no holiday. The villagers held church services so God would save us from disaster. Our only hope is in God.'

Well, we were sitting talking about this and that and my brother-in-law was dozing off. My sister too could hardly keep her eyes open long enough to say a word. It was dark already — the days are short now — we had supper and the lights were still on. It was time to sleep but they didn't go to bed. I went outside; there were lights in all the windows, no one was asleep. My God. Somehow I felt uneasy and afraid. My relations were sitting up. The slightest sound, even a mouse scraping, would make them start in alarm. It was late, bedtime was long past but they still wouldn't sleep. Roosters were singing and the lights twinkled all through the village in the night. And all of a sudden, bang! A shot rang in the village. So! My sister froze with her arms clutched to her bosom and my brother-in-law ran to the door and grabbed a pitchfork. I followed him. As I came out I saw

people running out of the houses armed with anything they could grab. Good God. Where were we to run? Who had shot? We ran out of the village and there were some people standing there. Without a warning the villagers attacked them and beat them fiercely until those who could fled. No one slept till dawn and in the morning the villagers returned to that place. Eight men lay dead and one was still alive groaning....”

\* \* \*

It had been arranged to gather on the square opposite the meeting hall. Hushcha had come early. He paced back and forth near the porch looking about nervously. Prokip was already there.

“For some reason they aren’t coming,” Marko looked troubled.

“It’s too early, they’ll turn up yet.”

But Prokip was also worried. It was not easy to keep the people calm. All around there were pogroms and fires, which swept through the villages like a deadly wind penetrating every nook and cranny. The villagers did not want to be different from their neighbours and it took considerable effort to restrain them. But Hushcha and Prokip won. They convinced the people that there was no use in burning and destroying what belonged to the people. The lord had not built his own house. It was the peasants who had put the logs and beams in place and now all this should serve the peasants. Today they were to decide who would win: Hushcha and Prokip or Khoma who urged the people to destroy and burn everything.

Little by little the people were gathering. Semen Mazhuha appeared at the head of a whole crowd. Panas Kandzyuba also led the rich peasants. The square was filling and beginning to buzz. Marko shook everyone’s hands. He felt stifled, there was something in his throat and he did not recognize his own voice when he heard it.

“Have you brought the flag?”

“We’ve got it, here it is!” Mazhuha replied unfurling the flag and holding it up.

“Is everyone here?”

“Yes.”

They were ready to start out but no one moved.

Only when the flag moved and slowly floated through the air did the crowd stir and begin to walk quietly. Feet

rustled through the mud like crawfish in a sack and the crooked huts, poor and dilapidated, looked on in dismay at this stream of people.

The lord's estate looked sleepy and deserted. From appearances it was empty there. Only the dogs growled and then hid. The crowd flowed through the gates into the yard like water through the neck of a bottle. The coachman came out of the stables. Hushcha ordered him to call the lord.

"The lord's not in."

"And where is he?"

"He ran off during the night."

The crowd stirred.

"Ran off? All right then, call the steward."

Jan came out of the house pale and hatless. He glanced fearfully at the people with his cold eyes and involuntarily stepped back. But Hushcha stopped him, took a piece of paper out of his pocket and began to unravel it. In the abnormal stillness the rustling of the paper could be clearly heard. It seemed that Hushcha was taking too long. Finally, he coughed, straightened up and started to read in a high, alien voice. Everyone knew the contents of this manifesto, but now it seemed new and solemn like a sermon in church. That's right. They already knew that as of today the land was not the lord's but the peasants', that the people were taking these fields of grain which had been made sacred by the labour of their forefathers and their own work back into their ownership.

Everyone listened with bated breath.

Hushcha finished and turned to Jan.

"We don't need you. Pack your belongings and be gone."

Jan was about to say something but couldn't utter a sound; his lips trembled and his shaking hands seemed to look for something.

He faltered and walked towards the house as if drunk.

But he did not stay in the house long. He ran out in a minute, glanced in fear at the crowd and cried in a hoarse voice:

"Musiy! Harness the carriage."

This was too much for Panas Kandzyuba and he exploded.

"The carriage! How about a manure waggon, your lordship? Do you hear, men, he wants a carriage!"

The crowd awoke all of a sudden. They began to laugh.

"So that's what he wants. No, his time is over."

"Don't give him the carriage."

"Get a waggon ready, Musiy."

"The one for manure."

Musiy ran for the waggon.

Jan turned red in the face.

"I don't need any horses. Let me go, I'll walk."

"Good riddance!"

The steward lowered his hat over his eyes and walked sideways through the crowd. His eyes, like mice caught in a trap, met every face with terror, his arms were ready to defend his body, but no one touched him. At last, when Jan was outside the gates, everyone sighed in relief, as if a speck had fallen out of their eyes.

Now they had to take over the estate.

"How are we going to take it over?"

"Let's elect three people as caretakers. We'll see how things turn out."

"Three are enough. How about Prokip, Hushcha and Bezik?"

"Mazhuha's better."

"Write the manifesto."

Olexa Bezik carried the table to the centre of the yard. Hushcha sat down at the table.

It was a grey autumn morning. Everything was tinged — the sky, the distant fields, the bare cherry-trees behind the house, the buildings and the peasants. The smell of horse manure and fresh apples was strong in the air.

The crowd hummed. Malanka would not let them alone. Why don't they write that the land should be divided up as quickly as possible? What are they waiting for? We've waited for long enough already. Every person should know what belongs to him and where. Her eyes burned and everyone had grown tired of her. The smell of apples tickled people's nostrils. Why not try them? Though the property belongs to the people, as Hushcha says, there must be a lot of unusual things in the house: different kinds of liqueurs, soft pillows, dishes and all sorts of trinkets that peasants had never seen before. Will all those things be left? The girls were looking into the windows. The housekeeper seemed to have guessed what they wanted, had brought out two baskets of apples from the cellar and was treating everyone.

Meanwhile Hushcha had finished writing. For a long time the peasants filed past the table and their horny hands scrawled their signatures or crosses to make it binding.

Prokip gathered all the hired hands and took away the keys.

"Those who do not want to serve the community can leave the estate."

The coachman and the housekeeper refused to stay. Nobody stopped them. Gradually, the yard emptied out. Only those who were elected remained — Prokip, Hushcha and Mazhuha.

The lord's estate now became the property of the people.

No one took better care of the people's wealth than Prokip. All day long he would run from the threshing-floor to the stables, from the cattle-yard to the granary, giving the workers food and feeding the horses and poultry. He would check everything himself and put everything in order. Everything that was done he entered in a book so that they would know how much of what had been spent. He shook his head wondering why there was so much disorder. There had been no real master to look after the property which had been going to waste. The grain had to be threshed but the threshing-machine was still not fixed. The ploughs were rusting without ploughshares, the breechbands for the horses were torn. All this required work and money and there was none. After consulting together, Prokip decided to sell the grain.

All three of them lived at the house in the rooms where the steward had been. Prokip's wife demanded that he spend the night at home for the house was empty without him, but Prokip refused: the community had elected him.

He couldn't sleep at night. He walked out of the house and immersed himself in the darkness of the autumn night listening to the night watchman's warning signal. He felt both strange and joyful. What only recently he had seen in his dreams had now come true. Life had turned over a new leaf for the peasants. Justice was looking them in the eye. There would be no more poor or rich, the land would feed all. The people would forge their own happiness, if only no one interfered. All these houses, the lord's bedrooms, through which one insatiable and greedy person used to walk, would now be used for a school. The peasants would gather in this room, they would be read to in that one. He pictured a new life, darkness retreating, windows shining with light, making the rooms seem bigger.

Jingling his keys Prokip would wake the workers even before dawn.

He always had his white book in his hands. He would record in it every kopeck and every grain of wheat that was used up.

People would drop in from the village.

"How is our estate doing?"

Everyone was eager to know how it was being managed and what the men in charge were doing. Would it be better to divide the land up among the people or, perhaps, to work the fields jointly and then divide the grain? Malanka was arguing loudly that they should divide the land as soon as possible. They explained everything to people, took them around the threshing-floor and the cattle-yard and asked their advice on how to use the buildings.

"It would be nice to have a school here," said Prokip.

But Hushcha went even further.

"We already have a school, let's open a university."

The people agreed on both school and university.

Peasants should study too, why should only the lords get an education.

Panas Kandzyuba looked over the fields, which stretched out from the gates to the horizon, and sighed. He was sorry that the lord had escaped and he wouldn't see him in *postoly*.

There were always some figures roaming through the fields in profile against the grey sky. There were the ones who did not have sufficient patience and were measuring the land to see how much every person would get.

Bending over with her skirt tucked up, Malanka shifted her feet along the clay like a heron.

\* \* \*

Khoma was laughing in an ominous way.

"Guarding the lord's property? Ha, ha! Guard it, guard it so it isn't lost. The lord'll thank you when he comes back. Sure."

His greenish eyes jumped like frogs in a swamp.

"D'ye think if the lord's taken flight you've seen the last of him? Sure! His kind won't give up. He'll pack the village full of cossacks and then, before you know it, he'll be back in his warm house. Thank you, men, that you took so good care of it. He'll write his thanks on your backs. No, the way to do it is to make him lose all desire to return, make it so he'll be sick when he sees what's left. Smoke and

burn him out. Burn everything to the ground until it's as bare as your palm."

Khoma poked his thick finger at his palm.

"See, like your palm."

For the peasants who were dreaming of the lord's fat cows, fine geese, and other property Khoma struck a responsive chord.

It's true. If Hushcha didn't have all those ideas, they would have everything like people should. Who knows whether they'll ever divide the land up, and, anyway, what does the peasant have in the meantime?

Andriy raised his maimed hand.

"Where's justice? This is what they do to us and what do we do in return?"

And he looked at the distillery. It vexed him that it was still standing proudly, raising its chimneys through which the smoke poured as if in mockery of their hopes.

"The lord's run away, but, honest to God, they've left Master Lyolyo to carry on. Let him make vodka, ha, ha!"

The angry Khoma breathed laboriously.

"Sure. It'll remain standing, what can you do with it?"

But Khoma knew what to do with it. He had a short answer:

"Burn it down."

These words whistled through his teeth like the wind.

It seemed a miracle that the factory was still standing. It was a challenge. In all the villages the peasants had done away with the lords, there were ruins everywhere, and here was this distillery. It could be seen from afar: either the chimney or the smoke playing in the air like a black, shaggy serpent. At night the whistle would sound and the windows burn like wolves' eyes. Nothing was changed at the factory and unbelievably, it was as if nothing had happened. The peasant's time had come and the lord's had passed. Peasants were destroying estates everywhere and it was all right. People from other villages were even laughing at them. If it weren't for Prokip and Hushcha this would have ended a long time ago. As to Master Lyolyo, what use was he? He had sucked the people's blood before, and he would do it the same way tomorrow. He threw out Andriy, do we have to wait for the same thing to happen to the others?

Andriy complained as he had earlier but now his hand had become a symbol.

"Look how they treat us at the factory!"

People took his fingerless stump and examined it as if for the first time.

The cowherd roamed about widely and wherever he showed up his green eyes agitated people, even Hushcha's followers.

"Why, are we worse than others?"

\* \* \*

On Wednesday all the people knew that it would happen on Thursday. Khoma went from house to house.

"As soon as you hear the bell, come out. If you don't I'll burn your house down."

He was ready for anything; this was no joke.

The night before Friday the lights remained burning late as if it were Easter eve. The peasants were getting ready axes, staffs and metal shovels. The children followed every movement of the adults from on top of the oven.\*

At times, someone would brush against a spade, or a crowbar would fall, and the sound would startle people. What? Already? In the tense silence the air trembled like a tocsin.

"Shhh! Quiet!"

Listening without believing their own ears people opened doors and stuck their heads out. A cold, drizzling mist descended from the sky. It was damp, unfriendly and quiet. It seemed that this would go on for ever. They might as well give the signal if they have to. Maybe Khoma was lying, maybe he was afraid and had backed down? People went back into their homes, paced back and forth and once again examined the weapons they had got ready.

But suddenly the tocsin did ring out. The coppery sound shook the autumn mist and filled the air. At last! Everyone felt relief. They came out of the houses, formed groups and hurried along. Awoken from a cold slumber, the bells cried out hoarsely and drove on the knotty figures, twisted by hard work, their crooked legs and arms strong as sledgehammers; the mass of heavy, awkward bodies merged with the darkness.

The crowd stopped in front of the factory. The large stone building where Master Lyolyo lived and the office was located stood out in grey against the dark sky; it was also

\* In a peasant hut people slept on and around the oven

cold and dark, only one window being dimly lit up like a half-closed eye. But the factory laughed insolently with a row of glowing windows and proudly puffed out wreaths of smoke.

Khoma walked among the people, hesitating as if not knowing how to begin. Near the house a commotion had already started. Someone ran along the walls, up the stairs and slammed the door. Then the light in the window went out and lit up again. The sounds of the tocsin shook the thin mist, throbbing and bursting, and the crowd ebbed and flowed in the darkness. Suddenly the door opened, a frightened voice was heard:

“Who’s there? What do you want?”

“It’s Master Lyolyo, it’s Lyolyo.”

“What do you want?”

Khoma walked out of the crowd.

“So! It’s you? You’re the one we want. Come here!” Khoma uttered a vicious oath.

“Stop, or I’ll shoot.”

A light, like a match struck, flashed at the bottom of the house. Something cracked, and a heavy discharge broke through the night.

The crowd froze and then ebbed. For a moment the people lost heart. But Khoma reassured them.

“Now, now! He’s even shooting! Get him!”

The words “get him” burned their bodies like a whip, tore their feet from the ground, drove people on in a frenzy of movement and energy. They were driven by a force that had suddenly wakened from slumber as a river comes alive under the ice.

The doorway groaned with stamping feet and the stairway shook under the weight of the bodies converging on it.

No one knew where Lyolyo was. Whether he was there or had escaped, whether they were beating him or only trying to catch him. One body pushed against another, feeling the warm breath of others pushing from behind. There was a jam at the door but the crowd kept on pressing from below. The door was locked. Khoma tried to break it down with his shoulder, and in the pitch-black darkness they heard the sound of his shoulder hitting the door and the boards cracking. Suddenly the door gave way, seeming to open into a great abyss. People rushed forward into the yawning opening.

“Just you wait!” Khoma yelled.

A minute passed.

Then a miracle happened, it was a short blinding dream. An electric light suddenly filled the big room as if someone had waved a silver wing, flashing against the parquet and reflecting in a number of large mirrors and golden frames. White curtains swayed slightly on the windows like clouds on a spring sky, green trees bent over the silk of the furniture, the stands with trinkets shone like a king's throne, and the grand piano, like a black animal on three legs from a fairy tale, opened its broad jaws, showing a row of big, white, shining teeth. This change was so unexpected that the excited crowd froze and the faces filling the mirrors could hardly fit in the frames.

But Khoma destroyed the picture with one blow.

He grabbed a staff, swung and brought it down on the piano. Bang!

The three-legged creature cracked and the strings roared in a terrible cord of sounds ranging from the sorrowful to the menacing. The spacious rooms picked up the roar and swept it through the whole house. People came to their senses, and began to move. The crowd surged through the door into the room and hit the walls. Then the staffs fell upon the calm waters of the mirrors and the faces that had filled them fell to the floor in a thousand pieces.

The house was filling with more and more people.

Blinded by the light and deafened by the sound of breaking glass, they rushed from the anteroom like wasps from their nest and grabbed anything they could get their hands on.

Hell broke loose.

Break it to pieces!

And they smashed everything. They tried to smash chairs by wresting apart their legs, and when they did not succeed they banged them against the floor and crushed them with the weight of their bodies silently, with clenched teeth, as if the chairs were hated enemies. With staffs they swept porcelain off shelves in a rain of pieces, under the blows of hammers glass came pouring out of frames like blossoms from a tree. They were drunk with excitement and all they wanted to hear was the ringing, breaking, cracking and death gurgle of every object as it went down with as much pain as a living thing.

Lyolyo was forgotten.

Khoma was unable to cope with the piano. Its black

polished sides creaked and settled down after every blow, but it was still on its legs, roaring like a mortally wounded animal.

The dust which had lain on the furniture now rose in clouds, making the light yellow and misty. Everything merged in a collective frenzy. People drank rage from each others eyes, mad with the death agony of broken things, the cries of glass and steel, the moaning of the strings. All those broken-off legs, smashed backs, bits of porcelain underfoot, pieces of paper, and the field of destruction filled people with an even greater desire to destroy and wreck; in a frenzy their feet crushed what had already been broken and hands searched for something else to smash.

With his undamaged hand Andriy broke the branches of living plants, and strewed the floor with earth from the pots. Aha! You're growing! He was fascinated by the sound of the pots being crushed under his heels.

Khoma, his mouth distorted and body wet with perspiration, screamed:

"Have a good time, children! Our day's come."

Panas Kandzyuba tried to lift a large wardrobe, but it proved to be too heavy. It fell on him and pressed him against the floor. He wriggled under it, groaning and crawling to the window. Others helped him. It was put down on the window-sill with its legs and white lower side up, then it tilted and disappeared. Panas stuck his head out of the window in order to hear how it would hit the ground.

In the yard, in the autumn mist, people swarmed like caterpillars.

"What are you standing around for? Come on, give us a hand. It's our day."

The room swarmed with new people, who could hardly make their way through the rubble. People teamed throughout the house, filling every room with cries. Staffs and hammers thundered as if from a big forge, furniture and doors crackled, steel gnashed and glass rang falling like pears from a tree in a storm.

The whole house shook from cries, calling for help through the broken windows into the dark mist surrounding it.

Wardrobes were moved over and fine shirts, light and lovely like bits of fluff, were thrown out, fabric was ripped, and bits of lace flew about like a spider web.

The blacksmith's wife's eyes burned and her hips quivered as she rummaged through the piles of clothing, crying out:

"Don't rip everything, leave some for me!"

She tore the shining yellow and red silk from the broken furniture.

Panas Kandzyuba ran through the rooms like a madman. A slip stuck out from under his shirt, and his hands carefully held a box with old rusted iron against his chest. He didn't know what to do with it.

Olexa Bezik was beaming. He had saved a jar of jam from destruction and pressed it against his heart as one does a child.

The ruined rooms were already filled with clouds of dust, drifting away through the windows into the cold. The torn white curtains on the windows fluttered in the wind like broken wings. Only the lamps and chandeliers were intact and stubbornly poured an unbearable bright light on all the destruction.

Dirty and ragged people looked about to see what else could be destroyed. But nothing was left. The bare walls were dying, the ripped wall paper sighing.

In a corner Khoma was wrecking a simple rotted kitchen stool, which was covered with slops.

Andriy touched Khoma's shoulder.

"What about the factory?"

Khoma lifted his delirious eyes at him.

"Since we're wrecking, might as well get everything."

And he went on breaking the stool.

"That's enough," Andriy screamed, "it's time to burn."

Khoma started. Burn? His eyes stopped still for a second and the flicker of a far-off fire reflected in them.

"Burn? All right. Let's go."

They piled up pieces of broken furniture, chair legs, bits of paper and set it on fire.

"Get out of the building, it's burning!" Andriy shouted.

The people ran out of the rooms like mice and jumped down the steps through the smoke.

Andriy took a candle from a chandelier and set fire to the curtains. The muslin burned well and the windows looked even deeper in the ochre frame of fire. Two of Andriy's shadows rushed about the walls and disappeared with him.

Andriy was looking for Khoma.

“Now for the factory. Do you hear, Khoma? The factory, I say.”

They were the last to run out of the house.

It was a dark night, still darker after the bright lights. But below, the night was alive, stirring and humming with waves of villagers and an invisible surf of bodies.

Only the factory shone through a row of lighted windows and trembled from working machines as if a heart were beating in fright in its huge stone chest waiting in anticipation.

The workers had left the job and their dark figures stood along the walls and near the doors. The light played in the puddles like a golden necklace.

The crowd and the factory stood facing each other, as if they were about to match their strength to decide who was the stronger.

Suddenly the heavy and shaggy figure of Khoma arose between them.

“What are you waiting for? Burn it down.”

Smoke poured out of Lyolyo’s house. Flames nimbly crawled along the curtains and joyfully licked the window frames from the outside.

The crowd, a faceless mass in the dark, stirred and advanced towards the factory. Andriy ran ahead. In his left hand he held an iron rod and his right fingerless hand was raised as if in threat.

There was the engine-room. Warm, full of winding iron pipes, wheels and machines like a huge intestine, it shook as if ridden with fever, its wide drive-belt flashing. For a second Andriy’s nostrils caught the familiar smell of oil, steam and the dry heat of the fiery oven, and his life as a worker until his accident arose before him. So, now they had met — the machine and its victim. Andriy could feel his cut-off fingers and fury engulfed his mind in a fog. He rushed at the drive-belt and knocked it down with one blow. It fluttered and fell effortlessly with a rustle, like a dead snake. The engine-room shook for the last time and was still and the flywheel turned with such speed that it seemed it would carry the machine with it. The steam engine throbbed powerfully, giving off a warm, heavy smell. Its black, shining sides maddened Andriy. He felt like beating this well nourished and fat beast just to hear it groan and cry, begin to die and let out its last gasp. He knocked off the pressure-gauge and hit the engine block with the iron rod.

Then he directed the steam into the whistle and when the engine made the sound which had awoken Andriy almost all his life, a sound that, when so near, seemed as shrill and sharp as an awl, the fury that seized him deprived him of memory, mind and reason. He hit the engine with all his might. Helping his right hand with the left, he tore off the bolt heads and wrecked everything he could. He even forgot the danger. He didn't see what was happening around him, didn't see all those coats and yellow jackets, beards and hair, sticky with sweat, burning and frenzied eyes, wounded hands, didn't hear how iron ground against iron in this devilish smithy, forging everything into ruins, which worked like the untiring spirit of destruction and filled the factory walls with a thousand echoes.

Khoma was everywhere. He seemed to have forgotten the human tongue and only let out mad cries, which burst forth from his burnt-out soul like slag:

“Wreck it! Burn it down!”

Wherever his shrewish old face, deeply furrowed by the plough of life, appeared and whatever his imperious and inexorable green eyes looked at, there the spirit of destruction made people strain with inhuman effort.

Khoma was tireless. Like iron pincers, his hands bent copper pipes and the more they resisted, the greater became the desire to wreck them. Bruised and injured, his hands had long been bathed in blood but he failed to notice it. All he knew was that he had more to break and burn.

At last! The lids fell off the tanks with a clatter, the fire reached the alcohol and a light bluish cloud hovered above it. People ran to watch it burning. The bluish flame, so light and innocent that it looked incapable of causing harm, curved and straightened softly, as if it were floating on the alcohol, and only at times did a wave with a red crest rise.

A sigh of discontent swept through the crowd.

It's alcohol burning! Real alcohol. It was a pity. Just the thought made people's throats burn and bodies fill with warmth. Why did they have to set it on fire without even letting us try it? Now it's neither the master's nor ours. The fire was devouring it.

Olexa Bezik was on the verge of crying. Will it be wasted?

He wanted to save the alcohol. He had the idea of dipping it up from the bottom. It was burning only at the sur-

face. He found a ladle and elbowed his way through the crowd.

“Where are you going?”

People wanted to stop him.

But there was no stopping him and he stuck his arm into the fire.

The blue flame fluttered, hit against the black edges of the tank and fell to the floor in several flaming balls.

“Aaa! It’s hot, lads!” Olexa screamed out.

His sleeve was on fire.

The attempt was unsuccessful but it didn’t seem hopeless. The flame was only on top; on the bottom there was pure, fine alcohol, it was only a matter of getting it out.

The crowd became excited.

Just imagine! All that alcohol going to waste! All that vodka!

Mouths were parched and the crowd wanted to slake its thirst, to have just one gulp, to moisten chapped lips. Break the tanks? Puncture their sides? The smell of alcohol tickled their nostrils; spasms gripped their throats as they swallowed saliva.

Burning eyes bored into the tank ready to devour the whole vessel, which was, however, sturdy and inaccessible, wrapped in flames. This frenzy of thirst calmed the crowd down, for now there was unity of desires and thoughts. In front of them, the cups burned higher and higher, a sacrifice to an unknown god.

All of a sudden a cry rang out from behind:

“Move aside, let me through!”

People didn’t have time to move aside when something wet and mud-spattered flew through the crowd, splashing everyone as it ran up to the fire. The dark figure only flashed past, an arm was raised and a man was already offering people a bucket of fire smoking like a heart torn from the bosom.

“Drink it!”

But how could they drink it?

“Pour some water, get some water!”

Someone brought some water and poured it in the bucket.

The fire subsided, curled up, gave a last sigh and went out.

“Hurrah! We’ve got the vodka!”

Arms were lifted up and stretched out, trembling and insistent with the single-minded desire of getting it as

quickly as possible, tearing from other people's mouths the warm and disgusting drink.

"Give it to me! Leave me some! That's enough, give us some!"

Those who were nearer the doors had no hope of getting any vodka. They had to get it themselves. They ran out into the yard, jumped fully clothed into the puddles and rolled around in a frenzy to become wet enough to plunge into the fire without fear.

Wild, semi-human figures, wet and covered with a layer of mud, revealing only shining eyes under it, rushed in waves towards the factory from the thick autumn mist and plunged into the fire like moths at light.

Blue flames grew and their crests blossomed in red like clouds at sunset. Deathly blue colours covered faces. Black, mud-covered people leaped about in a frenzied dance and scooped up fire from the burning tanks, jumping in terror along the walls, among the shadows cast by the discarded pipes and machines.

"Who wants more? Drink up!"

The house in which Lyolyo had lived was now burning. Beams fell into the void sending up showers of sparks, which were then completely engulfed in flames. The whole factory was now ablaze. Fire was coming out of its windows and doors like blood streaming from a wound.

The broad wings of autumn clouds glowed quietly above the factory, stretching across the precipice of the night.

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Next day it was quiet everywhere. People walked about listlessly, as if in a daze. Only the black chimney stood where the factory had been; it drew the eye and it seemed strange that one's glance was no longer arrested by the walls but proceeded farther into the emptiness of the fields and the reddish hills.

Andriy went to look at the ruins. There were people on the site who had come out of curiosity. Pale smoke rose slowly over the fallen walls like steam from a cow's nostrils. Through the wide windows the ovens covered with white tiles stuck out like teeth in the jaw of a skeleton. Barefoot children grubbed the warm earth finding various broken pieces and small burned objects. The children quarreled and fought like sparrows.

Andriy went in. Everything seemed strange and unlike

yesterday in the light of the grey day coming in through the windows and ceiling. Yesterday there had been machines here, hot, living and strong engines that resisted when they were hit. Today they lay wrecked, empty, doubled up with smashed ribs, reddish and shabby. Copper pipes stretched out their bent ends in disorder, crushed and crumpled like intestines, and red rust from the fire stood out like a bloody sweat on them.

Andriy stood still in surprise. Could he, with his one hand, have inflicted such deep wounds upon the iron? He shifted his eyes from his hands to the machines and only shrugged his shoulders. Could he have done this? He no longer felt any anger, it had been washed away in a single night. He even felt sorry for the machines: he had taken such good care of them tending them as a woman cares for her child.

Andriy sighed quietly and suddenly felt someone moving next to him.

Panas Kandzyuba stood among the ruins, heavy and grey, like a pile of burnt bricks.

"We've broken everything," Andriy called out.

"Was it us?"

Andriy was surprised.

"If not, who then?"

"The devil."

Andriy saw such determination and terror in Kandzyuba's eyes that he shuddered in fright.

"It was the devil and that's that."

Waggons drove up to the factory and left, carting away iron, brick and burnt beams.

"We'll take it apart and raze it to the ground," the peasants told each other, but they glanced around in uncertainty, and alarm could be felt in the way whips lashed out at the horses and wheels rattled.

By evening the news had swept the village that the cossacks were coming. No one knew how the rumour had begun or where it had come from. Some said that the cossacks would search the village and if they found anything, the holders would be shot.

This was probably the doing of Master Lyolyo. He had managed to escape with his life and now the villagers were in trouble. They should have killed him first and then burned down the factory. Now it was too late and nothing could help them.

What could they do? How could they save themselves?

Disaster had crept up so stealthily and was about to strike so unexpectedly that no one even dared to think how to avert it. The news was accepted as something as inevitable as the death of a sick man.

Yet some of the villagers hoped to save themselves. They secretly threw into the pond the iron they had taken or buried what they had left. But would that help? When it came to the crunch, wouldn't people give them away?

But the night passed quietly and the clear cold day completely calmed the village.

Someone must have invented the rumours. How could they be punished if the same thing was happening all around? Estates were going up in smoke everywhere — it was their right now.

More than half the day had passed and it was quiet in the village, nothing had happened.

Prokip was supervising work on the lord's field, the men were ploughing for the spring crops and finishing the late sowing. The work was moving along, the lord had not returned to take back the land, and Master Lyolyo did not seem to want to survey the site of the fire. All was quiet and the rumours had subsided. No one paid any attention to them any longer.

Another night passed. Those who had thrown things into the pond were now sorry they had.

The news burst forth like thunder from a clear sky. Now it was certain. Olexa Bezik was on his way to town but turned back. There were troops in Ternivka. They had rounded up villagers, shot some, cut down others with their sabres and drove the rest off to town. They searched houses, tied people up and beat them.

"You should expect them to come here too. Now there's no way of avoiding it."

It was clear that there was no way of avoiding it.

Panas Kandzyuba scratched behind his ear for a long time.

"So they'll shoot us too?"

His frightened eyes filled with anxiety and asked in vain for help.

Olexa Bezik pretended he didn't know anything. He shrugged his shoulders.

"I didn't burn anything, nothing'll happen to me."

"Weren't you with us?"

"Me? God forbid. I was at home."

"But I saw you with my own eyes."

"Who, me? Be damned he who saw me. You set it on fire and then blame other people for it."

"I set it on fire? Can you prove it?"

"I can."

There were no culprits. One person blamed another and the other blamed a third. It turned out that everyone was at home and if anyone did drop by at the factory it was only to have a look. Those who couldn't conceal their part blamed everyone. All the villagers had wrecked, plundered and burned the factory. The whole village was to blame and the whole village would have to answer for it. But the village refused to answer for it. Reproaches and quarrels provoked old enmities, and forgotten insults and sins came up to surface. The more restrained people calmed others. Be still. Nothing will happen. Now we are strong and it's our right.

At noon travellers brought the news about Osmaki. There the cossacks set fire to the village because the peasants refused to deliver up the guilty. The village was in flames.

Then people began to worry. Why should everyone suffer? Wasn't it Khoma who incited people? Didn't he push the people on? It was Khoma and Andriy. The villagers would also have to answer for seizing the lord's land. Everything was quiet in the village until Hushcha appeared. There was no denying it. Hushcha and Prokip had incited the people to rebel, they were to blame for everything. They talked about the people's rights, about the land, and now the cossacks were here.

Panas Kandzyuba was more worried than anyone else.

"Well? It worked out the way I said it would. Put *postoly* on the lord! Now you've done it."

In the evening Pidpara turned up in the village. No one had seen him since the manifesto had come out, he seemed to have vanished into thin air. He looked tall and stern and walked calmly as if he had aged. No one insulted him. On the contrary, envious eyes followed him.

"A fellow like that won't be punished. He lay low."

The villagers regarded him as a cunning, clever and careful person.

What should they do now?

Anxiety gripped the village. There was no end to the rumours. People recounted that in Osmaki children, as well

as adults, had been shot by the cossacks. They heard that those who weren't killed had been piled on a waggon like sheaves and brought straight to prison. Blood had dropped between the waggon boards all along the way. Even from a distant road people had heard the women wailing. Cattle and grain had perished in the flames. The pictures drawn by terrified villagers grew more and more frightening. People were so excited they couldn't stay at home. What should they do? How could they save themselves? Who knew? There was no way of avoiding the disaster. The villagers imagined the fire, ruins and blood. Children watched the road that led into the village, and the slightest noise aroused fear.

Of course, people like Khoma or Andriy had nothing to worry about. They had nothing to lose. No household worth speaking of. Panhandlers, beggars, stirred up trouble and then hid. Today they burned the factory and tomorrow they'll burn someone's grain. Pidpara's perfectly right when he says: no good will come of people who burn things.

Olexa Bezik advised returning the land to the lord. There'll be less to answer for.

"What about the factory?"

You can't build it up again. The black ruins lay on the villagers like a heavy conscience.

Some wondered whether it wouldn't be better to greet the troops with bread and salt, fall on their knees and surrender.

Others suggested fighting and refusing the cossacks entry into the village.

But there were no solutions.

Only Pidpara walked calmly and listened as his deep, stern eyes hid something under the shadows made by his brows.

Everyone thought that Pidpara knew something, but still he kept silent.

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No one could say how the thought originated and who first suggested it. Perhaps it was Pidpara whose stern gaze prompted it, or perhaps it was born spontaneously and took deep roots among the villagers. It was sufficient that people accepted it in silence as their last hope and only salvation. Let a few men perish rather than the whole village. A heavy

and secret agreement was reached by the villagers. The secret came into the light for a second and then disappeared again. And within, like a seed in a womb, it grew and matured and cast a shadow on the faces of people, who had retreated into their shells.

The ominous breath of disaster was felt in the autumn emptiness that engulfed the village; it was something inexorable, inevitable and cruel, something demanding a sacrifice.

A lamp burned before the ikons in Pidpara's house. The house was filled with a festive mood reflected on Pidpara's face. He spoke slowly and heavily as if counting money, and now the peasants recognized the former Pidpara. There were a lot of people crowded in the room and near the door. They had come to see him: they needed him again. While fright had deprived others of their reason and blinded them, Pidpara was afraid of nothing. For the peasants he was like a rock by means of which they hoped to regain their balance. He knew what to advise them.

Panas nodded in approval. That's right. The troops should come when everything is already over. There will be no culprits. The community itself will punish them so there will be nothing to punish the others for. It wasn't the village but isolated troublemakers who had rebelled. If it weren't for them, everything would be calm. Who called the strike? They did. Who seized the estate? They did. Who burned down the factory? It was also they. Would everyone have to perish because of them? To lose their homes and their very lives, perhaps.

He was excited.

Pidpara frowned.

"Now he takes what belongs to the lord, and just wait a while and he'll take what's ours. You've got a spare acre, he'll say, give it up. That fellow's saved a hundred, so give away the money. He'll take something away from me, from you, Maxim, and then he'll begin with those who are poorer. His kind will never leave us alone."

Pidpara's brother-in-law, Havrilo, stuck his thin yellow hand into his beard.

"What the hell. Shoot them all and that's that."

The cruel verdict rang out for the first time like a shot in the silence.

There was a heavy silence in the room. The silent agreement had closed mouths, and fear bred baseness.

But what if they punish us for it?

Then red-headed Maxim, the village elder, pulled a badge out of his pocket and fastened it to his chest.

"I answer for it. Here's the paper, an order to shoot all the rebels. You won't be punished for it."

With one hand he patted his pocket and with the other he straightened the badge.

Everything on him seemed to shine: his red hair, thick freckles and the copper polished by brick.

If that's the way it is, then why wait? Gather the people. Let them decide.

The bare ground beaten by the wings of the wind lay grey under the tin sky. The rows of exhausted huts, dull and unfriendly, looked bleakly at the inhabitants gathered for a meeting. The peasants walked, languid and heavy like clods of the meagre earth that had bred them. They carried their grandfathers' guns held together with string, heavy rusted axes, sticks and staffs. They were all driven by fear, by the ingrained reflex of obedience to authority. The meeting was to be attended by the "entire male population" and death was the penalty for absence. Wives saw their men off with tears and wailing as if they were leaving this earth. Who knows what'll happen?

Malanka wouldn't let Andriy go.

"Don't go. Suppose something happens, God forbid."

Andriy wouldn't listen.

"The master has branded me; honest to God, I'm not afraid of our people."

"You can show them your crippled hand, Andriyko. You think anyone cares?" Malanka hissed but came along with him.

Once again the village square was black with people. The men were in the centre and the women around them, filling the square to the ditch skirting it.

Pidpara's words were drowned by the din. He towered above the crowd in his coat, waving his hand and frowning. The muzzle of his gun could be seen next to him.

"Oh God, what'll happen?" Malanka exclaimed in fear.

"They're going to try the rebels."

"Who?"

"People are pointing to Khoma Gudz, Savva Hurchin. Watch out that Andriy doesn't get it."

"God forbid," Malanka was terrified. "My man was at the factory just like yours. Then they'll have to try half the village."

She was trembling: where was Andriy?

Maxim Mandryka walked through the crowd with his badge.

"Is everyone here?"

"Everyone is here."

"Olexa Bezik's not here."

"I'm here."

"Write them all down."

Just when they were getting ready to write everyone down, Semen Mazhuha rode up to the meeting hall on the lord's horse. He tied his horse to a post and offered his hand to Mandryka.

"Hello, Maxim. There's something I have to talk to you about."

The village elder looked at him.

"You don't deserve my hand. Get your due."

He hit Semen on the face.

Semen was stunned.

"What did you hit me for? I was elected by the community."

Before Mandryka had time to answer, Pidpara came between them and raised his gun.

"Make room quickly!"

The crowd flowed back like a receding wave and the gun and the people retorted at the same time. Semen, enveloped in a cloud of white smoke, doubled up and grasped his abdomen.

"Hey, my people, why has he done this to me?"

He staggered about and searched for a clue to what had happened on the grey faces, which bore down on him from both sides.

There was no clue and no hope to be found on these faces. Then, driven by an instinctive fear, he got up and started running with the blood flowing through his fingers and down his trousers to the ground.

Olexa Bezik overtook him and struck him from behind with a staff. His long body doubled up like a folding knife and fell to the ground.

Panas Kandzyuba had already run up. The helpless, still and warm body which lay at his feet so placidly aroused an anger in him that he had never experienced towards

people who were alive. He had an irresistible urge to make it suffer, trample it into the earth and destroy it. He shot the lifeless body and intended to pummel it in the chest.

"That's enough. He's finished." Bezik exclaimed.

They took Semen's body by the legs, dragged it to the ditch and threw it into the water.

Everything happened so quickly that people froze.

Blood had flowed. Only an instant separated the past from what had just happened, but it seemed like eternity had gone by and that the past had fallen into a precipice. Something new was born and had wrestled free of its chains.

Ivan Korotky, Deineka and a few others came out of the crowd and stood next to Pidpara, ready for anything.

Pidpara straightened up.

"Khoma Gudz, are you here? Come out!"

Heads turned and cruel, troubled looks crossed like swords. Where was Khoma Gudz?

"No, he hasn't come."

For an instant silence set in and the air tightened like a string pulled taut. Who's next? Who was breathing his last, whose hour had come? The breathing of the crowd was audible.

"Prokip Kandzyuba!"

Why Prokip Kandzyuba? He was elected by the community.

The village elder explained.

"I sent for him. He'll be here in a minute."

"All right. Now Andriy Volyk! Bring him here!"

"Volyk, Andriy," the crowd echoed. "Here he is."

"My God, why is he to blame?" Malanka screamed. "Don't touch him!"

Her voice was drowned out by a high and sharp unending screeching that sounded like a pig being knifed. Only isolated words could be distinguished.

Meanwhile the crowd moved, boiled and threw up like scum the tattered figure of the cripple.

"Come here, come. There's no avoiding it."

Someone pushed him and he fell on his knees in front of Maxim, pale, tousled and helpless, like a scarecrow in a field of hemp with a stump instead of a hand.

"Have pity on me, I'm not guilty of anything."

He bowed low, touching the ground with his forehead.

Maxim lifted Andriy to his feet.

“Cross yourself.”

Andriy meekly brought his maimed hand to his forehead.

“Kill him!”

He fell on the spot. He was finished off at once.

Again, they dragged the body along the bloody path to the ditch. But a cry made them drop it. The crowd shuddered from a hollow gasp of terror and the noise of arms being raised.

“Look over there, he’s getting up, he’s still alive, Semen.”

In the ditch a back rose like an island, a hand appeared for an instant clutching the air and fell again. The hand waved two or three times and then the tall figure straightened slowly and wavered on its shaky legs like a ghost in the dark net of running water. Semen’s large hands searched like a crawfish’s pincers in vain for something to grasp.

“He’s coming out! He’s getting out of the water!”

The men who had been dragging Andriy’s body rushed into the water and slammed Semen back into the ditch with one blow of the axe.

Once again the cruel silence clutched at the crowd, once again the sickening desire for bloody action turned a minute into eternity. Whose turn was it now? Whom will death call? Each new name gave the others a breathing space before they would die.

But no one broke the tense silence. Pidpara whispered with Maxim, and only behind the crowd Malanka wailed and women cried.

Suddenly, they all stirred. The crowd heaved and ripples went over it like over water.

“They’re bringing him! Prokip’s coming!”

Prokip was walking calmly and in his usual matter-of-fact way. As always, his clothing was neat and his movements were slow, and it seemed incredible that this man was walking to his death. He would come up now, take his soiled book out of his pocket and read to the peasants how much land was ploughed and sowed and what he had sold. That’s all that could happen.

All eyes bored into him as he calmly walked up.

He came across a spot of fresh blood. He faltered for an instant, as if afraid of stepping on the bloody path, paled and raised his eyes. His glance lingered on the guns, pitchforks and axes and on Pidpara and the group of people who stood in readiness. He understood everything.

Nevertheless he greeted them.

Pidpara moved his eyebrows.

"Why didn't you come yourself? We had to send for you. Get ready. You'll answer before God."

"Are you a priest? I'll answer before the community. It elected me."

"It's too late. You're going to die, brother."

"What for?"

"We've got no time to talk with you. You know it yourself. Hurry up and say what you wanted to."

"Did the community decide so?"

"Yes, it did."

Prokip looked around. Next to Pidpara stood Olexa Bezik, Ivan Korotky, Olexandr Deineka and uncle Panas. All of the same company.

"You're against me too? What did I do?"

They remained silent.

There was no hope.

Uncle Panas touched his shoulder.

"Should I call Maria?"

Prokip made a hopeless gesture with his hand.

"Call her."

She just managed to squeeze through the crowd; she wore a new warm coat in which she wrapped her baby. Now she fell to her knees on the blood-drenched earth.

"Forgive us, for God's sake, you — village elder, and you, honest people. If you hadn't elected him, he wouldn't be there."

She bowed low with her baby, first to one side then to another.

"That's enough, Maria, get up," Prokip stopped her. "Listen, Maria."

He fell silent for a second. He had forgotten everything.

"Listen, Maria, you know what, sell the horse, what do you need it for?"

"Oh Lord!" wailed Maria.

"Stop it. From the money you get give ten rubles to Pilip. I borrowed them from him. After you've milled the grain, don't sell it, for you need your own flour. Leave my clothes for your son, he'll wear them when he grows up.

"Hurry up!" Pidpara called out.

"Oh-h-h!" wailed Maria.

"Give my love to Mother, ask her to forgive me, that's all. And you forgive me too."

He kissed her thrice as at Eastertime and touched the baby's forehead with his cold lips.

"Are you ready?" inquired Maxim.

"Yes, and I have the community money and the keys."

He thrust his hand into one of his boots and pulled a rag out of it.

"Count it. Thirty-eight rubles and twelve kopecks." Then he remembered:

"There are two more kopecks."

He took them out together with the keys.

Maxim took them.

"Anything else?"

"Let me take off my coat."

He unbuttoned it and stood there in his shirt.

The people around him hummed approvingly:

"It's a fine coat."

"Would be too bad to get blood on it."

Pidpara was stuffing a cartridge into his gun and the others stood by.

"Wait," Panas Kandzyuba stopped them, "I'll do it myself."

He was still fussing around Prokip.

"Courage, sonny. You've served the community so far, now serve it for the last time. We're afraid, the troops are coming, we mustn't all answer for it. God will reward you. Cross yourself."

Prokip crossed himself.

Maria was still wailing and tearing at her coat.

They dragged her into the crowd.

"Say your farewell, sonny."

Prokip bowed to all four sides.

"Forgive me, men. Maybe I did someone wrong. Farewell."

"God will forgive you and you forgive us."

Panas Kandzyuba touched his nephew once again.

"Where should I shoot you?"

Prokip looked at him with eyes that were already dead and thought.

"Shoot me in the mouth."

White as the shirt on him, he tried to open his mouth, but couldn't. His jaw trembled: it felt wooden and he couldn't move it.

Panas brought the muzzle of the gun right up to his face and pulled the trigger.

In response to the shot his face spit a stream of blood at him and it splattered Panas' hands and chest.

Prokip fell to his knees. Pidpara finished him off from behind.

The people were drunk from the smell of blood, the deathly gurgle and the smell of powder. How about Hushcha? Where is Khoma Gudz? And Ivan Redka? What? He was still alive?

But neither Khoma nor Hushcha were to be found. They had disappeared.

Pidpara sent some volunteers to track them down.

The men who were trying to hide behind the crowd were led off into the meeting hall. They were let out from there one by one between two rows of people and finished off with bullets or blows. This was the way the younger Redka and his brother died as did Savva Hurchin, the latter only because he had once broken a window in the house of Havrilo, Pidpara's brother-in-law.

The bodies were left in the ditch to soak like hemp and the water was coloured by the blood. Streams of blue smoke rose above the crowd like the hands of a vampire in search of new victims.

The brief day had ended. The wind blew away the smoke with the last warm breath of the bodies and chased off the clouds. It swept on from the dark fields into the dark void and the stars quivered in the wind, twinkling like a small necklace in the bloody water of the ditch.

Malanka slowly dragged herself to her hut. She fell on the bed in the darkness and put her tired hands on her knees. She had been on her feet all day, there had been so much blood and suffering, and she had buried so many people that her heart now was filled with the dead like a cemetery. It was numb. There was no fear or pity left, she felt totally empty, unneeded and forgotten in this world. It was good that at least it was dark because her eyes could see no more. She desired nothing. Only that it would remain dark and quiet as it was now.

Everything had eluded her, everyone had avoided her. She used to have Andriy but they quarreled all their lives and now even he was gone. She had dreamed of land and the land had struck back at her, hostile and cruel, and had eluded her. It beckoned to her like a mirage and had disappear-

ed into thin air like a mirage. Now it was lying cold and sucking blood.

She wanted nothing. Only for it to be dark and for the tomb-like stillness to last forever.

The door squeaked.

“Who’s there?”

“It’s me.”

It was strange. She had lived her whole life and suddenly she had fallen into a precipice. If only there were a trace left, some memory. Everything was engulfed by the darkness. Everything was black. Even today had receded far into the distance, so far that it seemed a forgotten dream. Was it today or didn’t it happen at all? She saw only one thing clearly in the dark: Andriy’s cut-off fingers. Three yellow fingers in the oil, covered with sand. She looked for the fourth one, couldn’t find it. She should have looked better!

“Where were you?”

The fingers swarmed before her eyes like worms. The blue nails shined dimly like dead eyes, the yellow skin had become wrinkled and there was dirt from work in the wrinkles. She had buried them, only couldn’t remember where. Her head began to ache because she couldn’t remember where.

“Where were you?”

“I was saving Marko.”

“Did he run away?”

“He did.”

“And they killed Father.”

There were no more words. Nothing broke the dark silence, which flowed into the windows of the hut.

The earth outside the house was in a deep and cold slumber and, high above, the stars quivered like goldfish playing in the fishtank of the sky.

At dawn, the cossacks entered the village.

*Chernihiv*  
*September, 1910*

## PE KOPTYOR \*

Yon discovered Gashitsa at a dance. His ears and his heart were throbbing with the rhythms of the Moldovanyaska, his whole body was warmed by the dancing. His legs, so restless that now they were unable to stand still even for a moment, responded with every muscle to the music, his face shone with rapture and sweat. Finally, Yon broke away from a group of young men who were standing on the side. He cut into the dancing circle and caught two girls by the hands and... suddenly, he met her eyes, which flashed at him from under thin brows with the passion of youth and the South.

"What the hell," thought Yon, cutting figures with his legs and casting sidelong glances at the girl. "I don't remember ever seeing her before..."

There was no time to think; the music went on and he was carried away with the dance.

The musicians, three swarthy Gipsies, were sitting in a row on a bench near the dancing circle. The fiddler, a bony feeble fellow in narrow rust colored trousers and a Moldavian shirt, bent his head (with a shock of black hair instead of a cap) to the sounding board of his instrument, as if listening with curiosity and surprise to the sounds produced by his bow. His neighbor, the clarinet, an elderly Gipsy, was dozing as he played; his eyes were closed and his heavy well-fed body in its black padded jacket was rocking. Every now and then, when the music sounded especially sweet and lulling, the clarinet slipped from his lips and fell silent, but then, as if caught red-handed, suddenly began to let out wild shrill sounds. The third musician, the trumpet, worked hardest of all. Because of the heat, or maybe the strain, he was wet all over. His shirt, also soaked through, clung to his athletic body and sweat was streaming down his broad swarthy face. Still he played on and on, his cheeks swelling like a full moon and his eyes popping, as if about to shoot out. "Turu-turu... tal

\* On the *koptyor*. Koptyor — Moldavian stove with sleeping space above the oven area, also used for childbirth

Turu-turu... ta!" blared the trumpet, as if trying to destroy the walls of Jericho. Only when it stopped for breath did the high-pitched scraping of the fiddle or the shrill voice of the clarinet break through.

"Turu-turu... ta! Turu-turu... ta!" Every now and then a row of young faces — sweating, flushed, but earnest — showed through the cloud of dust raised by brass-shod boots. Holding their hands and swaying their arms smoothly and unceasingly, working their legs and stamping hard like strong horses on the threshing-floor, the young men and girls seemed to be doing some important work, thoroughly and conscientiously, rather than dancing.

"Turu-turu... ta! Turu-turu... ta!" The dominant voice of the trumpet pierced the dust, rolled over the square, bounced from the stone wall of the little church, and rushed away to the distant mountains, shining with their azure, and the solid wall of dark-blue forests supporting the vault of the sky.

The circle danced on. Feet pounded to the rhythms of the Moldovanyaska, joined arms rose and fell, and white kerchiefs fluttered in the girls' hands.... Warmed by dancing, faces shone with drops of sweat, eyes, flashing passionately from under lowered lashes, met more often, handclasps grew firmer in spite of themselves, and breathing became heavier. The dust, kicked up by scores of stamping feet and brass heels and caught up by the whirl of the dance, swept upward in spinning clouds, performing a dance of its own. Now the dancers disappeared in the dust, now a row of young men and girls appeared, as if from a cloud, enlivening the scene with their colorful costumes and heated young faces.

The heat was oppressive... The slowly setting sun grew bigger, as if increasing in size, brighter and hotter. The air was permeated with light and heat and it seemed that the square, the dancing circle, the musicians, and the motley crowd of spectators of all ages were covered with a golden net.

A terrible din hung over the square. Someone was drawing water from the well and the long unlubricated sweep let out a merciless screech. The hubbub produced by several hundred throats was like a summer shower. The cries of the children, the guffaws of the young people, the hard stamping of the dancing feet, the scraping of the fiddle and the shrill piping of the clarinet — all merged into a strange but

harmonious chorus dominated by the trumpet's "turu-turu... ta" which rose over the square, bouncing off the church walls and then rushing away through the air permeated by the hot rays of the sun.

Suddenly the music broke off. For a moment, the circle moved on by the force of momentum and then scattered, the girls darting away from their young men into the crowd. Gashitsa also made to dash away but was stopped by a strong hand. She looked back in surprise and saw Yon, shining with sweat and pleasure, eying her, and firmly holding her hand.

"Let go!" the girl tugged at her hand and blushed.

"What'll I get if I do?" joked Yon, tightening his grasp.

"How can you? I don't even know you!" Gashitsa jerked, her face turning red from the strain.

"I'm Yon, son of Kostaki. And you?"

Suddenly, catching Yon off his guard, the girl freed her hand and leaped away so quickly that her starched skirt flapped like a flag in the wind.

"Try and guess who I am!" she shouted, running away. Then, turning back for a moment, she burned him with a passionate flash from her dark eyes.

Disappointed, the young man scratched his head with such violence that his cap slipped over his nose and then dragged himself over to a small group of his companions standing nearby.

The fellows met him with their traditional horseplay: one embraced his neck and pulled him with such force that he staggered, another squeezed Yon's hand until tears appeared in his eyes. However, Yon took no offense. With a happy smile on his broad, clean-shaven, slightly pock-marked face, he glanced now at the group of girls where Gashitsa stood, now at his newly bought suspenders which crossed his broad chest and supported his wide *sharovary*\* of dark green cloth with red stripes where they met the tops of his boots. The brand-new suspenders, blue with silver clasps, drew envious looks from the young men and approving ones from the girls. This tickled the pride of the owner of this wonderful and most fashionable thing. Yon pushed two fingers under each of his blue suspenders and, with a proud toss of his head, turned to one of his companions.

\* Turkish-style trousers with wide legs

"Tell me, brother, who's that girl over there?" he pointed at Gashitsa.

"Which one? That wild goat in the white skirt?"

"Yes, yes."

"Why, that's Gashitsa, daughter of Mitsa Shtefanaki, the owner of the windmill. Don't you know her?"

Really, how could he have overlooked such a beautiful girl? Maybe she couldn't come to the dances very often because she lived at the end of the village? Here the sounds of the quick Bulgaryaska interrupted his thoughts.

Several young men sprang into the dance, pulling their girls behind them. Yon watched Gashitsa until he saw where she joined the circle and, joining it at the same place, grasped her by the waist from behind. With a lightness surprising for a toil-worn man, he began stamping and working his legs, glancing at her now and then, with a smile. Gashitsa, looking down, felt those glances and blushed.

By the end of the dance, sweat was streaming down Yon's face. Gashitsa, flushed and breathless, unfolded her white kerchief with its embroidered hem to dry her face. Halfway to her face, the kerchief suddenly leapt out of her hand, waved its embroidered edge and... landed in Yon's hands.

"*Valev!*" the girl cried in surprise and grabbed at the free end of the kerchief.

They stood there, each pulling the kerchief his own way. The struggle went on in silence, with equal persistence on both sides. Every now and then, a grimace, which could mean annoyance as well as secret delight in the young man's advances, crossed the girl's face.

Victory went to the stronger. Having snatched away the kerchief, Yon rushed off, wiping his face with it as he ran. Gashitsa darted after him.

"Give it back!" she shouted in an angry voice, at the same time ogling the young man.

In reply, Yon smartly folded the kerchief on a diagonal and threw it around his neck, making a knot under the chin.

"Give it back!"

"What'll I get for it?" teased Yon, fending her off with his arm stretched out.

"Give it back, I said!"

"And will you give me a kiss?"

"You crazy devil!" Gashitsa made a wry face, though her eyes were shining. "As if I have nothing else to do! Better you keep that kerchief...."

"That's more like it! Clever girl!" The triumphant Yon stepped closer to Gashitsa.

The sly girl was probably waiting for just this chance to snatch the kerchief from his neck. But Yon was not to be caught napping. He seized her outstretched hand, while his other arm embraced her waist and drew her close.

"Stop it!" she hissed, weakly attempting to struggle free from his embrace.

At this moment, the musicians struck up again. The happy Yon leaped into the dance, drawing Gashitsa with him.

Yon did not leave Gashitsa until all the dances were over. His advances became quite formal, and the wayward girl grew more and more agreeable, tickling the young man's heart with her passionate glances.

The sun was setting. The spectators slowly made for their homes and the young people also dispersed. The square became empty and quiet. The musicians bid farewell to the fading day with their last strains. Only the dust floated for a while in the purple sunset. Then it began settling softly on the little church's dark shadow which crossed the square, reaching the cottages on the opposite side.

Several days had passed. Gashitsa was constantly on Yon's mind. Wherever he was and whatever he did, he constantly saw those passionate, languid, dark eyes, the even lines of her brows, and her splendid figure. He could only smack his tongue with pleasure. A fine girl, there was no denying it. He could even promise to marry her. And how modest she was, and what looks she gave him when he was making a play for her. The picture of that memorable dance stood strikingly vivid before his eyes, the tune of the Moldovanyaska rang in his ears, and he remembered the scene with the kerchief.... The image was so distinct and lively that, in spite of himself, Yon clutched the kerchief, still embracing his neck, as though afraid that the hand of the playful girl might suddenly reach him and pluck off his so easily won trophy.

Once he caught her at the church, before the service. She was wearing her Sunday best, all starched, and looked very important. Her white jacket with red polka dots, which was slightly soiled on the right side where her dancing

partners had placed their toil-worn hands — or rather the soiled place itself — brought a host of sweet memories to Yon's mind and inflamed his heart. But because it was unseemly to show his feelings in public and in front of the church, Yon only greeted the girl. His eyes told her the rest.

Their second meeting... But to begin from the beginning.

One evening, when the sun was setting beyond the distant dark forest, he was returning from work at the vineyard with a group of young men. Talking lively, they were descending slowly into the valley when one of them suddenly let out a characteristic sound, something between a human cry and a horse's neigh.

"I-ho-ho!"

"I-hi-hi!" answered shrill voices from below, and presently the young men saw a group of girls with huge hoes on their shoulders. They were moving briskly along the dusty road.

"I-ho-ho-hi!" bellowed the young men all at once like a wild horde, running downhill to intercept the girls.

"I-hi-hi-hu!" replied the girls in a hellish chorus, fleeing from their pursuers.

The uproar was beyond description. The surrounding hills caught it up and it rushed away, bouncing from hill to hill and frightening the sleepy silence of the rosy evening...

Before Yon knew what happened, he bumped into Gashitsa, his arm flung around her neck, holding her tight against himself. His chest was heaving from the swift running, and his head swam from the touch of the girl's warm, young body. Amidst the wild yelling and screaming, holding Gashitsa in his arms, the happy Yon kept telling her something which neither of them was able to make out. Meanwhile, the racket was dying down... Only at the edge of the village did Gashitsa tear herself free from Yon's arms and rush into an outlying cottage which stood on the hill behind the windmills... "So that's where she lives," thought Yon, running his eyes over the plain, old Moldavian cottage with its thatched roof of rushes, wide eaves, barred windows and whitewashed walls spotted with blue. There was a root cellar near the cottage and the spacious yard was surrounded by corn sheds and other outbuildings. In the street, right by the gate, a new sweep rose over the well, as if guarding the cottage. Two big dogs were fighting behind the gate but, noticing Yon, both rushed at him and

bit at his heels until he disappeared around the corner of the street...

As he reached the gate of his own cottage, Yon heard the stentorian voice of his father coming through the open door: "*Nunte shi Bukovina!*" \* Kostaki senior's favourite curse raised a smile on his son's face.

"Father let himself go," thought Yon of his quick-tempered but kind-hearted father. As he crossed the threshold, the smell of fresh corn meal mush tickled his nostrils. Yon's mother, scrawny, old Anika, had just pulled a pot from the oven and dumped the fragrant, steaming yellow mass on a three-legged table.

Kostaki senior was sitting on the bench. He was a tall, stout Moldavian with a face red like pepper and a neck that seemed even redder against his white shirt with a red belt, reaching below the knees of his white trousers. Waving his hands energetically and shaking his head crowned with a shock of red hair touched with grey, he arranged the grey bristles of his unshaven chin, which looked like a porcupine and seemed to share the indignation of its owner and appeared to be ready to support him in his fight against his enemies.

"*Nunte shi Bukovina!*" yelled Kostaki. "He thinks he can insult me in front of other people just because he has a windmill and I don't!... The devil! Kostaki is not the last among the Moldavians for all that! What?"

"Who? Who are you talking about?" asked Yon.

"Who? Why, that Hitsa Shtefanaki who lives beyond the windmills at the end of the village..."

Yon listened curiously to the story of the quarrel his father had had with Gashitsa's father at the tavern over a quart of wine.

"He won't get away with it! What? Rich or not rich, God is one for all Moldavians... I'll sue him! The court'll deal with that damned miller! What? *Nunte shi Bukovina!*" The irritated Kostaki snatched his tobacco pouch from under his belt.

"Well," drawled Anika skeptically. "What can you do to him? The devil himself helps the rich, but for the poor man even his own oxen don't pull."

\* Literally "Wedding and Bukovina" — curse the meaning of which is unknown even to Moldavians

The end of the phrase came from the entrance hall, where the mistress of the house had taken the table and the steaming pot of corn meal mush.

"Supper's ready!" announced Anika.

Kostaki senior stuck his tobacco pouch into place and began his supper. Plucking bits of corn meal mush, he rolled them into balls and dipped them into a generously peppered bean sauce. He fished pepper pods out of the sauce and chewed them vigorously, as if they were his enemies, his red face glowing like a setting sun. Having washed his supper down with some wine from the pitcher, the old man turned to Yon.

"You'll take the horses to the pasture tonight, because at dawn I'm going to town to lodge a complaint."

Anika only sighed.

Yon wasted no time. His coat was slung over a horse's back, the iron hobbles were already jingling in his hands. Now he had only to hop on and — off to the pasture!

The evening air was quiet and mellow. The dust raised by the cattle returning from the pasture had descended back to earth. Here and there, a star twinkled in the pale, weary sky. Yon chose to ride by Gashitsa's cottage.

It was not on his way, rather too far from it, but the young man wasn't able to resist the temptation. Soon he was on the familiar road... He passed the windmill, slowly waving its wings like a huge bird. Then he saw the long neck of the sweep bent over the well to draw a pail of water. For whom was it working so hard, even screeching, the poor thing?

Yon rode alongside the well, looked — and felt something leap inside him from surprise. Gashitsa, hand over hand, was drawing up the pail. Her fine cotton blouse clung to her young body, emphasizing her round shoulders, strong arms and firm high breasts.

Yon even forgot to stop his horses. Only when he had passed the well did he catch himself and stop them. Then, he jumped off and went over to the well, pulling the surprised animals behind him.

"Good evening."

"Good evening."

Gashitsa blushed, but did not even glance at the young man, her look drowned in the dark depths of the well.

There was a silence.

"May I have a drink?"

Gashitsa silently pushed the pail toward him. But instead of drinking, Yon grasped Gashitsa by the hand and drew her close to him.

"Don't," she gasped out. "They'll see us."

"But there's no one around."

Yon drew the girl closer. She did not resist.

"Why are you doing this when you aren't going to take me for a wife?"

"Would you marry me?" he asked, bringing his broad pockmarked face, hot and beaming, closer to hers.

At the same moment the restless horses jerked aside, nearly pulling Yon off his feet.

"Whoa! You devil's brood!" he cried, tugging at the reins wound around his hand.

"Hey, Gashitsa!" a voice called from the cottage.

Gashitsa started, grasped the pail and rushed to the gate.

Yon's voice followed her, "I'll come again... tonight."

Yon jumped on his horse and angrily lashed the "devil's brood" which had interrupted his wooing at the most exciting moment.

The horses shook their manes protestingly and started off at a gallop along the road, kicking up thick clouds of dust.

A whole colony of windmills popped up from behind the hill, closing in on Yon from both sides of the road. Some stood dark and still, their black, bat-like wings spread out against the evening sky. Others, with glowing red lights in open doors, swung their wings regularly and smoothly, as if they were about to take off and fly into the distance.

On the hilltop, the horses slowed to a trot. From here, vast fields of corn could be seen in the distance and their fragrance could be felt in the air. A happy feeling grew in Yon's heart. He began an endless song in a melancholy voice.

The horses slowed to a walk, snorting occasionally from the dust. The hobbles jingled softly, the sad song resounded over the vast fields...

The road turned and ran downhill into a wide, endless valley which seemed black among the gently sloping hills. A pleasant, damp coolness enveloped Yon immediately and the horses neighed happily, raising their heads... He caught a glimpse of a small lake whose still surface glistened among the black rushes... From far away came the croaking

of frogs... White mist was slowly rising and clouds gathered over the rushes... The sky darkened, sparkling with stars...

Grazing horses wandered about the valley. Yon joined the night herdsman sitting around the bonfire. Absorbed in the usual young men's talk — about girls, wine and army recruitment — they did not notice when midnight came. Yon decided to go to the village. He asked the young men to look after his horses, promising them a bottle of wine. Quite a few appeared to be not indifferent to it. Yon took off his coat and, leaving the vest on, headed uphill toward the village.

As Yon approached the windmills, roosters in the village were crowing. He proceeded more slowly.

The village was asleep. The grey cottages were barely visible in the dark of night, their outlines were blurred. The scene very much resembled a graveyard with its silence, mystery and looming crosses.

In the dead quiet, Yon could hear the pounding of his heart and the soft steps of his feet in *postoly* on the carpet of the dust.

At last he was at the sweep... Then he made out the black fence... Yon tiptoed to it, bent over and looked into the yard. It was dark. Only on the wide *pryzba* \* something white could be seen... Must be the canvas covers, under which the whole family used to sleep out. Yon pulled himself up, bent over, pressing his chest against the fence, and softly landed in the yard. Only then did he think of the fierce dogs which had pursued him along the road in the daytime. He paused, hesitating. Still, he had to make up his mind. Yon rose on his tiptoes, leaned forward and, softly, like a cat, started for the *pryzba*... He reached the middle of the yard... It was close now... "What's that black thing? Maybe a dog?" he thought and stopped, holding his breath. "No, it's not a dog, it's only a log." Yon moved on and nearly stepped on a sleeping dog, curled up by the cottage. Finally, he reached the *pryzba* and halted. The air under the eaves felt warm, and from under the blankets came puffing and snoring. "Which is Gashitsa?" Yon asked himself, running his eyes along the row of covered figures. "Must be this one," he decided. His hand went slowly along the lying figure. He felt an elbow, then a shoulder and... suddenly touched a rough, prickly beard.

\* The earthen bench running along the outer wall of the house

"Ah," a sleepy mumble replied.

Yon stood petrified, his outstretched hand hanging frozen over the beard. His heart sank. A minute passed. All was quiet. Yon moved further like a shadow. He saw a little foot sticking out from under the blanket. "No, it can't be Gashitsa," he thought. Only at the end of the *pryzba* did he finally recognize Gashitsa by her black braids which were lying on the white blanket like two thick snakes.

"Gashitsa, Gashitsa," he whispered, softly shaking her shoulder. But the girl was sleeping like a log.

"Gashitsa, wake up. It's me, Yon".

Gashitsa turned her head uneasily, then sat up abruptly, rubbing her eyes with a fist.

"Gashitsa," begged Yon. "Let's go to the garden, or somewhere..."

Gashitsa took the fist from her eyes, looked at Yon and said in a frightened voice:

"Why did you come here? Leave at once... They'll hear..."

"They won't," whispered the young man, pulling her round the corner of the cottage.

"I said I'd come, so I did," he said in a soothing voice, holding her hand. Then he told her how he had pricked his hand on her father's beard.

Gashitsa marvelled at his courage and laughed.

"I say, I'm so thirsty that my heart is burning. Do you have anything to drink?" he asked.

"There's water in the entrance hall."

"Water's no good. Maybe there's some wine left in the decanter?"

Gashitsa thought for a while. "Wait a minute," she said. "I'll be right back." She went to the cottage.

Cautiously, she opened the outer door, then the inner one, groped for a matchbox and a candle in the open cupboard, took the cellar key from the wall, and stole back to Yon.

"Come on," she called, starting ahead.

Following one another, they tiptoed past the sleeping family, their necks stretched out apprehensively.

As they passed the dog, it growled but did not wake up.

Gashitsa opened the cellar. The cold, musty air hit their faces. In darkness, they groped their way down several steps, then lit the candle. The darkness dispersed, lurking only in the corners.

Gashitsa fixed the candle to a barrel. There were nine such wine-filled barrels with bulging sides, forming an

impressive line along the cellar walls. Various kinds of buckets, large and small, stood on the side. The cellar looked grave, even grim. The dark shadows from the quivering light of the thin yellow candle shifted eerily.

"Where's the white?" Yon broke the silence.

Without a word, Gashitsa took a wooden bucket, placed it by the barrel, and pulled out the tap. A jet of transparent golden liquid hit the bottom, foaming. The vessel half-filled, Yon stopped Gashitsa.

"That'll do."

The young man took the bucket in his hands, lifted it to his mouth, blew off the foam, and pressed his lips greedily to the brim.

Gashitsa, leaning against the barrel, fixed her eyes on her beloved, as if sharing his pleasure.

"Good wine," Yon finally gasped out, wiping his lips with his sleeve and putting the bucket down. "Thank you very much," he added, embracing and hugging Gashitsa. The girl did not resist. It was such a pleasure to be in the arms of her beloved. The touch of his sinewy arms and the warmth of his young body sent such a sweet tremor through her. Something seemed to ring in her ears, and her head swam... As if from behind a wall, she heard Yon's voice, some words...

Oh! She would never be sorry for having fallen in love with him... All the boys were afraid of him because he was so strong... Who of them could match him? Nobody! Yesterday, Petraki, also a strong fellow, tried to wrestle with him. Yon threw him on the ground so hard that the poor fellow nearly parted with his soul... And how cunning he was! In every way... They wouldn't even beat him in the army, if he had to go there for a month, because he knew Russian. Who else could put this as smartly as he: "I believe... God... Father... Mighty... maker... heaven... earth...."

Yon was so carried away by uttering the strange words of the Credo in Russian that he even released Gashitsa... The feeble flame of the small candle barely illuminated Yon's figure, his lowered hands, his concentrated pockmarked face, and his large mouth which was distorted so unnaturally as he pronounced those strange words. Yon uttered word after word in a flat tone, while Gashitsa listened with folded hands, as if spellbound.

"How clever he is!" she thought, her heart swelling with a new wave of feeling.

"Was it good?" Yon asked when he had finished.

"Very good!" whispered Gashitsa. "Only I didn't understand anything."

"Well, even the boys can't understand it, let alone the girls."

And with these words, Yon guzzled the rest of the wine from the bucket.

A warm wave spread over his body, his eyes sparkled, his heart grew light, his head clear, his arms and legs acquired strength and liveliness...

With a toss of his head, his hands in his vest pockets, Yon again turned to Gashitsa with a superior air.

"Do you know what an oath is?"

"No, I don't," said the girl unhappily.

"You don't? An oath is... a pledge... given... to... Christ... the faith... the truth..."

Gashitsa clicked her tongue, nodding her head in genuine surprise. "How difficult it is..."

"That's nothing!" Yon let himself go on. "I even know the manual for the rifle. Want me to show it?"

Yon looked around the cellar, seized a besom with a long handle from a corner and stood at attention, his shoulders raised in a funny way, so that his head seemed to be drawn in altogether. Forgetting about his precarious situation in the strange cellar, he commanded at the top of his voice:

"Slope arms! One-two... One-two..."

His whole figure — the protruding shoulders, the pock-marked face hidden between them, the besom pressed to his side, and the stiff legs which he shot out like a strutting rooster — all this seemed so funny to Gashitsa that she couldn't help laughing. But Yon did not even notice her laughter. He kept stamping up and down the cellar, shouting:

"One-two... One-two!... Order arms!"

Suddenly a fierce barking came from the yard, followed by a deep voice, "Who's there?"

Yon ducked on the spot. Gashitsa, having recognized her father's voice, rushed to the candle and put it out. The cellar plunged into darkness and complete silence. Only the barking and the heavy steps could be heard from above.

"Who's there?" repeated the voice.

Yon was sitting gaping stupidly into the darkness. Gashitsa was trembling behind the barrel.

Soon, all was quiet above: the barking lowered to a whine and stopped, the steps dissolved in the silence of the night.

"Gashitsa!" whispered Yon.

"What is it?"

"Where are you?"

"Here, behind the barrel."

Yon crawled gropingly to Gashitsa and snuggled by her side. They sat quietly for a while. Then Yon broke the silence.

"Let's get away from here."

"I'm afraid. Better wait."

But they soon became bored sitting like that and, holding hands and bumping against the barrels, they slowly climbed out of the cellar.

"Let's go into the vineyard," said Yon. At first, she told him to go home, but then, before she realized what she was doing, she found herself behind the cottage on the path leading to the vineyard.

They found themselves a place in the thick of the bushes. Yon gathered some grass to spread on the ground.

The soft black soil breathed of moisture, the luxuriant old bushes raised their strong branches like arms and, here and there, a twinkling star peeped through their broad leaves. Gashitsa grew cold and afraid. In spite of herself, she snuggled up to Yon and gave herself up to the young man's passionate caresses...

Dawn was breaking when they parted: Yon gratified and happy, Gashitsa heavy-hearted and anticipating an irreparable disaster...

The young man and the girl met in the vineyard nearly every night.

Time passed. Spring grew into summer — sultry, dry and scorching. The vines were covered with pale green tassels, the corn in the fields unloosened its hair, and barley changed its color to yellow. It was as if the luxuriant vegetation had grown old and slightly touched with grey.

The grass with which Yon had feathered their nest in the vineyard and, alas, the feeling for Gashitsa also began withering in Yon's heart. More and more rarely would he jump over the fence to the familiar vineyard at night, and more and more eagerly would he turn his eyes to other girls. Gashitsa was aware of Yon's betrayal, but her reproaches and tears only increased his aversion.

The ease with which he had won the girl's heart and taken from her everything that a girl could give, without any resistance on her part, soon quenched the flame of his first love. Their love, still so sweet to the girl, lost all the charm of novelty for him. Gashitsa simply bored him.

At first, Yon did not even think of leaving the girl. He had seduced her, so he had to marry her. And if he didn't, wouldn't her parents make him face the music? And what would people say? How would Yon's father, the hot-tempered, but just, Kostaki, look at it?

However, little by little, as indifference to Gashitsa grew in Yon's heart, he began to look at his father, the same hot-tempered Kostaki, as his deliverer from this delicate situation. Yon recalled the quarrel between his father and Gashitsa's, and seized upon their enmity as his salvation.

Would his father ever agree to have his enemy's daughter as his in-law? No, not for all the world.

He, Yon, would be glad to marry Gashitsa, but what could he do if their fathers were at war and would never agree to it?

Yon's belief in the obstacle he had thought up was so firm that he even regretted that he could not marry Gashitsa.

In order not to hurt the girl and himself, he stopped visiting Gashitsa despite her tears and pleadings...

Harvest time had come. Sheaves squatted all over the fields, smiling at the farmers, asking to be taken to the threshing-floor. On the hills, the stalks of corn rose high, strong like oak, showing off their thick cobs. The grapes in the vineyards grew full and yellow.

Old Kostaki's red-pepper face grew even redder with pleasure as he looked at all this wealth. "I must get Yon married in the autumn," he decided. He made no secret of his intention, and soon Yon learned about his father's will and not only obeyed it, but relied entirely on Kostaki senior's taste.

So, with his father's sanction, Yon was soon spending his leisure time gazing into the dark eyes of the squat Domnika and wearing a copper ring presented by her — the first link of the shackle with which Hymen \* lies in wait for young men.

But what about Gashitsa?

\* Greek and Roman mythology: the god of marriage

She was lying on the *pryzba* at her mother's feet. Her father was pacing the yard, murmuring a prayer to the starlit sky. She could hear his sighs and catch some words of the prayer. The silence of the night was broken by the clear croaking of the frogs in the pond and the clattering of the stork's long beak on the neighbor's roof... Her father's long prayer irritated Gashitsa. She would rather see him sleeping, for tonight she expected her lover and had to be in the vineyard soon... But, would Yon come? Certainly he would... Gashitsa wanted to see him, to have a frank talk with him... Ah, that Yon!... Her heart ached so much because of him and her mind was tormented with thoughts of him... She wasn't able to think straight any more. Only some fragments, some scraps of thoughts and images flashed occasionally through her head and pricked her aching heart and... disappeared... There he was, with the besom at his side, flushed and handsome, marching about the cellar... Then she saw him in the vineyard, hugging her, talking about their coming wedding and married life. Traitor!... Traitor! What was it those people were saying about Domnika? Had he really deserted her for another?... Oh no, no... She saw him again, stealing along the path to the vineyard to embrace her and tell her when he would send his match-makers...

"Who the hell is nesting in that vineyard at night? Just let me catch you and I'll break your legs!..." It was the strict voice of her father. She trembled. She was frightened, afraid for Yon... She must hurry and warn him... The girl sat up abruptly on the *pryzba* and... woke up... The dark night breathed dampness, the frogs croaked in the far-away valley, her father was groaning, tossing from side to side... She must hurry, Yon must be waiting... But she couldn't leave now; her father was still awake, he might notice...

Gashitsa lay down again pretending to sleep... A sweet languor enveloped her: sleep glued her eyes, but the girl overcame it, listening eagerly to her father's breathing which grew more and more even... At last he fell asleep. Now she could go.

Gashitsa slipped quietly from under the blanket, cautiously lowered her bare feet, and disappeared round the wall...

It was quiet in the vineyard. The waves of the black sea of vines ran down into the valley. Gashitsa plunged into

this sea and soon found herself in the familiar place. Yon hadn't arrived yet. Gashitsa sat down under the bush, hugging her knees, and decided to wait. She could feel the breath of warm air, imbued with the fragrance of the black soil, rising from under the branchy bushes.

This fragrance, the twisted vines and the withered grass — everything here reminded her of the happy moments of her life. Again she saw Yon embracing her, swearing to love her for ever... And now? She must tell him... Oh! Someone was coming... It must be him... No, it was someone else passing down the path to the village... She would tell him that their marriage could be postponed no longer, that she had been deceived long enough... Again it seemed to her that Yon was coming... She could hear a noise far away...

Gashitsa stuck her head above the bushes and pricked up her ears... This wasn't him either. It was a horse grazing on the hillside and its heavy tread echoed in the quiet of the night...

Oh, God! When would he come?... It was late... And she wanted to see him so much, wanted him to know that soon... Oh, what a shame! How would she tell him?... But she must, for then he would certainly give up Domnika and send the matchmakers to her... But why didn't he come?... Could it be that he wouldn't come at all?... What was that? A rooster's crowing?...

Gashitsa stretched her neck, listening.

Somewhere nearby, a rooster gave a short crow. Then in joined another in a clear melodious voice followed by a cacophony of crowing which broke the silence of the slumbering village.

The girl sat there as if petrified.

"No, he won't come... But he must... Come... Come... Come," she repeated stubbornly in her mind, putting into her words all the strength of her desire. "He hasn't come... He has deserted me... For Domnika... But wait and see!... No, what can I do to him?... He'll marry, and I... deserted... disgraced... Shame!... Shame!... Shame to the end of my life... People will gossip, rumors will spread like wildfire... And my father!... Oh, God!..."

Gashitsa began to cry. Warm tears tickled her cheeks and streamed down to her lips which she pouted miserably, like a child.

The chill of the late hour enveloped the girl. She shiv-

ered and wept, while in her heart a soothing voice kept saying: "Maybe he'll come?... Maybe he'll come?..."

It was at dawn that Gashitsa returned home — tired, cold, without hope, but determined to see Yon by all means and clear things up with him frankly, to the very end...

Yon, feeling guilty, avoided Gashitsa, but still she managed to catch him once. He was driving an empty wagon to the field to fetch sheaves of wheat. He did not notice when Gashitsa jumped on the wagon and sat quietly at the back. Only when they were out of the village, and a cloud of dust screened the wagon from curious eyes, did Gashitsa move up to Yon and tap his shoulder. The young man was flabbergasted.

"How did you get here?... And why?"

"Why? Because I've been waiting too long for you to come... When will you send the matchmakers?..."

Gashitsa's voice, though sharp and demanding, was drowned out by the rattle of the wagon.

"What?"

"When will you send the matchmakers?" she shouted irritably into his ear.

Yon slowed the horses.

"I won't send 'em," he snapped.

"So that's how it is!... And how are you going to pay for my shame?..."

"Father doesn't allow," the young man evaded the answer, looking aside.

"So, now it's your father. And before?... But what's this?" Gashitsa cried out, seizing Yon by the finger which carried the shining ring, so dear to him, presented by his Domnika. "So, your father doesn't mind if you love that big-nosed Domnika, does he?"

Yon was offended.

"Hey! And where do you come in?... You climbed on someone else's wagon and even have the nerve to start a quarrel! Get off!"

"I won't until you tell me when you'll marry me..."

"When I have hair growing right here!" Yon shouted angrily, tapping his palm with the whip handle. "Get off!"

Gashitsa clutched the side of the wagon, but Yon's strong hands threw her off, and the wagon rumbled on.

"U-ugh!" Gashitsa shook her clenched fist after the wagon, getting up and beating the dust off her dress.

The poor girl was choking with wrath and tears. With a loud wail, she ran toward the village, but soon pulled herself together, dried her tears with her apron, and went home.

There was nothing left to do but to tell her mother everything and ask her for advice.

Her mother was so shocked that she even forgot to scold her daughter. Oh! What a disgrace, what a shame!... Something had to be done about it...

Aunt Prokhira was sent for. She was known as an authority on such matters.

She was found in the street, holding a distaff in front of her, twisting wool into thread and muttering something to herself as she walked.

When they heard the shuffle of shoes beyond the door and saw the distaff coming in, Gashitsa and her mother had no doubt that, in a moment, they would see the fat figure wearing a padded jacket and two black kerchiefs — one on her head and the other under her chin, with an enormous nose in between which, at first glance, could be taken for a face.

Aunt Prokhira questioned Gashitsa thoroughly, savouring every detail of the spicy tale, and finally declared with an air of authority:

“You’ll have to climb *pe koptyor...*”

*Pe koptyor!*... The girl pictured the humiliating procedure which custom demanded, the inevitably offensive talk with Yon’s parents, enemies of her father, and the wild scenes that often accompanied such procedures... Shame!... Shame!...

What awaited her in the days to come seemed so bitter, so intolerably humiliating, that Gashitsa would rather be swallowed by the earth. What was she to do? The earth wouldn’t swallow her, and that meant going to Yon’s cottage...

It was agreed that Aunt Prokhira would take Gashitsa there in the evening, when Yon’s family would all be in, and then let the girl’s mother know the result.

As soon as it was dark enough, Aunt Prokhira called for Gashitsa and pulled her out of the house almost by force. The girl felt as if she had a fever. Her feet seemed to be rooted to the ground, her heart was gripped by cold, and one thought, one desire, occupied her mind: that the road would never end.

“Cheer up,” Prokhira tried to console her. “You’re not the first one to climb *pe koptyor*. Last year, Katinka Sandina married Nikhalaki that way, though his mother tried to pull her off the *koptyor* by the hair. She got it from her father, and then from Nikhalaki, too. The bruises wouldn’t come off the poor thing for about two months. And yet....”

Gashitsa did not listen to the end of the story. They turned the corner... Then they saw red lights in Yon’s windows... Gashitsa’s knees gave way. She hesitated before the gates, but Prokhira pushed her into the yard...

“Go ahead... I’ll wait here...”

Gashitsa ran across the yard, grabbed the latch and opened the door.

As she went in, Anika was opening the chest, while old Kostaki was taking an ember from the oven to light his pipe.

“Good evening.”

“Good evening.”

Gashitsa first kissed old Kostaki’s hand, then Anika’s, and, without a word, darted to the *koptyor*, jumped onto it and hid behind the chimney.

Kostaki and his wife exchanged surprised glances, and the same thought struck their minds.

Anika dropped the chest lid with a bang and rushed to the *koptyor*, where Gashitsa was cowering in the corner like a little animal.

“Why did you come here?” Anika demanded in a severe voice.

“And why did your son come to me?” Gashitsa snapped back.

“My son?... And what about the others?... I know your sort, the modern girls!... Get off!...”

“Not even if you kill me... People know that nobody else came to me but Yon... He seduced me, he said he’d marry me... and now...” Gashitsa sobbed.

“*Nunte shi Bukovina!*” thundered old Kostaki who had heard the whole conversation. “What’s all this? Where’s Yon?”

He flung the door open and his bellow set the window panes rattling.

“Hey, Yon!”

Yon had barely crossed the doorstep when Kostaki senior, his face redder than usual from rage, grabbed his son by the shoulder and dragged him to the *koptyor*.

"What does this mean, you scoundrel?" he roared into the young man's ear, pointing at the *koptyor*.

Yon glanced and stood frozen at the sight of Gashitsa.

"I only... she..." the young man stuttered. But before he could finish, his father pulled him out into the entrance hall, slamming the inner door behind him.

Soon, the frightened Gashitsa could hear some tumult and slamming sounds suggestive of a fight, above which the hoarse voice of Kostaki senior rose from time to time.

"...with my enemy's daughter?... to seduce a girl... I'll knock all thoughts of other girls out of your head... *Nunte shi Bukovina!* Tomorrow you'll send the matchmakers to Shtefanaki."

A moment later, Kostaki senior, breathless, burst into the room, went over to the *koptyor* and shouted:

"You hussy! Go to your father right away and tell him that tomorrow I, Kostaki, will send the matchmakers to him on behalf of Yon! Did you hear? Go and tell him as I said."

Breathing heavily, Kostaki flopped on the bench.

"Oh, God," moaned Anika, crushed by the unexpected events. She tried to talk Gashitsa into going home.

However, Gashitsa declared through tears that she would not leave until the matchmakers had been sent.

Anika had to make a bed for her on the *koptyor* and, after a long counsel held in whisper with her husband in the corner where the icons hung, she put out the light and lay down beside the girl...

Yon spent the night out. He could not sleep for a long time, thinking of the day's events and his ruined dreams about Domnika. Occasionally, putting his hand to his head, he sighed, alone in the dark night.

The next morning, walking with Gashitsa to the threshing-floor, Yon did not say a word, pretending not to notice her.

Before long, however, urging on the horses which trotted in a circle on the sheaves of wheat, Yon occasionally cast a sidelong glance at Gashitsa and her sinewy arms, while she, smartly shaking the sieve, was winnowing the grain, scattering the chaff over the threshing-floor like snow. And he felt the unwillingness melting in his heart, giving way to resignation.

## THE WITCH

"Aunty" Prokhira stormed into the house of Yon Broska, her neighbor, with an impetuosity he never would have expected from so dignified a person. From Prokhira's pallor, from the jerky movements of her staid figure, which made her large sagging breasts tremble noticeably under her flimsy peasant vest, her black kerchief askew on her head, and especially from her bare swollen legs without their customary stockings, Yon figured that something extraordinary must have happened. Before he had time to exchange glances with his Maritsa, bent over the supper by the oven — something Yon was in the habit of doing whenever faced with an uncertain situation — Prokhira let out a scream: "Valev!" and collapsed on a bench, panting and gasping.

"What's the matter?" Yon and Maritsa cried out in unison.

"Valev!" Prokhira could only babble incoherently.

"But what's happened to you, Aunty Prokhira?" Maritsa rushed to her side, abandoning her pots.

"I've seen a witch!" exploded Aunty's bomb.

This news caused quite a reaction. Yon's longish face grew even longer and Maritsa's dark eyes widened.

"What? How? When?"

Prokhira took some time recovering her breath. Then her story began, interrupted now and then with sighs, gasps and moans. Prokhira started by giving the background to all of it. Without missing a single detail, she went through all that which they had already heard from her so often. She described her cow, which was black with some white patches on her back and muzzle — a fine, clean cow with an udder as big as a barrel — supplied detailed information on that cow's feeding and disposition, her milk yield and its quality and, encouraged by her listeners' unabating attention, proceeded to tell them about the family relations of the gentry folk to whom she sold the milk. But look what happened! The cow had been losing weight for some time now, gave no milk to speak of and would let no one near her. Nothing worked — not even holy water and incense. And when the old village healer was called, she had whispered but one word: "Witchcraft!" What else could it have

been? Prokhira, of course, had suspected as much herself. Every single night, hadn't she noticed something white flit through the door of the cowshed just like that, like some shadow? And then — Prokhira paused and let her eyes roam mysteriously all about the room before fixing them on her hosts. The two were burning with impatience. Yon's drawn face and the sparks of curiosity in Maritsa's eyes left Aunty Prokhira satisfied.

"What with all the housework to do, today I went to do the milking later than usual. The sun was already setting when I went to the shed with my pail. So, there I was saying to myself, 'Well, at least I won't let the witch have the evening's milk.' Now, I pushed the door open with the pail — when out jumps a white dog between my legs! *Valev!* I stopped dead. That was the witch! I tell you! My blood boiled. You know how it is with me, don't you? I'll kill her! I'll kill her if it's the last thing I do! I grabbed the pail and went after her. She flew out of the yard with me right behind her, ran here and there with me after her, then jumped the ditch right into Mitrokha's garden — and me after her. I could've swallowed my heart running like that, I tell you! I lost my shoes on the run, but almost caught her. So, there we were racing right toward your vineyard. Then as she reached the fence, she stopped and crouched. Her tail went down and over the fence she sailed! I threw my pail after her and just prayed to God, not knowing what was going to happen next. Then I looked over the fence and what do you think, my dear neighbors? Not a trace of her anywhere. Just vanished into thin air! Just my pail hanging on a bush and your Paraskitsa standing nearby."

"Our Paraskitsa?" gasped the man and wife.

"Your Paraskitsa, all right. With her hair ruffled and grape leaves sticking in her braids. And that stare of hers gave me real chills, I tell you! *Valev!* Can't get over it even now."

Prokhira fell silent. She was still laboring for breath.

Yon and Maritsa kept silent too. All three were ill at ease, as if haunted by a disturbing thought of something which could not even be named, something only a vague shadow of which had just flashed before their eyes. Yon looked bewildered and a mysterious smile hovered on Maritsa's lips.

Then all three spoke at once, recalling all the indicators of witchcraft, going through all known remedies against

spells, recounting their own and other people's experiences with witches and other evil spirits. Yon and Maritsa heaped advice upon Prokhira. Maritsa worked herself up. She threw up her hands and swore that, had she been in Prokhira's position, she would have run down that witch even at the price of her own head.

Prokhira had regained much of her self-confidence and spoke in a loud and authoritative voice, although, at times, it was apparent that something had made her uncomfortable, something which was about to escape from her lips and yet, remaining unspoken, had to hide behind her bitten tongue. Meanwhile, it had grown late. Prokhira looked down conspicuously at her bare legs, without stockings or shoes, and made haste to leave; she had yet to go to Mitrokhka, in whose garden she had lost her shoes, and ask him to find them for her first thing in the morning because, at dawn, she intended to go to market in Kišhinev. She had heard that the Broskas were going too, so she would take her leave now.

As soon as she was gone, Maritsa faced Yon and eyed him coldly. Yon withered under that stare from his wife, whom he feared.

"What are you staring at me like that for?"

"Oh, why am I staring? You'd better go out and see what that daughter of yours is up to in the vineyard. I'm fed up with the bastard. The moment you're out, so is she. Wandering all about the garden, in the weeds or hanging about in the vineyard day and night. And I'm the one who has to do all the work about the house. But if I say so much as a word to her, she turns that blank stare at me so that my flesh crawls. That crazy bitch will poison me one day, just wait and see. You'll have an inquest in your house yet. She never says a word when there are people around, but shoots off her mouth to you about me. 'Stepmother is this and that, drinks wine and carouses in the tavern!'"

"Oh, come on, she's never said anything like that."

"You don't have to tell me! Blood is thicker than water, isn't that right? If she was really a decent God-fearing girl, she'd behave like one. Where's she off to when all good people go to church? Wandering in the weeds or tramping in the vineyard with the dogs? Have you ever seen her in church? Just tell me — have you or have you not? And what has she been doing in the vineyard night after night? Do you know? Then tell me!"

Yon merely blinked because he did not know what Paraskitsa could have been doing in the vineyard. Somehow, his inability to explain made him furious. His dull-colored eyes flashed as he exploded, "*La draku!* \* It's you, not me, who should know what the girl has been doing at night! Even if you aren't her mother, just her stepmother, you ought to keep an eye on her just the same, *o sout draku!*"\*\*

The usually meek Yon stunned Maritsa so much with his unexpected outburst, that she only stared with her wide-open dark eyes and hollered, "Keep raising the devil if you want to have more of him about the house!"

The forgotten supper made itself heard in the oven. Maritsa hurried to it and then Yon suddenly realized how heated the whole atmosphere had become. It was not clear which of the two was hotter, Maritsa or the oven, but presently the whole hearth was aflame, crackling and boiling, as though fiery dragons were in there fighting to the death. Yon darted out of the house. Outside, he stuffed his pipe, sat down on the *pryzba* and drew a deep breath of the cool night air. The moon was just rising from behind the old black barn. The walnuts, acacias and apricot-trees cast long black shadows, broken by silver rays, across the yard and onto the house. Here and there, windows were glowing in the village and, beyond the village, the dark braid of vineyards merged into the shadows of the rugged hills. Somebody was talking loudly and laughing in the street nearby.

Yon was dejected and puffed hard at his pipe, thinking that Maritsa was being unfair to his daughter. But then again, what else could one expect from a stepmother? He also thought about his garden and vineyard which Paraskitsa had put to rights with her own hands. After all, neither Maritsa nor he had so much as touched anything there. The poor girl had done it all by herself. A quiet, hard-working girl she was. A bit strange, too. Why wouldn't she stay at home? Why did she stay clear of people all the time? Suddenly, Yon clearly visualized the scene as described by Aunty Prokhira — a white dog leaping over the fence with a pail flying after her. Then, everything disappears. The pail hangs on a bush near which Paraskitsa stands, with

\* "To hell!"

\*\* "A hundred devils!"

grape leaves in her braids, and stares strangely at Prokhira.

He stirred uneasily. What could she have been doing in the vineyard after all? Why should she be scaring people? He got up impatiently and went to the corner of the house from where he could see the vineyard.

“Paraskitsa! Where are you?” he shouted, cupping his mouth to prevent his voice from spreading. His “where are you?” rang loud and sonorously. It flew towards the vineyard, bounced off the wall of nut-trees and returned to Yon. He stood for yet a while and, not seeing Paraskitsa nor hearing her answer, shrugged and went into the house where Maritsa had served supper.

Lying next to Maritsa, he could not fall asleep for a long time. In spite of himself, he was still listening, waiting for something, irritated by Maritsa’s delicious snore. The quiet patter and then scraping of bare feet reached his ears close to midnight. That must be Paraskitsa returning from the vineyard and cleaning her feet before going to bed. Yon yawned, made the sign of the cross over his mouth and went to sleep.

At daybreak, the Broskas were already preparing for market. Paraskitsa had got up long before and was busy doing something near the ladder. She was obviously avoiding her stepmother. Coming face to face with her at last, Paraskitsa felt such a wave of hatred in the older woman’s look that she recoiled from her and slipped out of the house. Yon intended to speak to his daughter several times, but somehow failed to muster the courage. Only when they were about to leave did he snap at her, assuming as stern an expression as he could, “You stay in the house and don’t go traipsing about, because... because....” He finished his admonition when he was already beyond the gate and the girl did not hear the rest of it.

Paraskitsa was alone now. She quickly did her chores about the house and tidied up the room. Then, she made herself breakfast from yesterday’s corn bread and kept indoors, remembering her father’s bidding. Passing a little mirror fitted into the wall, she could not help stealing a glance, though she knew that this would give her nothing but pain.

Paraskitsa was a plain girl which she thought was the reason for her unhappiness. Her short stocky figure, toil-worn hands and especially her face, drove her to despair.

How many times had she looked at herself in this mirror and how many times had her heart filled with resentment over such ugliness! She could not help trying to smooth the cobweb-like lines of her face, but it was all in vain. Her skin grew no smoother and the spots she had rubbed merely grew blotched, while the mirror reflected the same face with a large nose, a sour mouth and the red spots she had just made. Bitterness surged in her and overflowed in hot tears from her grey eyes which were as colorless as the tin spoons in the cupboard. Rebellion! Paraskitsa, who was usually so quiet, shy and submissive, would then rebel with every fiber of her soul against the unfair fate which had doomed her to unhappiness. She gritted her teeth, knitted her brows, clutched at her hair and let it flow down her convulsively shaking shoulders. What good was there in those sable brows resting over her eyes like an eagle's outspread wings? What good was there in all that long hair, a girl's pride and beauty, washed and cherished with secret, yet vain, hopes, if those braids added no beauty whatsoever to her face which was young but looked like a dried apple?

Often, when overcome with powerless despair, her face wet with tears and her hair disshevelled, Paraskitsa would cower speechless and motionless on the bench in the corner. Then, her anguish, molten with tears, would gradually give way to sweet and soothing dreams. Like the Frog Princess in the fairy-tale, she shed her ugly shell to be revealed in all her luxurious beauty — tall and slender, with a chalk-white face, star-like eyes, beautiful and happy, in short, the direct opposite of what she was. Waves of love surged in her heart like the floods of spring. And all her love was for him — the village's handsomest boy. Merry-making on the green... The envious glances of other girls... The holding of hands... The dark quiet nights filled with the ecstasy of love, sweet kisses and infinite happiness...

Paraskitsa could sit like that for hours on end, intoxicated with her sweet colorful dreams. But one glance at her little mirror and all these dreams, all her happiness, were gone. Looking back at her from the mirror was the same ugly face. The ugly face which, she was sure, was always there, hidden under that smooth glass surface to remind her mercilessly of her loneliness and ill fortune.

She had had two comforts in life, but had been deprived of both. The first had been her mother, so gentle and loving.

The mere recollection of her image, emerging vaguely from the past, made her tears flow. She had died and Maritsa had appeared instead. The other had been... No, that was something she did not dare to think about, for it made her heart ache until she could hardly breathe. And, then, it was so hard to discard a girl's dreams, long cherished and nourished in a lonely heart.

Why should she, a miserable and ugly creature, have dared to raise her eyes to the proudest eagle in the village, one as beautiful as the new moon? A lizard in love with the sun! But a lizard was surely happier because, at least, it could bask in its rays, while the eyes of her own sun, Todoraka, would never come to rest upon her. Their beauty and warmth belonged to Maritsa. The moment she saw them together, her blood froze. Since then, her heart had turned to ice, so cold that it froze, giving her no rest.

Her loneliness had grown even drearier in a world harboring such vipers as her stepmother. Then, she had drawn away from the company of the girls and the young men without regret. Because of her ugliness, she had always been the least among them anyway. She had given up dances, walks and fancy dresses and even avoided her own home in which, only too often, she caught the dagger-like glances of her stepmother. There was so much malice, scorn and undisguised hatred in those eyes, that Paraskitsa flinched with a feeling of unknown guilt and wished she could shrink into a speck of dust.

The only place where she could breathe at ease was her father's vineyard, the mute witness of her dreams, anguish and sorrows. She loved that sea of lush green with its coolness, shelter and sense of privacy. She had put so much work into that plot of land, nursing with her own hands those emerald vines with their delicate tendrils and clusters of grapes under shaggy leaves. Those were true and trusted friends among whom her soul rested from all the injustices of the larger world. There she spent her days, there she greeted her nights.

And now, her father, whom she loved for his kindness and pitied for the unfair treatment he was getting from Maritsa, had forbidden her even to go to the vineyard. Why? It was something Paraskitsa was unable to understand.

But she obeyed and stayed indoors, annoyed by her idleness. It was past midday. The intolerably hot sunshine poured through the windows. All was still in the room;

there were only the flies swarming under the ceiling. They irritated her. She went out into the yard. She could hear the sound of music reaching her from the village square. Gaily dressed girls were walking down the street to the dance there. Paraskitsa clambered into what looked like an oversize wicker basket intended for stowing corn and now half-filled with cabbage. Nestling there on the heap of cabbages, she thrust her head through a wide gap and looked down onto the street.

A few girls whom she knew were just passing by. But instead of greeting her, they darted timidly aside, pointed fingers at her and cried: "That's her! That's her!" Then, they hurried down the street, rustling their skirts and raising dust. To Paraskitsa it did not make any sense. She even looked around to see if there was somebody nearby whom she had not noticed before and whose presence might somehow account for that scene. There was nobody around. Intrigued, she thrust out her head even more and looked after the girls. Now Granny Anika approached her with her grandchildren. Paraskitsa was glad to see her. The old lady had always seemed so sympathetic to her. But now, much to her surprise, Anika looked up wildly at her, gathered the children into her fold and hurried past without so much as a greeting.

Paraskitsa was puzzled. What had happened to everyone? What made them behave in such an odd manner in her presence? Sensitive as she was to any offense, she felt so deeply hurt that she sank back onto the cabbages and lay there until evening, filled with bitter thoughts.

The sun was already setting when she remembered that it was time to cook supper because father and stepmother would soon be back.

The Broskas returned earlier than usual. Word had spread rapidly among all Yon's neighbors that Aunt Prokhira had discovered a witch who turned out to be none other than his daughter, Paraskitsa. Several versions of yesterday's events had circulated at the market, each featuring Paraskitsa as a born witch. When one of these tales came back to Yon, he had flown into such a rage that he had almost come to blows with a neighbor who had told him about it, as one friend to another. In the end, though, they had a drink over it at the nearest tavern. But while they were having that drink, Yon had to listen to such fantastic things about his daughter, that his superstitious

head was instantly filled with recollections of Paraskitsa's strange and incomprehensible behavior which both disturbed and scared him.

But, then again, who knows? Trouble may visit anyone. He had never doubted the existence of witches and his back turned cold at the thought that his own daughter could be one.

Maritsa added to his fears with her enigmatic smiles and the sorrowful nods of her head, from which one was supposed to deduce that she had known it all along but had chosen to keep it to herself. In the grip of superstitious fear, his imagination was whetted by the darkness and he imagined many truly terrible pictures.

He decided that he must make sure Paraskitsa was still wearing her cross. After all, witches were known to fear such things and no true witch would wear one. Maritsa agreed with him.

As soon as the Broškas entered the house, Paraskitsa became restless and seemed to look for the slightest pretext to flee outdoors. Yon, however, was so eager to reassure himself that he told her to stay. Not used to attention from her father, Paraskitsa thought it strange and gave him a look full of bewilderment. Her surprise grew when her step-mother went to the oven and, ostensibly on the sly, but actually for all to see, made the sign of the cross over a pot of corn meal mush.

Yon ordered Paraskitsa to unfasten her blouse. The scared girl clutched the blouse at the throat and stood frozen, staring at her father with wide-open eyes.

Yon lost his temper. There she was, the witch, sensing danger!

"Undo your blouse, can't you hear?" he roared.

Paraskitsa shuddered and began unbuttoning the blouse. At first, she could not manage, however, because her fingers were trembling and the button would not come out of its loop. But the blouse was undone at last, revealing her yellowish breasts and the little silver cross on a black string. Yon took the cross, felt it with his fingers and showed it to Maritsa. Still standing by the oven, the woman glanced at it, shook her head, but said nothing.

Yon felt greatly relieved though, at the same time, he was ashamed of himself for what he had done to his daughter. The girl stood still, looking timid and confused, her blouse undone.

“Cover your bosom, for God’s sake! And better stay home instead of running about at night!”

Paraskitsa flushed with a shame which surged to her face in hot waves. She covered her breasts with her arms and rushed out of the room.

Yon exchanged glances with his wife. Maritsa shrugged with her recently assumed mysterious air. Then, much to Yon’s surprise, she began complaining in a rather shrill voice about all those inventions of the village folks. Most probably, there was nothing behind all that stuff they were saying about the girl. True, she was a bit strange and kept to herself, but what people were saying about her just could not be so. Take the deaf Mariora, for example. She had sworn to God that she had actually seen Paraskitsa perched on the well in the moonlight one night and strewing something on the ground. And Yordokhi Karabush had complained that somebody had tied his gate shut with bast. After this, his horses had gotten sick and he claimed this could have been only Paraskitsa’s doing. It had been a shame having to listen to all that at the market. But then, what else but lies and malicious rumors could it all have been?

Just as Yon was amazed to hear Maritsa defend her unloved stepdaughter, he was no less depressed by the things people had been saying about Paraskitsa. But what about that cross he had seen with his own eyes? No witch would wear one. And had it really been a cross? Couldn’t it have been just a vision? Yon did not know what to think and could not get it off his mind.

Paraskitsa was going through strange and, at the same time, hard times. Her life had taken a sharp turn; everything in it had become puzzling and confusing.

She knew her father was now keeping an eye on her. Wherever she turned, she felt his intent gaze fixed on her. Maritsa had made a complete turnabout in her attitude to the girl. She was now all sweetness and kindness when she spoke to her, especially in Yon’s presence, and yet made a point of making the sign of the cross over everything Paraskitsa so much as touched. She did it furtively, but in such a manner that the girl never failed to notice it. Maritsa would cross the jar from which Paraskitsa drank water, the oven whenever she came anywhere near it, even the hens whom the girl fed. All this confused Paraskitsa so much that she could stand it no longer and again began escaping to her vineyard as often as she could.

But not even at the vineyard could she regain her lost privacy. Often, as she sat brooding under a bush with her arms folded, somebody's whisper reached her ears. Looking around, she would then glimpse eyes burning with curiosity and gaping at her through parted bushes. She was followed, spied upon and whispered about behind her back. Why? She did not understand. She had noticed that, of late, people had begun avoiding her, returned her greetings reluctantly or failed to respond altogether. They pointed fingers at her, casting sinister sidelong glances. What did it all mean? What did they all want from her? What wrong could she have done them? How could she harm anyone just by being what she was — plain-looking, hurt and unhappy?

Her desolation stung her to the quick and the girl wept not only down her face, but also over the broad grape leaves which so caressingly touched her cheeks in her favorite hideout in the vineyard.

Then, at last, it happened. One day, when neither Yon nor Maritsa were at home, Paraskitsa, taking advantage of their absence, took the pails and the yoke and went to fetch water from the well which stood in the village square. As soon as the children playing there glimpsed at Paraskitsa, they immediately scattered in all directions and hid behind the wattle fences, glaring at her. Only sparrows were hopping by the well and pecking at something near the log frame. The sight of those sparrows, which did not seem to mind her presence in the least, moved Paraskitsa so much that she took some crumbs out of her pocket and threw them on the ground for the birds. It gave her pleasure to see the sparrows fussing about, snatching crumbs from one another.

While the sparrows were fighting over the food, Paraskitsa filled her pails and lifted the yoke onto her shoulder. At this moment, something hit her on the back. Paraskitsa cried out and spun around. A hail of lumps of earth, stones and dirt flew at her from behind the wattle fence.

*"Shedz bineshar!"* \* Paraskitsa shouted in anger and shook her fist.

This was just what the children seemed to have been waiting for. Yelling, hooting and booing, they fell out from their shelters and descended upon Paraskitsa. At first, she

\* "Behave yourselves!"

tried to defend herself but, showered with stones and dust, realized that she could not manage all that gang of assailants and took to her heels. Frightened and furious, she ran, holding the pails to prevent the water from splashing, while the children raced behind like hounds chasing some wild beast and continuing to rain earth and dust all over her.

"Boo!" yelled log-legged twelve-year-old Iokash, Prokhira's son, who led the assault. "Hit her! Serves her right, too! Come on, show her how to steal milk from cows! The witch!"

"The witch! The witch!" echoed the children in chorus, throwing handfuls of sand at Paraskitsa. "The witch! The witch! She steals milk... The witch!"

All of a sudden, Paraskitsa stopped. That word flashed through her entire body. All sorts of guesses ran through her head. Recollections of all those things which had been happening to her of late, so far incomprehensible, now became suddenly clarified with just one word — witch!

The girl's heart was seized with cold fury and she ran at the children with a beastly roar. One of the pails fell on her toes, hurting them badly, while the other was thrown off balance and splashed water all over her legs from behind. However, Paraskitsa did not even notice it. Grabbing her yoke, she charged at the children who, terrified by this unexpected outburst of rage, ran away from her victim screaming, "*Valev! Valev!* The witch!"

Paraskitsa was tearing along like a thunderstorm. Her eyes were burning, her chest was heaving heavily, her hair was streaming. She terrified the children so much, that they were wailing with horror and running away as fast as they could. When the enraged Paraskitsa, bumping into a fence, stopped and looked around, not a single one of her assailants was in sight; they had safely fled from that terrifying pursuit. She swore and, sobbing loudly, ran home. People stared at her as she ran, all wet, covered with mud and dust, her braids unplaited. Paraskitsa rushed into her yard and, still sobbing hysterically, threw herself onto the ground, her face down. Now she knew why father had made a point of finding out if she wore a cross, why her step-mother was making the sign of the cross over the pots and meals. She understood what was behind the evil glances of those she met. She was burning and aching with human injustice. The great misfortune which had so suddenly

befallen her nearly suffocated her. She — a witch! But this was a lie, this was slander — nothing but vicious ugly slander. She was quite ready to shout to the whole world, “a lie! a lie!” But meanwhile, that lie burned her and filled her heart with an unendurable pain which Paraskitsa was unable to ease. She beat her head against the ground and shed hot tears.

In the meantime, word had spread all over the village that Paraskitsa had actually practised witchcraft in broad daylight by the well. She was reported to have scattered something into the well and all around it. The villagers refused to take water from that well; some insisted that the Broskas have the priest consecrate the bewitched well with holy water at their own expense. Yon was besieged by persistent people who no longer had any scruples about retelling to him all the wild rumors about his daughter which were circulating in the neighborhood. It had turned out that not only Prokhira's cow had stopped giving milk. More than a dozen animals had fallen victim to Paraskitsa's evil charms, much to the distress of their owners. Yon had to rectify all these wrongdoings, do something about it. But what could he possibly do? He could not think of anything and it tormented him.

This was why he was very glad when Aunty Prokhira came to him to discuss the whole predicament, bringing along her husband Yoch Galchan. Yon produced a decanter of white wine, Maritsa served freshly-baked pumpkin pies and the conference began. Prokhira, as a well-experienced and generally respected lady, was the first to speak. She was not satisfied, she said, by the mere fact that Yon had seen a cross on Paraskitsa's chest. It could well have been just a vision. This was what they should do: on Sunday, they had to take Paraskitsa to church. During the service, they should all watch. If she was really a witch, then as soon as the choir began singing “Ye Cherubim”, this would be more than a witch could stand and then she would begin howling and whining like a dog. This was the best way there was — one which had already helped unmask more than one witch.

Yoch, a sturdy florid-faced Moldavian with a short-cropped bristling moustache and oily eyes, only sneered, wagging his head sceptically.

“Eh, it's all nonsense... Old wives' tales. Did you, at least, look to see if she has... well, that thing?”

“What thing are you talking about?” his offended wife snarled at him.

“Well, you know, that thing no witch is without — a tail.”

No, Yon and Maritsa replied. They had not looked to see if she had a tail.

“That’s just it! And that’s the first thing you should’ve done.” There was not a witch without a tail, he explained, nobody had ever seen a witch without one. The girl had to be examined at once. If they would only agree, he was ready to do it for them. Let them be sure, he would make no mistake about it, he would look her all over, all right...

Prokhira, however, disagreed violently. She threw a sharp glance at her husband, at his well-nourished reddish face cracked into a greasy smile. Oh yes, she could see through him all right, make out his thoughts and wishes in no time at all. So, better he keep his mouth shut and sit still instead of meddling in women’s business.

But Yoch was unimpressed by his wife’s objections. He still persisted in advocating his radical remedy; the girl had to be examined. If there was a tail, then a witch she was; no tail — no witch.

The conference failed to reach a unanimous decision. Yon and Prokhira were in favor of the original proposal, pinning all their hopes on the church service. Maritsa was inclined to take sides with Yoch. In the end, Prokhira’s proposal won the upper hand. It was decided to take Paraskitsa to church on Sunday and see what would come out of it.

Actually, Paraskitsa herself found out about that decision quite by chance, for the whole village lived in anticipation of the following Sunday when she would be led to church where she would start wailing like a dog amidst the singing of the cherubim’s hymn, thus betraying her witchcraft before all the people.

Strangely enough, Paraskitsa received the news so impassively that it seemed as if it did not concern her in the least. Of late, she had grown so tired, so apathetic, so indifferent to everything. It seemed as though she and the world were two runners in a race in which she was hopelessly behind.

She no longer cared. There was no happiness in the world, no good luck. Actually, she almost wished she were dead.

Sunday came just three days later. All those rumors

about a witch, who was to appear in church to be put to a test she would surely fail, attracted so many people that there was simply not enough room for all of them inside the church. Many had to stay outside, cramming the graveyard around the church building. Young girls dressed in their Sunday best tried frantically to save their starched skirts from bodies pressing hard against them from all sides. The young women exchanged whispers and grew more and more impatient as time passed and Paraskitsa failed to appear. Whenever somebody worked his way through the crowd inside the church, all those already inside would instantly turn their heads toward the door. Boys and young men climbed onto the gallery for a better view. Aunty Prokhira conducted herself as if all this was her birthday party. She strode around the church with no less dignity than the sacristan who was lighting the candles. Walking about, she hissed mysteriously to some people, nodded or made gestures to others. Even in church, Yoch kept his greasy smile and whispered something to those standing next to him, throwing glances at the women's half across the aisle. And Paraskitsa had not come yet. The priest had already emerged from the holy gate and begun the service and Paraskitsa was not yet there. The people were becoming restless. Then at last, a commotion started at the door and swept like a wave all along the church, till it reached the front rows near the altar. And through a passage, which was probably too broad for even some very important person, entered Paraskitsa with eyes lowered, shy and timid, wearing a dress which was neat but not fancy. Maritsa followed behind with the air of an innocent victim and with Yon in tow. Several hundred people glued their eyes on Paraskitsa, as though they were seeing her for the first time. Those standing farther behind were stretching their necks and leaning against others to see better. When Paraskitsa came up to some girls to take her place, they recoiled from her in horror, giving her so much room that even the priest's wife could envy her. But all that free space only added to the girl's sorrow and she, in order to avoid seeing people, those evil unkind people, kneeled there appealing to God — the good merciful God who saw all human injustices and knew she was innocent. Paraskitsa was praying devoutly while the electrified curious crowd was stirring around her. In vain did the young dark-haired priest reveal the whole beauty of his soft voice, in vain did

he put so much emotion into his exclamations; this was not what his good parishioners were now interested in. All were waiting for something really unusual and if they were following the service, it was only not to miss the moment when the choir began singing "Ye Cherubim". Then would happen what they had all been waiting for with such tension; the witch would then expose herself with dog's howling and wailing. It was stuffy in the church. The building could not accommodate all this mob. People were crowded together, pressing hard against each other as if forming one huge body — hot, sweating and breathing through hundreds of mouths. Hot human breath mixed with the incense fumes and the smoke from the candles was hanging overhead in a thick grey cloud. It seemed that this stuffy, charged atmosphere would suddenly be broken by a bolt of lightning and the walls would be shattered by the mighty rumble of thunder. So, as time drew near to the cherubim's hymn, eyes blazed even more than before. The uneasy expectation was becoming intolerably oppressive and people's necks ached because most of them had to peer over the heads of others. It was just impossible to carry on like this. But everything became still, like before a thunderstorm, and then the choir broke into the majestic sounds of "Ye Cherubim", starting softly and gradually growing louder and louder. The people started, as though their faces had suddenly been swept by a cool wind. Faces turned pale and grew longer, and hundreds of eyes stared fixedly at Paraskitsa. The girl was on her knees praying. She herself, pleading and protesting against human injustice, subconsciously had been waiting for the cherubim's hymn. And now, as soon as the low solemn singing rang out from the choir gallery, something burning and heavy swelled in her throat and was just about to escape from her lips with an ear-splitting scream. Paraskitsa froze in terror and cold sweat. She barely managed to contain that scream. Her arms shaking convulsively, she crossed herself and made a deep bow holding her hands firmly together. Was it all true, after all? And the people were still waiting — motionless, holding their breath, fixing their burning eyes on the prostrate witch. Meanwhile, the hymn was dying away like a summer night. The mirk was gone and the light of realization that, after all, nothing extraordinary had happened stunned the tense crowd. For a little while, people stood still, as if not believing their eyes, disappointed but

still hoping to see something. But nothing happened. Paraskitsa was on her knees crossing herself and bowing while the faces of the womenfolk surrounding her wore sour looks. The crowd stirred, roused from stupor, dissatisfied and disgruntled. People seemed angry at Paraskitsa for having deceived them in their expectations.

Some escaped outdoors at once for fresh air. Yoch was agitated and was whispering something heatedly to one of his neighbors. He looked at his wife who, ashamed and astonished, lifted up her eyes as if asking the Lord how it could all have happened.

The service was over. The people hurried out of the church. Some felt sorry for Paraskitsa, thinking she was but a victim of malicious rumors. Aunty Prokhira looked miserable. After all, it was she who had counselled all of it; it had also been she who had spread the whole story and now nothing had come of it. But Yoch Galchan was triumphant. He had known that it would end so, but nobody would listen to him. He had advised, and still did, examining the girl. If there was a tail, she was a witch; no tail — no witch. That was the thing to do. There was no other way. Some agreed with him and even Prokhira, to get out of her predicament, now declared herself in favor of Yoch's suggestion in this particular case when they were dealing with an especially cunning, evil and experienced witch.

Yon walked beside Maritsa greatly reassured. Most likely, there had been more lies than anything else to this whole story about Paraskitsa. He was glad to see everything end in such a way that now he would not have to have the priest sprinkle holy water over the well which Paraskitsa was said to have bewitched. He tried to share his satisfaction with Maritsa, although his wife received it somewhat coolly. She kept glancing with hostility at Paraskitsa, who was hurrying back home, pale, alarmed by something, her eyes downcast.

Stars blinked in the sky above Paraskitsa and all was dark and quiet around her. Tough twisted vines scattered in disorder over the damp ground, intertwining their branches and pitching overhead a fanciful tent of thick leaves and large heavy clusters. The grapes were already ripening. All day long, under the hot August sun, the obscure process of ripening was gradually going on and now the semitransparent clusters, taking on a reddish or yellowish hue, were sweetly dozing amidst the broad

leaves. Thin vapors were streaming upward from the ground. They were guarded against evil looks and misfortunes by sheep, cow and horse skulls stuck on poles. A vague white loomed over the vineyard.

Paraskitsa sat in her favorite place under a large branchy bush. She stared into space but saw no bushes. Before her eyes was the church, crammed with people. The choir was singing the cherubim's hymn and something was stirring inside her, swelling up in her throat and urging her to scream crazily at the top of her voice. What could it be? This question had been tormenting her incessantly. Since that memorable Sunday, it had often happened to her and then she felt something she had never experienced before. She would begin to pray and then find herself unable to continue when some unknown evil force choked her, trying to burst out of her throat in a wild scream. Or she would suddenly feel she had become as light as a feather and could take off into the air, fly somewhere and do something evil. She often felt an urge to do something really bad and wrong. For example, she would fly to Prokhira's, sit astride her cow, shout at her and pound her with bare feet, rushing along with streaming hair until the frightened animal fell dead. Or do something to Maritsa... Turn her into a dog, for instance, a skinny miserable bitch with a drooping tail... She would try to get into the house, cold and starving, only to be driven away... She would run to Todoraka and he would hit her with his foot... And she could do it, too, for she felt enough force for that. But, by God, what was she? Were all those people right? Was she really a witch? "Oh, no," moaned Paraskitsa, rubbing her eyes and trying to chase away those eerie visions and thoughts. She must be possessed by the Devil because she had stopped praying and no longer turned to her Lord. Paraskitsa crossed herself, concentrated and, lifting her eyes to the star-studded sky, spoke devoutly, "*Tati apostru, kare yesha shiyershi la pomind...*" \*

The moon glided from behind a mountain which looked like a black cloud hanging low on the sky line. The silver light crept stealthily into the vineyard, enveloped the bushes and glowed on the clusters of grapes. The animals' skulls on the poles grew even whiter and cast long, horny

\* "Our Father which art in heaven..."

shadows. The leaves of the vines were sharply outlined in the darkness, trembling gently in the moonshine.

Paraskitsa did not finish her prayer. She had the impression that a snow-white sheep skull winked at her with its hollow eye. Paraskitsa strained her eyes. No, she had only imagined that. She raised her eyes again toward the sky, going on with her prayer, when something flashed just to her right. She swerved in that direction. Only a cow's white skull with horns was swaying there on a long pole, grinning sinisterly. Paraskitsa froze with horror. The skull was still grinning cunningly at her, glaring with its empty eyeholes. Paraskitsa's flesh crawled.

Something rustled. Frightened, she turned in that direction but there was nothing there; only a ray of moonlight reached for the vines like a giant's huge white hand. Paraskitsa was trembling and was afraid of meeting the eyes of those skulls, although something was urging her to glance to that side where she knew a horse skull hung on a pole. But, she did not dare. Suddenly she felt that somebody was standing behind her back. Terrified, she sprang to her feet and stared right into the eyes of that horse skull she was afraid of looking at. The skull hung still on its pole, casting blinding reflections of moonlight and looking quite dismal. Yet, Paraskitsa was filled with the fear of something terrible she thought was about to happen and those ill forebodings oppressed her greatly.

The whitish skulls now looking so fearsome, the black cold bushes with their twisted branches, the rays of moonlight reaching for her like the hands of a giant ghost, and finally, the unfamiliar spiritual process, so odd and mysterious,— all that seized Paraskitsa with a cold paralyzing fear. She wanted to run and could not move. Her feet seemed to have grown into the ground and her eyes, flung wide open, stared intently into space, as though she expected to see something extraordinary. When finally she overcame her fears, she fled from the vineyard, swaying drunkenly, tearing through the bushes and shuddering each time a dewy leaf brushed her face or neck.

For several days after that, Paraskitsa went about in a trance. There was no getting away from her haunting thoughts; she kept recalling everything she had heard about witches in her childhood, comparing all their attributes with those eerie feelings she had been experiencing of late. She grew more and more convinced that the people were

not mistaken, that she really was a witch. And this realization made her blood freeze. She no longer went to the vineyard in the evenings because it seemed to her that the skulls there would mock at her, hissing, "Witch!"

Lying restlessly at nights, she could not fall asleep for a long time. She was tormented and haunted by all sorts of sinister thoughts.

Once, at daybreak, when Paraskitsa was not sure if she was asleep or awake, something did happen to her. She again had the impression that she had become as light as a feather. A cool wind swept over her and something rough and cold, like a snail, tickled her legs, something long and hard, with a hairy brush at the end, like a cow's tail. Horns seemed to spring up on her head, raising her hair. She did not actually see them, but somehow felt they were there. A crazy fury lit up her eyes and seared her heart. The next thing she knew, she took off into the air and flung herself into a whirlwind which caught her and carried her above the ground. She flew while the wind was whistling and hooting all around her, fanning out the evil flames blazing in her satanic heart.

In the morning, she was found unconscious near Galchan's garden, brought around and taken back home. Pale and mortified, she sat on the *pryzba*, ringed by a crowd of curious villagers. She answered no questions. She was afraid to move, fearing that a long, snail-like tail would again brush against her bare legs.

The event caused a great sensation in the neighborhood. Reassured by the trial which they had all witnessed in the church on Sunday, the villagers were now stirred up again. Yoch Galchan's theory, which he expounded heatedly to all who would listen, gained support from the bewildered village folks. *Magala zhiyam!* \* Everybody agreed that only a tail was the unmistakable mark of a witch and that only finding out if Paraskitsa did or did not have one could solve the matter one way or the other. Yon was harassed by neighbors insisting that his daughter be subjected to an examination. If he was unwilling to cooperate, they threatened they would find a way themselves, because the village just would not put up with that infamy any longer.

Driven to despair by his superstitious fears, Yon agreed to everything. He himself was fed up with the whole story and would be only too willing to put an end to it.

\* Long live the community!

The examination was scheduled for next Sunday. Early that morning, when all the people were still in church, Aunty Prokhira was already in the Broskas' house. She wore such a solemn look as she helped Maritsa tidy up the room, as if the priest himself was coming to consecrate the house. Prokhira watched the girl closely, in case she tried to escape. She was positive that Paraskitsa suspected what was going to happen and was only looking for a chance to slip out of the house. And what if she did? Then she would surely be gone for good. Prokhira went so far as to bring water for Paraskitsa to drink. As she had to go outside, she bolted the door just to make sure. She kept exchanging whispers with Maritsa in the corner, evidently sorting out last minute details, and making signs to Yon who, visibly disturbed, continually peered out the window. All this seemed quite odd to Paraskitsa. She was stealing uneasy glances at all those in the house, following all their movements. Whispering something to Prokhira, Maritsa went out and, a few minutes later, came back, bringing along deaf Mariora, a large old woman, as sturdy as a butcher, with chunky sinewy arms and bulging eyes. Mariora had a natural affinity for smelling out things and, before long, she got the smell of just about everything in the room. Thus, she smelled out a pitcher of white wine Yon had stowed away behind the oven and, although declaring it was a sin to drink such stuff before the end of the church service, poured herself a glass and gulped it down with obvious pleasure.

As the time approached for people to begin leaving the church, Yon looked out the window more and more often. At last, he spotted a group of people headed for his house. Soon, people were converging on the house from all sides. Young women in their festive dresses, still solemn-looking after the service, crowded by the door. The men remained farther behind, with only Yoch Galchan hanging around among the women and talking excitedly. Young girls and boys stood aside, but children clung to the windows, swarming like flies.

When Paraskitsa saw the mob through the window, she was seized by a wild fear. It dawned upon her that all those people were after her, that they would probably take her to be drowned or burned alive as witches used to be in olden times.

With the air of a hunted beast, her eyes wide open with

fear, she rushed about the room, trying to escape. But at that moment, Prokhira and Matoria grabbed her arms and held her firmly. Yon stood by the door, ready to die rather than let his daughter out of the house. Maritsa folded her arms under her apron, watching the scene with that enigmatic smile of hers.

"*Valev!*" screamed Paraskitsa, struggling to break free of the women's grip. "Let me go, Auntie! Oh, my God, this is the end of me!"

"Be quiet, just don't be afraid," the "auntie" reassured her, dragging her to the bed.

The next thing Paraskitsa knew, all her skirts were pulled up over her head and the women's strong hands forced her down onto the bed. The girl was wheezing and wriggling like a trapped animal, desperate squeals like those of a pig being slaughtered escaping from under her skirts.

Prokhira waved her hand and Yon rushed to unbolt the door at which people were already banging impatiently from outside. A whole crowd of them tried to force their way in at once, but Yon made determined efforts to contain them. He would let in not more than one or two at a time.

The mob was becoming more and more agitated; everybody wanted to see the witch's tail at once. Those, whose cows had fallen victim to Paraskitsa's witchery, were especially adamant. Galchan struggled to get into the house ahead of all the rest, but the young women would not let him through because he was a man and it just did not seem proper to them. This was driving Yoch crazy with fury, for the whole idea was his in the first place, and he kept making his way to the door, pushing people apart and swearing, his mouth foaming.

Yon admitted only women, two or three of them at a time. They would come up to the bed, feel and look over the bared half of Paraskitsa's body, diligently and thoroughly, as though they were examining a cow at a market and, disappointed by the results, give way to others who were already coming in. Paraskitsa had stopped resisting and shouting. She had realized that she was not going to be taken out to be drowned or burned alive. She had understood what was wanted of her and lay still and silent. And people followed in an endless procession like pilgrims, eyeing and touching her. Paraskitsa did not see them but, by their voices and touches, recognized the visitors. This was Auntie Anita who lived near the cemetery, and that one

was old Domnika, the mother of Yordoka, one of the village's finest boys. Paraskitsa was suffocating, she found it difficult to breathe under the pile of skirts but she did not dare to struggle, realizing that if she did, the two women's strong arms would instantly press her back onto the bed. And there she remained, doubled up in an unusually uncomfortable position, lying quietly and with resignation, receiving all those guests visiting her, as though it was her birthday.

In the meantime, a riotous din rose from outside. Yoch Galchan stoutly defended his author's rights, insisting that he be admitted to the house. In the end, his case was referred to the most respectable ladies who, after brief deliberations, decreed to make an exception for Yoch in recognition of his important role in today's memorable event. Yoch was allowed to go inside.

Flushed and excited, he hurried to the bed glaring with his oily eyes all the way from the piled up skirts down to Paraskitsa's neat stockings. Visibly disappointed, he stood over Paraskitsa for a little while, slapped her lightly and spoke with authority, "No, not a witch!..."

At this moment Prokhira and Maritsa let the girl free. She hastily disentangled her head from the skirts, and although her face was burning with shame, her heart was throbbing with joy and a sweet tranquility spread throughout her entire body. Now she knew for sure, as did all the others, that she was not a witch.

*Chernihiv*  
*June, 1898*

## THE CHRYSALIS

Triste comme un beau jour  
pour un coeur sans espoir.

F. Coppée

The one-horse wagon with open sides bumped and jolted mercilessly each time its wheels missed the ruts. Because of the continuous jolting, Raisa Levitska's chest began to ache. This was even for the better, for it distracted the local teacher from her unpleasant thoughts. She had not calmed down yet after the recent incident with the priest. She felt like the hot fragment of a bomb which had just exploded. Before her eyes, as if on purpose, stood the lean, Jesuit face of the priest, distorted with rage as she drove him publicly out of the schoolhouse. Well, she could not have done otherwise. When his constant denunciations, his campaign against the *zemstvo*\* school, his instigation of the peasants against her and interference with her work became unbearable, her nerves had failed and she had made a scene in the presence of the schoolchildren peasants. The priest went to complain to the school inspector and his superiors, while his wife burst into the school with her housemaid, broke all the flower pots there and, glaring with her green cat-like eyes and choking with abuse, rushed with clenched fists at the "impudent teacher". She would have beaten Raisa if the latter had not escaped. Then came the inspector, a member of the *zemstvo* board. An investigation and questions followed and the whole affair ended in her transfer to another school. She was going there now. As soon as examinations were over, she had packed her poor belongings and, not wishing to stay a single day longer in the same village with the hateful priest, had set off at once. Although she was already far from the site of her troubles, that disgusting incident was still repressing her like a nightmare, irritating her and raising anger in her heart. In her thirteen years of service, this was her second transfer because of conflicts with local priests. And who could tell what was in store for her at the new place where — Oh, God! — there would certainly be a priest and his wife.

Fortunately, the jolting and pangs in her chest kept breaking the thread of her bitter thoughts.

\* A local administration body in czarist Russia

The wind raised the white sand lying along the road, and Raisa gazed at the dust which drifted like smoke and veiled the distant strip of forest. The pretty birches waved their green braids in the wind like wood-nymphs. On both sides of the road, shaggy squat willows clutched at the earth with their naked roots like predatory birds clawing their prey. It was May, but it was sultry like a summer's day. Long white clouds were creeping like gossamer across the hot sky, while in the west something fearful was rising, growing in size, and uttering distant rumbling threats. Raisa kept casting worried looks in that direction, wondering whether they would manage to escape the storm. At the very thought of it, she grew cold and shuddered. The driver, in response to her requests, clicked his tongue at the nag and applied his whip to its expanded ribs, but it was of little help.

They entered a grove. It was quiet here, and there was a smell of resin in the air. The black needles of the pines stood out like embroidery against the light green of the birches. In the places where the birch, which had supplanted the pine, let through the rays of the sun, the whole scene seemed to be flooded with green Bengal light. Every now and then they came across a blossoming wild pear-tree growing by the road, or a bird-cherry bush with the sweet fragrance of its delicate white tassels.

As they rode out of the grove, they saw large, gently descending fields, and their wagon rolled along the newly-made narrow road which meandered across the green of some winter crop toward the village.

Finally, they reached the village. It lay in a depression surrounded by marshlands, concealing its shabby cottages with the branches of spreading willows. From a distance, it seemed that hidden behind the willows were not cottages, but stacks of black rotting straw.

While the wagon rolled along a street, Raisa looked around curiously. The cottages were mostly old, black, with moss-grown roofs, also black. The yards were muddy, with greenish puddles. The street also glistened with pools. Everything here bore the stamp of poverty. It seemed to Raisa that both the houses and the people, always digging in the ground, had acquired an earthy color and become part of inanimate nature. A man walked along the muddy street, rolling like an uprooted oak stump: he had a swarthy face with skin like tree bark, strong chapped hands covered with soil, and stumpy legs. A young woman ran out of a

black cottage and stood watching the strange traveler with shielded eyes. The sun played on her bronze legs as on a willow trunk leaning over a fence. Logs were scattered along the street and cottage walls, and the old men sitting on some of them with hanging heads could hardly be distinguished from the black mass of wood. Dirty children swarmed along the fences, mingling with dogs and pigs. Lean, long-legged piglets with muddied bellies also wandered along the street. The air was filled with the stench of manure. Women in tucked-up skirts, revealing their red stork-like legs, were slapping their laundry paddles in a small lake. Outside the village, beyond the common land, a different kind of village could be seen. It was densely populated by grey crosses, under which toilers of the land who had turned to ashes were sleeping a peaceful sleep. Still farther, stretched a flat grey-green field on which the red skirt of a working woman looked like a lonely flower of the field.

As they passed the bend in the road, a white church could be seen from behind the tall luxuriant maple trees. Raisa's heart was suddenly wrung and she compressed her lips. Well, it would be not her first encounter with a priest and she would fight back if she had to.

The school was opposite the church, across the road. It was a new, high, iron-roofed building, perched on a hill like a magpie on a fence. The wagon turned into the large yard overgrown with knot-grass.

The school appeared to be locked up. Raisa walked around it and looked into a window, only to see emptiness staring back at her. She shook the padlock on the back door — no signs of life. A man in the street stood leaning on the fence, watching all Raisa's moves.

"Can you tell me, please, who keeps the key to the school? I'm the new teacher," said Raisa.

"It must be with Tetyana, the caretaker... Go and fetch Tetyana, and make it quick! She's weeding her stepmother's kitchen garden."

His words were followed by the rapid patter of bare feet as something white bolted down the street.

Raisa sat on the bench, waiting for the caretaker. The place was quiet and deserted. The white church, surrounded by luxuriant greenery, made an impressive sight. The unhitched horse was grazing in the large green yard, while the driver was lying in the shade under the wagon.

More than half an hour had passed before a gate slammed and Tetyana appeared on the path leading to the schoolhouse. A skinny old maid, she stood clutching the key in her freshly soiled fingers and eyeing Raisa with amazement.

"How d'you do?..."

"How do you do? Open the door, will you... I've come to teach here."

Tetyana, striding like a soldier in her skirt, hurried to the school door, let Raisa in, and then ran to the wagon for the teacher's baggage.

As Raisa went in, the stale air with a strong smell of pine hit her face and she held her breath. Her steps echoed in the empty classrooms while she quickly opened the windows. Warm, greenish light filled the house, and the blue of the sky looked in through the open windows.

Meanwhile, Tetyana brought in Raisa's belongings and some water for the teacher to wash, fumbled in a sack for the samovar, and presently pulled it by the "ears" with such vigor that the poor thing rattled.

"Shall I prepare the samovar?"

"Please do."

While the caretaker busied herself with the samovar, Raisa went to inspect the school.

It was a newly built, spacious house. The sunlight pouring through the large windows heated the high walls so much that the resin stood out on the pine boards. The yellow painted desks, gathered in one corner, were covered with dust. A big fly was beating against a window pane, buzzing plaintively. A spider had spread his web between the black bookcase and the blackboard. Raisa made the rounds of all the rooms and each met her with emptiness and silence, as if the schoolhouse were an empty beehive which someone had overturned near the house and left lying in the sun. The teacher's flat consisted of two tiny rooms, of which the sleeping-room was especially small. It could hardly contain the bed, small table and chest. As Raisa lay on the bed, she had the impression that she was at the bottom of a deep well, because the unplastered pine-board walls, high and too close to one another, looked like the walls of a well. The second room was only a little larger and, from its windows, the white church could be seen amidst the green of the tall trees.

While the teacher ate, the caretaker stood by the door studying her and her belongings carefully. Finally, she

grew bold enough to sit down on the edge of the sofa and begin a conversation, doing her utmost to learn from Raisa and to tell her as much as possible.

Raisa learned that the school had been empty since Lent, when the former teacher had fallen ill and died soon afterward. It was there, in that small room where Raisa was to sleep, that the lonely teacher had suffered. Were it not for the priest's old lady, there would have been no-one to close her eyes.

"Is the priest so old?"

"No, the reverend isn't old. He's a widower and has a daughter in her teens. I said 'old lady', meaning the reverend's mother... He's a rich man and has a big farm. There's no landlords around here and no other chance to make some money, so people work for whatever he pays them. But mostly they work off their sins... Now he's quarrelling with the deacon because they can't share the collections..."

Here followed all the details of the quarrel: what and when the priest had said to the deacon and what the deacon had answered, and what had come of it all, and how the incident had affected the lame Semenikha, whose husband was a cousin of the deacon's godfather...

Tetyana's story, spreading like ripples from a stone cast into water, involved a lot of people and most remote sections of the village. It confused so many details of different aspects of life that Raisa could not make head nor tail of it and, finally, she stopped listening to the talkative caretaker.

She arranged her things in the two rooms somehow, and went to bed early. But sleep wouldn't come to her. The candle flickered on the table at the head of her bed as she lay stretched out under the fresh canvas sheet, her eyes wandering over the pine-board walls of her small room. In the dim light, they resembled those of a well even more than before. Raisa was at the bottom of that well, while the wide world with its life began only up there, where the light could hardly reach.

Life... She was thinking about it now. She was in her thirty-first year already, but did she get much out of life? She had enjoyed it only in her last years at the clerical school, when seminarians, pretending to be her relatives, brought her banned books, talked with her about love for the people, about politics, and even told her that there was

no God... She had been afraid, but enjoyed it. She would find some inconspicuous place and read to herself until her head ached, trembling from her new thoughts. She had such a strong feeling of love for the suffering "people" that, at first, she even wanted to die for them, but then she changed her mind and decided to live on. She considered herself superior to her schoolmates and the other people around her; she felt a wave of unusual vigor surging in her heart. She was eager to free herself from the confinement of the school walls and go to the "people" to serve them. Finally, it happened. Her father, a poor old deacon, took her home, to the country. However, her beloved suffering *people* were not to be found here, for they were far away, in Russia. Here, in the village, there were only *muzhyks* \*, whom she knew well, but couldn't say she loved very much. Life in her large, poor family, with too many mouths to feed, could hardly be enjoyed. True, her father went out of his way to dress Raisa no worse than the priest's daughter, to give her the opportunity of attending weddings and holy festivals where she was supposed to find herself a suitor from amongst the seminary graduates. However, a suitor was not to be found, for the girl was neither rich nor beautiful. Life at home was not getting any better, so, after two years with her father and having failed his hopes, Raisa had to leave to become a teacher. Thirteen years of teaching! For thirteen years, she had been withering like a drying apple. At first, she had found consolation in the thought that someone needed her in this world, for she was serving a noble cause. However, this theory faded until it had faded away. Her life, dull and colorless, moved in a narrow rut, offering nothing to make her happy. She had developed into a one-sided personality, her interests limited by her profession. Once outside her field, she felt like a fly in the autumn. That was exactly what she called herself — "an autumn fly". She had asked herself more than once whether she liked school. Yes, she did like school and her work, at which she was losing her voice, wheezing, straining her chest, and waging an endless war against schoolchildren, their parents, the priest, and her superiors. She liked it all as the peasant likes ploughing, harvesting, or the hard bench on which his tired body rests.

\* In czarist Russia, a peasant; sometimes used as a derogatory term

However, this was not enough for her heart. It's true that more than once it opened under the fickle rays of happiness. But blooming lonely, unnoticed and uncalled, without any hope of dropping its seeds on good soil, it had wilted and withered, as had her face, breasts and hands. In fact, her whole body was like a flower of the fields which had dried in a herbarium.

Finally, her fate had brought her to this strange village and she, more lonely than ever before, was tossing from side to side at the bottom of her well. She was unable to sleep and terrified by the thought that, sooner or later, she would have to leave this well to meet with reality, a reality in which the central place, this time, would be occupied by such a trifle as her relations with the priest.

The day was breaking when Raisa fell asleep. A strange voice at the window woke her up.

"Yesterday, I saw something roll up to the schoolhouse, so I told the reverend it must be the new teacher. He sent me to find out. 'Go to Tetyana,' he says, 'and ask her who, where from, and why....'"

Raisa, as if stung, sprang out of her bed and knocked on the window. It was none of his business! This was not a parochial school, it belonged to the *zemstvo*. She didn't know and didn't wish to know him. She wasn't taking orders from him, he only was a teacher of catechism, and that only during vacations.

"How impudent of him," thought Raisa, excited.

After several days, Sunday came. Raisa did not go to church. On purpose. She wandered about her empty rooms, reread her books, sat under a tree in the orchard, or met with schoolchildren who brought her wild strawberries to make the acquaintance of their new teacher. There was no place where she could spend her vacations. Her father had died long ago and she had no wish to go to her relatives.

The priest gave no sign of existence and Raisa calmed down a little. Most of all, she liked to sit by the window of her "sitting room", through which she could see the white church amidst the thick greenery. Sometimes, when the sunset was clear, the church assumed a rosy hue, while the tree-tops seemed to be gilded.

One evening, while Raisa was admiring the play of light on the church building, a tall figure suddenly appeared in front of her window. Raisa's heart fell. She sprang away from the window and rushed out, but then remembered that

both doors led into the yard, which meant a sure meeting with the priest. Raisa ran through a classroom, opened a window, and jumped out into the orchard. The priest tried the door, paused for a while and, having rounded the schoolhouse, caught Raisa standing by the wall.

Both of them were confused.

He took off his straw hat, the color of embarrassment creeping up his face and reaching the bald spot on his head.

She, bent forward and pale, stared at him with scared and angry eyes.

He had come to make her acquaintance. He knew she had arrived and had expected to see her in church, Sunday, but she hadn't appeared in the house of God... She was a newcomer and knew no one here... So, if need be, would she please come to him, her nearest neighbor. Although she worked for the *zemstvo*, he was of the opinion that church and school should go together.

He did not notice the angry glow in her eyes when she darted a look at him at his last words, and continued:

"My mother and I would be glad to see you at our place... My daughter, Tasya, will come home soon on vacation... You'll have company then..."

One question worried Raisa: should she invite the priest in? She came from the clergy, who had instilled in her a certain respect for the clerical order, but a particularly unfriendly feeling toward the guest got the better of her.

"The devil with him," Raisa decided finally and continued listening.

Soon, the guest was tired of standing. His eyes searched for a place to sit and, after a while, he slowly carried his womanish figure, wrapped in a white cassock, to the bench in the orchard.

Raisa also sat down on the edge of the bench.

Within the half-hour spent in the orchard, Father Vasyl managed to set forth his complaints about his drunken and lazy congregation which did not care about the church. He inquired of Raisa who she was and where she had come from, as well as mildly reproached the late teacher for having been unable to instill the spirit of humility in the younger generation.

Raisa's answers were curt and reluctant, but Father Vasyl, being in a complacent mood, did not notice it. Taking his leave, he repeated his invitation for Raisa to visit him.

Raisa rushed back into the house, her cheeks burning, and an unpleasant feeling of being inhospitable pricking her heart. "I should have invited him into the house... Ah, the devil with him," she thought again. "But what if he takes offence? All right, if you please!... I don't want to have any contact with him..."

However, their relations were not to break off.

Once, the priest's old mother sent her a bowl of raspberries. Another time, when Raisa felt unwell and Tetyana had informed the priest about it, he gave her some quinine and later inquired from Tetyana about the teacher's health.

For all that, Raisa appeared neither in the church, nor in the priest's house, though she was certain that the godly-minded family felt offended. "Let them be!" she would say stubbornly and turn her eyes away from the window through which the white church, embraced by the green giants, was looking at her.

May had grown into the scorching days of June. One day seemed especially hot. From the very morning, Raisa had a feeling of alarm. "There'll certainly be a storm," she thought, terrified. Indeed, the oppressively hot, though calm, day quickly changed into dusk and darkness began to fall. The heavens and the earth became gloomy, and a black strip appeared on the horizon. Soon, there was a flash against the strip, as if a match had flared and gone out at once. After a time, a weak light showed in another place, and a flash followed the first one. The clouds kept winking at each other. The streaks of light, at first weak and quiet, grew in size and intensity. Now it seemed that, behind the black strip, a wave of fiery sea rose and fell only to rise again in another place. Suddenly, there was a wink beside the previous ones. The lightning faded, but the flashes increased their tempo. The black sky was incessantly winking with lightning, grinning wryly.

Raisa grew more and more nervous. The clouds could bypass the village and then the storm would be reduced to distant flashes of lightning. But it could also be otherwise and, as luck would have it, she had dismissed Tetyana and remained alone in the empty schoolhouse. Raisa lit a lamp in front of the icon and hid in a corner, far from the windows, starting each time they went suddenly blue from the bright lightning and the pieces of furniture, caught in the light, seemed to scurry away as if from some secret meeting.

Night was falling fast.

Black clouds grew on the horizon, moving ever closer over the black land. It became pitch-dark outside, as in a chimney. The flashes grew brighter, changing from red to dazzling white. Each time the lightning ripped the veil of the night like a torrent of white lava, the black outlines of poplars, cottages and windmills stood out on the horizon in fiery frames. The silence was saturated with alarm, even horror, and the warm air was still, like a frightened child. A giant monster seemed to be closing in upon the hushed earth, opening its fiery jaws and showing its black teeth. The trees trembled as it breathed and every living thing hid from it. The monster was moving ever closer, its mouth opening wider and wider, breathing out flames more and more frequently. A roar was already coming from far away. Suddenly, something awful happened. The still air quivered, whirled, jerked aside, then rose above the earth and, gripped with maddening horror, rushed away... It sped through the darkness in blind haste, whistling and hissing from fear, shattering its breast against walls and fences, sucking in sand, leaves, trees — everything in its path. The black monster sped after it, still threatening the earth from above and belching out flames...

Suddenly, a terrible roar shattered the air.

The earth shook, the window panes rattled, the girl's heart missed a beat.

Raisa screamed. Even before, every peal of thunder had made her shift uneasily in her corner, groaning softly. Her wide-open eyes and pallid, suddenly haggard face, glowed in the dark like phosphorus. She felt that her hair had become rigid like wire, and something cold had touched it. Her hands and feet were ice-cold and an alarming lump was rising in her throat. But when the cannonade began and the heavenly salvos rolled over her head, Raisa cowered in the corner, numb with terror, waiting for the disaster. The icon lamp went out, and Raisa felt too weak to get up and light it again. Meanwhile, the reports of the heavenly cannons became more frequent. Fiery arrows, red dragons and balls of fire criss-crossed the sky. A salvo that resounded on one side was immediately echoed on the other. The rolling peal of thunder was so powerful that the earth shook, the walls of the schoolhouse trembled, and the desks behind the wall tore from their places in wild fear and stampeded with racket across the empty room.

The cannonade was long and persistent. Then, there was a lull, as if the storm lurked, gathering strength for another onset. Suddenly the whole sky was ablaze; then it split in the middle and fell on the earth with a terrible crash. The church rocked, the walls of the schoolhouse tumbled down, and then everything around became dark and quiet.

\* \* \*

"*Panna* \* Raisa, are you alive?" she heard a strange voice ask.

A match flared and, in its faint light, she saw the stout figure of Father Vasyl in his white cassock. Water was streaming down from his huge canvas umbrella plated with copper at the seams, and his high boots were covered with mud. With his arrival, the damp freshness of the summer rain rushed into the stuffy room and the bracing air brought Raisa to her senses.

Seeing that the teacher had nearly fainted and noticing her pallid, almost yellow face and wide-open eyes, Father Vasyl exclaimed:

"Goodness gracious, what's happened to you?"

He lit the candle hurriedly, brought it to Raisa's face and repeated anxiously:

"What's happened to you?"

Raisa stared at him with round eyes, though she seemed to recognize her guest.

Father Vasyl put together three finger tips from his plump, womanish hand and, fanning Raisa's face with the damp cold of his sleeve, made the broad sign of the cross over her.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost..."

Raisa rose to her feet, ran her frightened eyes around the room, and asked in a low voice:

"The storm... Is it over?"

Of course, it was. There had been a fine shower, but it had cleared up already. And what a storm it had been!... After the last bolt of lightning, he thought the church was on fire and ran out to see, but it turned out that nothing had happened, though the lightning had struck somewhere near the church or the school. Then he remembered that Raisa

\* Equivalent of "Miss", now an anachronism in the Ukrainian language

was alone, as she had dismissed Tetyana, and he thought of going to see if anything had happened to her, or maybe frightened her... All the more so that the school door was open. And that's what he had seen... Well, how did she feel?.. Better?.. Thank God!.. Only it was stuffy in the room, the air was not healthy and it would be better to open the windows... What? She was afraid?... But the sky was quite clear and starry, and the air outside was clean and still... Wasn't it?... She'd feel better now. Could he be of any help? Perhaps he should send for Tetyana, considering that Raisa had not completely recovered? Certainly, he wouldn't send anyone if she didn't want him to, though he thought it would be better if he did... He would send her some herbal beer instead. Half a glass of it would return color to her face and calm her heart. And now he wished her good night and hoped that she'd be quite well by tomorrow.

As he was taking his leave, the air of tranquility created by his plump hand, the white cassock enveloping his womanish figure, his grey eyes, and even the bald spot on his head were so comforting that Raisa wouldn't let him go so soon. She was grateful to him, anyhow.

"Couldn't you stay for a while?" she asked timidly, still holding his hand. "Why are you in such a hurry? The samovar must be ready, I lit it before the storm... We could have some tea..."

Before he could answer, she slipped out into the dark of the adjacent room.

The samovar was bubbling cheerfully and steaming. The light of the lamp under the white shade gilded the new, pine-board walls. The aroma of the fresh tea blended with the fragrance of the ozonized air, and the stars were looking in through the open windows. The glasses tinkled in Raisa's busy hands. Her thin figure, dressed in white, flew about the room like a feather in the wind, her dark eyes shone, her withered cheeks gained color, and there was a note in her voice which suggested that something of the electric storm that had raged over the earth remained in her frail body.

Father Vasyl was sitting with his legs crossed and, letting out jets of smoke from his Russian cigarette, wondered at the sudden change in the teacher's mood, though this change pleased him. There were other things that pleased him, too: the golden shine of the clean samovar, the

milkwhite lampshade, the pine boards of the walls, the hostess's dress, and the starry sky.

Raisa had not quite recovered from the storm yet. It was obvious by the light tremor in her hand as she put the glass before her guest, by her nervous, too quick movements, shining eyes, and her exhilaration. It was easy for her to talk with Father Vasyl now, as if he were an old friend.

It turned out that she knew his late wife. Fanya was two grades her senior, but Raisa remembered her very well. So she had died... Eight years had passed since then, but Raisa hadn't even known about it.

"My only consolation now is my dear girl, Tasya... She'll come tomorrow or the day after..."

When Father Vasyl spoke about his daughter, a kind expression appeared on his face and his grey eyes glowed.

He was glad to have someone to tell about his pet and Raisa showed interest in the girl.

Many common acquaintances were mentioned during the conversation, which presented many surprises to Raisa. She couldn't imagine, for instance, that the pock-marked, lanky seminary student, red-haired like a Red Danish cow, the one that used to lisp the ideas of Feuerbach to her, now wore a calotte and a pectoral cross and had been promoted to the rank of provost.

"You don't say!" she couldn't believe her ears.

"So help me... Don't you read the *Eparchial Gazette*?"

No, she had never read the *Eparchial Gazette*, so he promised to bring her one.

And so their conversation, crowded with memories and news of deaths, promotions, and the happy or sad destinies of their common acquaintances, went on peacefully to the cheerful bubbling of the samovar, evoking long forgotten faces and events, the feelings and cherished hopes they had lived through...

After Father Vasyl had left, Raisa plunged into her bed at the bottom of her well. However, she did not notice its high walls any more, nor the darkness fluttering its wings over the well's top. The stout figure, the calm face with the glowing eyes, and the plump hand with the three fingers pressed together over her brow still stood before her eyes...

Two days later, a twelve-year-old girl, lop-eared, with a round face sticking between her angular shoulders, came running into the schoolhouse. Her quick dark eyes reminded Raisa of Fanya and she guessed at once that the girl was

Fanya's daughter. The poorly cut percale dress could not conceal her stocky figure, the white clinging stockings accentuated her thick calves, and the yellow back-straps of her brown shoes flapped like pig ears.

Tasya dashed past Raisa without noticing her, and ran on through all the classrooms, clattering with her shoes and looking into every nook and cranny, as if she had returned to her own home and were inspecting it to see if everything was in order. Finally, she ran into Raisa and stopped in confusion. But not for long. After a few minutes, she was showering Raisa with all kinds of questions.

Did she have a sister? Were the cherries ripe in the orchard? Did she have the same head teacher at school? What kind of jam did she like? As for her, Tasya, she liked all kinds of it, and so on, and so forth.

Tasya soon made friends with Raisa. She never let go of Raisa's hands and kept inviting her to her place until Raisa agreed.

When they entered the priest's spacious house, there was nobody in. Presently, Father Vasyl appeared and was very glad to see Raisa in his house.

"Mother! Mother!" he called to the next room, wiping his perspiring bald head. "We have a guest..."

There was frequent clattering like that of a goat walking on a wooden floor. After a while, an old woman, dressed in black, appeared in the doorway, holding a walking stick which had produced that peculiar sound.

"Mother... mother..." she mocked her son. "A guest... What kind of a guest is she? Just a teacher... Might have come here long ago..."

She resumed her clattering and, paying no attention to Raisa, crossed the room, sat down on a chair and muttered:

"Mother... mother... teacher... teacher."

Despite the unfriendly welcome, Raisa liked this old-fashioned woman in black at once. Her head was wrapped in a black kerchief, and showing from it was a baked potato rather than a face.

"Mother grumbles at every one of us," apologized Father Vasyl.

"Grumbles... grumbles..." echoed the old woman. Then she rose, clattered across the room and sat on another chair, muttering under her breath.

It was obvious that nobody in the family paid attention to her.

Meanwhile, Raisa watched Tasya in the next room. The girl squatted before the heating stove, pushed her hands into the soot pit and, after fumbling about a long while, pulled out a small jar of jam. Carefully removing the paper cover, she plunged an ash-soiled finger inside and then quickly put it into her mouth. She licked off the jam with such delight that her small dark eyes shone like those of a little animal and her protruding ears were red, as if someone had just pulled them.

Father Vasyl boastfully showed Raisa around his farm. He led her to the apple-trees he had planted himself and spoke of them in favorable terms. Then he let her smell the air of the stable and see the mud of the cowshed, and finally called all members of his clucking, gabbling and quacking kingdom. But of all living things that crowded around Raisa in the large yard of the priest's farm, the most lively and curious was Tasya, whose small stocky figure darted among the calves or cut into a flock of geese, causing an indescribable clamor.

Then they drank tea on the veranda in the quiet sunset. The big and peaceful figure of Father Vasyl, his old mother's incessant muttering, which sounded like the purl of water running through the rain-pipe, the kid-like liveliness of Tasya, and the simple conversation and atmosphere filled Raisa's heart with serenity. The bishops, looking out through the open door from the portraits hanging over the antique mahogany furniture, also seemed to belong to their small company, one in which Raisa did not feel lonely at all.

\* \* \*

So, the ice was broken; the acquaintance had been established.

Raisa was glad to see Tasya calling at her place early in the morning, urging her to go out to the woods or the field. Sometimes they took Father Vasyl along. He had to pick mushrooms with them, bending his well-fed figure in its white cassock only with effort. When he was tired and his long hair became wet with perspiration, they allowed him to rest, coming often to watch him lying on the grass and puffing at his cigarette, and bringing him the mushrooms they had gathered.

Raisa soon won over the priest's mother. She made jam

for her, helped her in the bakery, looked after the hired women. This pleased the old woman and she expressed her feeling by grumbling at Raisa, just as she did at the members of her family.

Now all four of them became like a family.

Most of all, they enjoyed each other's company during Sunday dinners. As soon as the church service was over, Tasya would drag Raisa to her home and the teacher would have to go to the kitchen to prepare some dainty for the little sweet-tooth. Flushed from the heat, her sleeves rolled up, she would rush into the dining-room, clatter with the plates, help the housemaid to set the table, and chase out Father Vasyl, who was usually lolling on the sofa reading his newspaper.

"Go to your room, please. You're in the way here," she would cry cheerfully.

At dinner, she would have her usual argument with Father Vasyl over the number of glasses he had drunk.

"You've had five already!" Raisa would exclaim with indignation.

"There's a teacher for you. You can't even count to five. I've had four, not five..."

"Yes, five... I don't allow you to drink any more. You heard me!"

"Oh!"

"Oh!" Raisa would repeat mockingly and snatch the bottle off the table.

Father Vasyl would defend his rights and declare war on Raisa, turning from the servant of God into that of Mars.

Then a terrible commotion would start at the table. Tasya would scream like a stuck pig, the old lady would grumble, crossing from one place to another and clattering her walking stick indignantly so that the plates would rattle on the table.

It usually ended in the triumph of the weaker side but, actually, every one would end up satisfied, in spite of the fact that Tasya's appetite, which only grew with the fight, would practically deprive them of the dessert.

They would go together to the hay meadow, the grain-field, or the apiary. Father Vasyl was gradually getting used to the new teacher. Sometimes he sent her to oversee the farm hands weeding the sugar-beet field, or asked her to take dinner to the haymakers. With these pleasant and already familiar daily cares, time passed unnoticed for

Raisa, all the more so because she felt quite at home in Father Vasyl's family. At the end of summer, Tasya went back to school. This saddened everybody. Father Vasyl visited the school more frequently now to talk with Raisa about his little darling. He also brought the *Eparchial Gazette*, which he was too lazy to read by himself. So they read it together. First of all, Father Vasyl opened to the page about current events. The names mentioned there were all familiar to him and, besides, the page contained descriptions of various events and changes which had taken place in the life of the local clergy. At first, Raisa pretended to be curious out of politeness, not to offend Father Vasyl, but later became keen on the matter and showed real interest in the life of her former seminary acquaintances. Sometimes, the mail was delivered in Father Vasyl's absence, and then Raisa would be the first to read the current events and wait impatiently for Father Vasyl to come to share the news. As soon as he appeared, she would meet him with a question.

"Did you hear that Father Arkady was transferred to another parish? And Father Feognost received a bursery?"

"Really? How do you know?"

"Here, read this..."

And they would put their heads together over the newspaper so that Raisa's dark lock would tickle the bald top of Father Vasyl's head.

Soon Father Vasyl found something to keep him busy at school. Parents brought their children to be enrolled and Raisa used the opportunity to get acquainted with the villagers.

That's when Father Vasyl proved to be very helpful. He knew every peasant, his life, character and thoughts, his wife and children, and his riches, perishable and imperishable. Father Vasyl would sprawl in a chair and say in a commanding voice:

"This one may be enrolled. His mother is a pious woman and never misses a service... Oh! And you, Ivan, also brought your boy to school? You want your son to be as smart as his father? No, don't enroll him, I know him too well."

"But Father, have a heart, I'm not to blame for your trampled crops..."

Here an argument would begin over damaged crops or stolen rye. Father Vasyl would grow angry, sputter, flush,

and insist that the boy should not be admitted. This would irritate Raisa, but she did not think it proper to remind the priest of her rights in public. When she learned that the villagers had fallen into the habit of going to the priest and begging him to enroll their children even before seeing her, she grew indignant and told him that it didn't suit her. Father Vasyl, however, managed to calm her down. It turned out that she even had to thank him. She couldn't but be grateful to him and follow his advice! There was nothing Father Vasyl didn't know or couldn't do. When the leaking roof of the schoolhouse needed repair, Father Vasyl found the roofers immediately. When the teacher needed to stock firewood for the winter, Father Vasyl saw to it that it was dry. Whenever Raisa thought of going to the *zemstvo* or some other place in town, Father Vasyl offered her his horses, and so on.

Raisa was really grateful to him for his innumerable small services and advice, without which she would have felt much less comfortable in the strange village.

Besides, she liked him. In her opinion, he was handsome. His high brow spoke of honesty and nobility, his grey eyes emanated sincerity, casting a soft light over his whole face. Besides, he was unhappy, having been a widower for such a long time. At times, she had a feeling of tenderness in her heart, of maternal concern for his ruined life. She would rather be indulgent with him than with anyone else.

On Tasya's departure, Raisa arranged with the priest's mother about boarding. The three of them had their daily meals together. This strengthened their friendship and increased their feeling of family. Raisa even exerted a certain influence on the priest. Gradually, she reduced the traditional number of glasses Father Vasyl used to empty at dinner until, finally, he gave up drinking altogether. When he told her how much he could drink and how much he had drunk at times, her heart filled with pride at the thought that her influence was so strong as to have eradicated such a deep-rooted addiction.

They would spend long autumn evenings together at the round table in the priest's dining-room, illuminated by the dim light of the oil-lamp. Accompanied by the grumbling of the old lady, they had endless talks about Tasya, recalling the smallest details of her childhood, her pranks and the funnily twisted words she had used. They made plans for her education and dreamt of her future. The atmosphere

in the dining-room grew warmer, more family-like. The cold autumn darkness, enveloping the house and pattering on the windows with a fine rain, isolated them from the rest of the world. They felt as if they were on a desolate island and this brought them even closer together.

Sometimes they read dragged-out novels, pulled out of the dusty heap in the store-room, with pages missing at the end. Raisa would do the reading, while Father Vasyl would waddle up and down the room, his hands deep in the pockets of his cassock, his head bent thoughtfully, his shaggy, bear-like shadow crawling on the walls.

The priest's old mother was usually dozing. At times, she would pick on some word and start grumbling and clattering with her stick, working herself into such a state that Raisa would have to stop reading. They would soothe her, and then the reader's voice would drone on, the bear-like shadow would continue crawling on the walls, and the patter of the autumn rain outside would be heard again.

The evenings on which Father Vasyl read his Sunday sermons, which he wrote himself, were the most festive ones. He would draw the smoking lamp closer to himself, tuck the ends of his unruly hair behind his ears, and turn into a real despot. The slightest noise, the shortest, even praising remark from his old mother would simply enrage him. As he read his creation, his serene eyes would flash fire and he would spit out a multitude of vigorous words in his vibrating, somewhat snuffling, voice. His cheeks flushed slightly and a deep furrow crossing his forehead between the eyebrows, Father Vasyl would castigate his parishioners like a prophet from the Old Testament. Thieving, disobedience, inebriety, indifference, destruction of soul and body would hang over their heads like a thick cloud, contraposed with an even more gloomy, more fearful one promising infernal punishment, smelling of sulphur and breathing fire. The stout figure of the inspired preacher would soar between those black clouds like an innocent white dove, arresting the sight of the spellbound women.

"I'll show them, I'll haul them over the coals!" Father Vasyl would threaten his imaginary congregation.

Although all this would seem beautiful and powerful, some passages would not satisfy Raisa. It would seem to her that some of his thoughts should be clarified and developed, while others should be deleted. Besides, his allegories were not always clear enough and consistent.

Father Vasyl would reject any criticism. What was written, was written.

"I won't change a single word!" he would rage.

Raisa would stand her ground and give her arguments. A heated discussion would follow, in which a careless word would escape Father Vasyl's lips and hurt Raisa. It usually ended in Raisa's taking a pencil and making her insertions and corrections, to which Father Vasyl would have to agree in the long run.

On Sunday, Raisa would run to the church earlier, anticipating the sermon impatiently. She would carefully observe the effect it produced on the congregation, especially the passages which she had changed: women would seem to blow their noses with greater feeling, and men's faces would assume more intelligent expressions.

The sermon would seem so solemn to Raisa and Father Vasyl would seem worthy of his triumph. She, poor teacher, would also bask in his glory, for a part of her self would influence masses too. This would raise her in her own eyes.

Gradually and imperceptibly, Raisa grew attached to Father Vasyl.

She especially felt this on the day when Father Vasyl visited the hishop or attended ecclesiastical congresses and she had to spend evenings alone. She would feel melancholy, wandering about her clean rooms and not knowing what to do with herself. On such occasions, the schoolhouse would seem to be a coffin made of pine boards. Being at a loss on how to pass the time, Raisa would seek refuge with the priest's mother. They would spend the entire evening talking about the noble features of Father Vasyl's character and the ill fate which had made him a widower at such a young age.

She would return home in a strange mood, unable to fall asleep for a long time. Lying on her bed, narrow like that in a nunnery cell, by the dim light of a candle, she would feel a warm wave rising in her heart. In spite of herself, she would remember the thrilling moment of taking communion as a young girl, or a warm, sweet languishing prayer which her believing heart had sent to heaven. It had been a long time ago...

She would like to relive those moments, to enjoy their luxury once more. But was it possible now?

She would lie there hoping that it would come again, that pure feeling of her childhood, and, like a spring shower,

would revive her parched heart. She would hope and, at the same time, be afraid of her hopes.

And it would come.

From the height enveloped in darkness and into which Raisa would stare, a divine bliss would descend upon her lonely heart, and it would burst into blossom, luxurious but short-lived, like the flower of a fern...

She would fall asleep warm and refreshed, ashamed and comforted like a child after long and bitter crying.

Sometimes, after a night like that, she would feel a sharp cold steel inside. It would cut her heart, driving her to despair.

"Enough of those illusions, enough of that self-deception," she would think angrily. "Enough of shutting my eyes to reality... I'm not a child. If my life is a failure, a candy in a bright wrapper won't sugar it up... I want no more of self-deception, no more of futile hopes. I want nothing and nobody... Yes, nothing and nobody..."

At such moments, she wouldn't want to see anybody and wouldn't go to dinner. She would become yellow and thin overnight and the look in her dry, burning eyes would be like a piercing knife.

Father Vasyl, worried by her absence at dinner, would come to the school himself. Raisa would call to him from her bedroom that she didn't want to see him, that she had a headache, but he would go in all the same, sit down in her room, and comfort and entertain her until she had settled down.

And she would have to be grateful to him again.

Raisa took every opportunity to repay Father Vasyl for his kindness. As to his health, she took a special care of it. No sooner would Father Vasyl go hatless in the cold entry hall or into the yard, as he usually did, than Raisa would run after him with his hat and scarf in her hands. At first, Father Vasyl was indifferent to her solicitude, but then it began to annoy him, especially when Raisa made scenes, accusing him of taking too little care of his health.

She could not understand how a man having not only family duties but also social ones, could neglect his health. He, with his honesty, public spirit and powerful gift of speech, could and had to use his influence, to live for the realization of his lofty ideas, for the benefit of his parishioners. He had a mission to carry out.

She used to talk with the villagers about that mission of his. They would agree with what she said, though sometimes would express their surprise at the fact that somehow the reverend's words did not always agree with his deeds. Raisa would grow angry and withdraw into herself with a feeling of disgust for their ingratitude.

However, besides the moments of dissatisfaction, there were also things which pleased her. Before, she would have never believed that such a simple, usual thing as fasting, to which she had never attached any importance, could be a source of consolation. Having her meals with the priest's mother, Raisa also began to observe the fasts. She grew thinner and paler, feeling weakened a little by the fasting which she had to combine with much work at school. But, at the same time, she enjoyed the self-restriction and self-discipline which raised the spirit of her frail body.

Her other source of consolation was the matins. Afraid of oversleeping, she would spring out of her bed in the dark room, chilled overnight, and glance at the clock. It would be too early. The wintry night would look into the windows, the stars would twinkle in the frosty air, the lights lit by early risers in distant cottages would blink like wolves' eyes. She would wander about, cowering in the chilly air, her steps echoing in the rooms dimly lit by the candle. In her black dress (the only color she wore now) and black kerchief thrown over her head, which made her look like a nun, she would run to the church with the first peal of the bell. Inside, the caretaker would be sweeping the floor by the light of two or three yellow patches on it, and the dust left by parishioners would settle on the crudely painted icons and the poor gilding. High above, the gloom would hang, booming plaintively with the chord of the cracked bells. Father Vasyl, smoothing out his hair, would stride across to the altar, hurriedly shaking Raisa's hand as he passed by. Archangel Gabriel on the gates would give way to the priest and he would disappear behind the altar.

Timid lights would gradually appear here and there like stars, and the dark gaunt faces would stand out on the icons. From the entrance, the shuffling of feet would come and the church would be filled with grey vapor streaming out of the mouths and nostrils of the frozen people.

Everything in this atmosphere would adjust Raisa's mood for praying. She would stand behind the choir on its right side, in front of a medieval icon. Behind her, the old deacon

would blow his nose, filling the church with the echoing sound, and drawl out several notes, trying his voice.

The service would begin. Raisa would recollect the prayers she knew; some of them would seem even poetic. On her knees, she would pour out her full heart, gazing at Father Vasyl, as if expecting him to take her prayer to God Himself.

Whispering words of humbleness and supplication, she would not fail to notice the trembling of his red lips under his black moustache and to catch the shining of his grey eyes, and would be sure that his high brow, reaching up to the bald spot on his head, emanated soft light.

And when Father Vasyl, standing in the clouds of blue smoke, would raise his plump hands toward the first ray of the morning sun and appeal to God in his soft, somewhat snuffling baritone, Raisa's soul would soar after his voice to dissolve together with the smoke of the incense in the glory of the Sunday sunrise.

Raisa would be the first to kiss the cross. With sweet pain in her heart and pious trepidation, she would press her lips not only to the cold metal, but also to the soft hand of Father Vasyl, as if with that kiss, heavenly bliss could descend upon her...

Raisa would return home humble and placid. Her body would be even lighter than before the service, her back a little numb, but her breathing easier. She would sit down in her modest room, covering the table with a cloth and eating a wafer, this divine flesh of God, in a mood which she used to know in the bright days of her distant childhood.

Raisa was tired of her work at school. It no longer satisfied her. She was more interested in her new views, feelings and way of thinking. All this was so fresh and unexpected. Not that these changes surprised her. On the contrary, she could not understand how she could have lived a different life for so long, without drinking from the life-giving source which she had been bearing in her own heart. She had been simply robbing herself.

Now, by the grace of God and thanks to the help of Father Vasyl, new paths opened before her and there was new food for her spirit. Raisa felt as if she were a chrysalis growing bright wings under her sheath and gathering strength to fly.

She humbly called herself a disciple of Father Vasyl. It

became necessary for her to see and hear her teacher constantly. Raisa spent all her leisure time in the priest's house. Her day began from the moment she could at last be with Father Vasyl. The rest of it she simply struck out of her life.

On Christmas Eve, Father Vasyl felt slightly unwell. Raisa devoted all her time and strength to him. She was so zealous in fulfilling her duties as a sister of mercy that she even annoyed Father Vasyl.

Once, she woke up at midnight with a distinct and dreadful thought: Father Vasyl was dying. She could swear she had heard a voice say "dying". She was afraid to think of it and, yet, she could see his closed eyes, his pallid face resting on his mother's hand in a black sleeve, and his bare chest heaving in the agony of death.

She hurriedly threw on her clothes and, as if hypnotized, ran out of the schoolhouse. Outside, the bluish snow was sparkling, and everything seemed harder and more distinct in the frosty air. The village around her was quiet and deserted. The snow crunched under her shoes as she ran. (She had forgotten to put on her galoshes.) She saw in her mind's eye the lights in his windows, the slamming doors, the house filled with moans and lamentations, his pallid face against his mother's black sleeve, and his stiff lips whispering her name...

"I'm coming," whispered Raisa in answer, hurrying on.

She ran for her life, though her knees were trembling and her legs nearly gave way. She did not believe she would reach the house in time, and sent her soul ahead. She was sure that if she did come in time there would be a miracle: he would come to life and recover. All her blood rushed to her heart, and it alone lived on, ready for struggle.

Raisa felt that her legs would soon fail her and give way any moment. She mustered her last strength, keeping her legs going with the effort of her whole body. At last, she caught a glimpse of light — first in one window, then in another... Finally, she bumped against the gate in the high fence...

It was closed. Raisa quickly put her eye to a wide crack. The bleak white house stood like a block of ice, staring at her with its sleepy dark windows. It was quiet. Even the dogs were sleeping.

Raisa leaned against the gate and closed her eyes. Instead of joy, she was overwhelmed with exhaustion. It was

as if the blood that had rushed to her heart a few moments before had evaporated into the freezing air, and her breast suddenly felt weak and empty.

When Raisa opened her eyes, she saw white snow in the blue light, the smooth glittering road, and shabby cottages looking like white mushrooms with black stems. She could even distinctly see her footprints in the deep snow. So, it was not a nightmare, but reality.

She was ashamed.

Her head hung, she slowly went back home.

"I hope nobody saw me," she thought, looking around. She was afraid lest somebody had witnessed her night visit. But, the village was quiet and deserted. Only as she passed the church, he nearly dropped to the ground at the sudden clap of the watchman's rattle.

The next day, she learned that Father Vasyl had spent a quiet night and was almost well again...

Raisa's constant attention was beginning to bore Father Vasyl. Whenever he left the house, his clothes were thoroughly checked with the result that he was wrapped up in so many kerchiefs that one might think he was going to the other end of the world. He was not permitted to take off his jacket, which Raisa had knitted herself, until the end of winter. His every cough, however slight, provoked a reproach for his being too careless. Lack of appetite led to her insistent offerings of more, while a good appetite caused pleadings not to overeat. This irritated Father Vasyl. It was a conspiracy against him. What did she want from him, this old maid?

"You're watching my every bite, and don't eat anything yourself. You'll soon become a living mummy."

Father Vasyl's rude tone and bad temper hurt Raisa. However, she humbly tolerated his despotism and did not say a word when he dismissed Tetyana and hired a caretaker he had chosen himself, though this caretaker stayed in the priest's bakery and did nothing at school. She did not protest even when Father Vasyl expelled her two best pupils to settle scores with their parents. But his disregard of her inmost feelings was really painful for Raisa.

All this passed unnoticed to Father Vasyl. However, Raisa saw that he avoided their usual conversations and discussions, which she liked so much.

They still spent evenings together, but these were unlike the evenings they had once known.

After tea, the old lady would settle by the heating stove, put a basket of feathers in front of her, and pluck them, dozing. Raisa would reach for a book and ask timidly:

“Shall I read?”

“No, I don’t want to. I’m sick and tired of it. What is there in those novels?... I don’t know who they’re written for... Maybe for the old maids to make their blood run faster.”

With these words, Father Vasyl would cast a sidelong glance at Raisa and yawn. Then he would shuffle about the room and yawn again with a bored look, or flop on the sofa, also yawning and grunting with pleasure.

His mother, still plucking her feathers, would follow suit.

“You’d better go to bed, or you’ll burst your mouth,” she would yawn her advice.

“That’s right. I don’t know why, but I’m rather sleepy,” Father Vasyl would yawn in reply and go to sleep in spite of the early hour and Raisa’s presence in the dining-room.

Sometimes, he would get down to making entries in his church books, pretending not to notice Raisa.

At other times, something would get into him, and then he would become unbearable. He would needle Raisa, mock at her exaltation, even ridicule her shallow mind, and contradict his own reasoning during their discussions. Then his old mother would have to intervene on behalf of the embarrassed and unhappy Raisa, scolding her son and clattering her walking stick to interrupt the unpleasant conversation.

With Tasya’s arrival for Christmas, their relations improved. Father Vasyl was again nice and pleasant, and Raisa felt happy, as if all her troubles had been erased from her memory.

But the peace between them did not last long. Tasya soon left and Father Vasyl was bored again. He would walk listlessly around the rooms at a saunter, his head hanging.

Finally, one evening he went over to the sideboard, took out a bottle and poured himself a glass of vodka. Raisa stared at him with frightened eyes. Father Vasyl paced up and down the room, and then filled another glass. Raisa watched him in horror. When, after a while, he replenished his glass for the second time, she suddenly rose, nodded good-bye, and left the room without a word.

Without taking off her things or lighting the candle, she threw herself on the sofa. She lay there, motionless, feeling depressed and crushed, aware of only one thing — that she was lonely. Her heart, deserted and neglected by everybody, was bleeding in the dark pine-board coffin.

A dog howled in the darkness outside, drawing out a persistent plaintive note. She would howl like that too, if she had the strength. But then, what for? She would rather lie here motionless and hopeless until this darkness became eternal. She would be like a flower dried between the pages of a book. She did not want to hear the ticking of the clock or the howling of the dog. She wanted none of those sounds which reminded her of life. Let there be only silence and the everlasting pain of her lonely, hopeless and anguishing heart. Let it bleed...

She did not know how long she had been lying there. She only remembered a sudden touch of a warm, soft hand on her heart. She opened her eyes. Bent over her, stood Christ, His soft white hand lying on her black dress against her heart. Ashamed and terrified, she screamed and sprang out of the bed. The vision disappeared. With a trembling hand, she lit the candle and wiped the perspiration from her forehead. She was not sure whether she had seen a dream or a ghost, but the touch of the stranger's warm hand was still there.

After that night, Raisa resigned herself to her fate. She humbly accepted Father Vasyl's rudeness, sneers and indifference, while Father Vasyl, as if intoxicated with his power over the old maid, showed his contempt for her more and more often. Humility became her only means of defence. The more Father Vasyl repulsed Raisa, the more self-sacrifice she showed, devoting to him all her time and strength. She would give him the last drop of her blood. If he kicked her like a lazy dog, she would lovingly and humbly press her lips to the foot which had done it. Her large eyes and her withered yellow face emanated nothing but humility.

She drew her strength from her own humility and found anguishing pleasure and lofty poetry in it. Raisa would interpret his outbursts of bad temper as evidence of energy and unfaltering will, while his indifferent, changing, or sometimes even contemptuous attitude toward her she would explain by his devotion to supreme interests which made it difficult for him to pay attention to trifles.

She willingly sacrificed her humble heart to this extraordinary man as she was taught by Him who had left the warm touch of His hand on her. For it was Christ, she was certain that it was Christ. And she was aware of her love for Him. She prayed to Him. She conducted sweet conversations with Him in silence and solitude. And He understood her.

Meanwhile, Raisa was in her wane.

Her health was drifting away with the fall of the high spring waters.

“You’d better consult a doctor and take some treatment,” Father Vasyl would say when his eyes came to rest on her waxen face.

She would not answer, but only gaze at him with her clear, sad eyes.

With the coming of spring, she could lay fresh flowers at the altar before every service. That was her sacrifice. She would get up at dawn and spend the green dewy mornings roaming the meadows and adding flower to flower.

“Are you by any chance in love that you have your rendezvous so early and out of the village?” Father Vasyl would joke, having learned about her morning outings.

After the service, Raisa would take one of the bouquets home. It would seem to her that it had undergone a change. The smell and color of the flowers would seem to be sharper and fresher, as if God’s blessing, descending upon the altar during the service, had made them open. Raisa would press the bouquet to her lips and heart and put it on the table in her bedroom.

There, in the room, which looked like the cell of a nun with its snow-white bed cover and black clothes on the wall, she arranged a kind of altar against a piece of clean canvas and decorated it with fragrant grass and fresh and dried flowers. A large photograph of Father Vasyl stood in a conspicuous place beside the bouquet.

The service in the church was not enough for her. She would kneel before her own altar and, with eyes fixed on the portrait of Father Vasyl, think of Christ and pour out her heart to Him in prayer. To Him alone would she open her heart. She would complain of her life — dull, colorless and unhappy. She lived in a wilderness, silent, dismal and cold. She did not want such a life, it was worthless... Why, then, had He breathed fire into it, when that fire only

turned her heart to ashes?... He witnessed her suffering. Let Him take her to Himself and give her the happiness which she had not known on earth and which she desired more than she would a drink of water in fever. At His feet, nailed to the cross, she was now laying her lonely heart and all the passion of her love. He was kind, He was beautiful, and she would serve Him faithfully, would become His humble slave. Let Him console her. Let Him refresh her parched lips. Let Him lay His hand on her heart and quiet its rebellious beat as He had done once before... O Christ our Lord!...

Intoxicated by the fragrance of the flowers, her mind confused by the endless complaints pouring out from the bottom of her heart, Raisa would raise her hands and stand motionless in the pose of supplication, calling for consolation and believing that the miracle would happen.

And consolation would come.

Calm and meek, the figure of Christ would descend to her. His grey eyes would emanate soft light and soothing kindness. He would lift her in His arms — she was so unhappy, small, and light as a feather — and she would feel her body rise in the air as He would place her against His breast.

His touch would fill her with inexplicable luxury and her head would swim in a sweet faint, while her incinerated heart would refill with warm blood, flaming in heavenly delight... Then her face would bathe in irrepressible tears.

“...You see,” Raisa continued the story which she was telling to a close friend and former schoolmate who had paid her an unexpected visit. “You see, he’s an extraordinary man, not a common village priest... If only you knew the loftiness of his thought, his noble heart, his devotion to the public cause, his pure soul... you’d fall under his spell... He’s handsome, too... His grey eyes emanate soft light, and his pale face and high brow are marked with peace and serenity... His hair is somewhat reddish, but it doesn’t spoil the general impression. On the contrary, it makes his lips look fresher... He has a musical voice... But then, you’ll see for yourself, you must see him... Not everyone likes him, perhaps, because of his vigor and strong will... This man is not in the right place here, in this village... He’s

wasting his life here... Now, just imagine how upset I am! He's going to spend the holidays with Father Ivan..."

"But why should you be upset? Let him go."

"You don't understand, you don't want to understand... He mustn't go there... It's no place for him... It'll mean drinking, cards and orgies... He must be strong, he must rise above all this... He gave up drinking... I begged him, I pleaded him not to go... Can it be that I... Can it be that he..."

Raisa's voice trailed off, and tears rolled down her face, so pitiful, so miserable, expressing a painful question. Tormented by her inner pain, she wrung her hands until the joints of her fingers cracked, and stared away through the mist of tears...

"You don't understand," Raisa started again, turning her wet face to her friend. But the woman interrupted her:

"Yes, I understand you very well; you love him."

"What did you say?"

"I said that you — " she broke off.

Raisa suddenly flinched and gave a weak scream, like a wounded bird.

Then she saw a flash of lightning and the earth began to swallow her. Raisa was slowly sinking into a deep, giddy, dark abyss. And as she did, the church, rosy in the sunset and enveloped in the greenery of the maples, was slowly disappearing from her sight.

*Chernihiv*  
*September, 1901*

## AT A HIGH PRICE

These events took place in the thirties of the last century.

The Ukrainian peasantry, defeated in class struggle, with the yoke of landlord bondage on its neck, carried its fate with a subdued discontent. This was not an ox under the yoke, a common domesticated ox for whom fodder and respite meant happiness — the yoke was set on the neck of a wild aurochs \*, brought to bay, exhausted, but still driven by the steppe winds, having not lost the taste of freedom, of open spaces. Having submitted to brute force, he laboured under the yoke although, at times, his eyes blazed with rage and, then, he stamped his hooves and lowered his horns...

The free spirit of the people still smouldered under the ashes of bondage. The fresh traditions of freedom, so fresh that it was at times difficult to differentiate yesterday from today, nourished the spark still living in the ashes. The older generation, witness of another life, could still boast on their palms callouses from the sabres raised in defence of the rights of the common man and the nation. The song of freedom, perhaps poeticized in the years of suffering, echoed a captivating response in the hearts of the young and drew them to where the chains of bondage were not shackled onto men by fellow men. Passionate expectations dragged and pulled hundreds and thousands toward the broad Bessarabian \*\* steppes, free of landlords and servility...

And that's how it was beyond the Danube! Oh, there, beyond the Danube... The survivors of the razing of the *Sich* \*\*\*, the bravest, the most determined, built their nest in the Turkish lands and from there carried to the Ukraine, as if contraband, fiery appeals to join the circle of freedom, the brotherhood of the *Sich*.

Through ravines, dried-up riverbeds, through the depths of the forests, concealing themselves in the dark of the night, hiding, as if from a wild beast, all those who hadn't

\* European bison, now almost extinct

\*\* Bessarabia — today, part of Cherrnivtzi Region of the Ukrainian SSR, the Moldavian SSR, and Rumania

\*\*\* The military encampment of the Zaporizhian Cossacks, razed by Catherine the Great in 1775 because it was a haven for escaped serfs and a centre of resistance to czarist autocracy

mouldered in bondage, hadn't lost the spirit of life, fled from the landlord and servility, fled to attain that for which their ancestors had unsheathed their sabres, or entered battle armed with pikes and pitchforks...

The enemy, meanwhile, was not slumbering.

The possessors of those souls, transformed into beasts of burden, written into the ancestral estate inventory along with oxen and horses, feared most of all the restless and freedom-loving spirit of the people. That spirit could in no way be bent to serve landlord interests, couldn't be reconciled to the fact that the infinite treasures of the Ukrainian land, worked by serfs, were given to the landlord. The age-old struggle between the two camps — the landlords and the peasants — was a chronic struggle which, at times, took on sharp forms and swept the miserable land like a storm. Although the landlord won, the struggle was unending because it could not end. Not so long ago, having bathed in his own blood at Uman \* and having piled Haidamak heads in stacks at Kodnya \*\*, the landlord relished the taste of victory, all the while watchfully maintaining his rights over the live working inventory — the serf.

The serf protested, the serf fled to free lands, rescuing himself from servitude the best he could. He left behind in his native land everything precious, everything dear to his heart.

But even there, far from his native village, the hand of the landlord clutched at him. Raids, true manhunts, as if for wolves or bears, were organized on the free lands. Raiding parties raced across all of Bessarabia, searching everywhere — in ditches, in haystacks, amidst the reeds of marshy rivers — for impoverished and tormented people. In southern Bessarabia, from the swift River Prut, along the left bank of the Danube, and all the way to the sea, the troops stood on guard and denied that freedom which blossomed in a foreign land somewhere there, beyond the wide Danube, past the green riverside willows...

A bounty was set on each escaped head. For each one caught, the riverside Cossacks received prize money. Hundreds, thousands of unfortunates fell into the hands of the Cossacks and were forced to drink the cup of bitterness to the end. A grim fate awaited the escapee; he was conscript-

\* Town in right-bank Ukraine. Here, Haidamak rebels defeated the forces of landlord Poland in June 1768

\*\* Site of the execution of Haidamak rebels

ed, exiled to Siberia, punished by the lash, branded as cattle or, with half-shaven head, was beaten, humiliated and returned in chains to his landlord, again to bondage, to servility...

What could he expect at home from his lord?

Nevertheless, as water melted by the warm breath of spring, the Ukrainian peasantry flowed like a river to that place where, although at a high price, cherished freedom could be gained. And if not — their bones would lie in eternal rest...

## I

“Is that you, Ostap?”

“Yes, Solomia...”

“What’s going to happen?”

“What’s going to happen?... Let the devil take it all... I’ll run away... I’ll go beyond the Danube. Maybe people there haven’t yet turned into dogs... See — I’m packed. Farewell, Solomia...”

“You’re leaving, deserting me... So, I’ll be left alone with that repulsive man... No, run away, Ostap... If you only knew what happens in the parlors; the landlord rushes through the house like a madman. ‘Rioter,’ he yells, ‘Haidamak! He incites my people!’ He called his overseer: ‘Bring me Ostap Mandryka immediately...’”

“So...”

“I’ll rip the skin off him. Oh, I’ll show him... I’ll make that Haidamak remember Kodnya...”

“So...”

“I’ll have him conscripted,’ he says. And the lady was pale, so pale, shivering from fright. She wrung her hands and said: ‘Roman, let’s flee from here, or else those serfs will beat us to death, like they did my grandfather in Uman...’ Go, Ostap, go, beloved... If those beasts catch you, they’ll torture you. They won’t let you live...”

“The devil take them... I’m not so much afraid of the Polack as I’m getting angry at our own people — the ox has stuck his neck in the yoke and despite everything you do, he doesn’t care, he pulls anyway... Eh, I’ll go to where there’s freedom, a different type of people... Farewell, Solomia...”

“Climb over, so that we can at least say good-bye.”

Ostap threw his saddlebags over to where Solomia was standing and climbed the fence. Against the starry night sky the silhouette of a well-built youth was projected for a moment and disappeared in the thick weeds on the other side of the fence.

"Oh, there's so much nettle here, it's stung me all over. Where are you, Solomia? I can't see you in the dark."

"I'm here..." and in front of Ostap appeared a large dark silhouette, as if that of a powerful man. "Let's go to the pond and sit under the willows."

Stumbling through the high weeds, ducking under the bushes which tightly intertwined in this neglected section of the landlord's grove, they finally came to the water. It was humid here. With total quiet hanging in the air, the thick grove had retained the warmth gathered during the day. And now the heat radiated from here, as if from a stove. On the mirror-like surface of the pond, from whose depths the dark starry sky stared back, a mist silently floated like a white cloud and covered the stars glittering in the mysterious depths as if with gauze. The hot breath of the night was impregnated with the strong scents of sweet rush, nettle and sun-warmed water. Near a boat in a small inlet surrounded by swordgrass and leafy burdock, the frogs croaked so noisily that they hushed all other sounds in the distance.

Ostap and Solomia sat under a willow but something kept them from talking. The events which had so unexpectedly led to their separation, and all the more so, the uncertain future which had already cast its shadow on their souls, had come together at that moment and touched them to their hearts. To say little — what can be said in a few words?... To say much — to what purpose? It would not ease their hearts or change fate... And when?... It was already time to go.

"How will you go, Ostap?"

"Once I get on the road, it'll work itself out. Somebody will show me the way..."

"But don't go through the village, dear, so that nobody sees you... I can row you across the river in no time. From there, through the bush and the field, you'll get to the road. It'll be safer that way."

Solomia went to the pond, got into the boat and felt around for the oars.

“That nasty old man put the oars in the shed... But, it doesn't matter, we'll make do.”

With one swift stride, Solomia appeared on the bank and pulled a pole out of the fence so easily that it might have been put there by a child.

Ostap got into the boat and Solomia pushed off from the bank. The boat gently rocked and steadily drifted across the water over the reflected stars which flickered in the blue depths. Solomia looked at Ostap with a quiet sadness and felt tear after tear roll down her face. They kept silent. It would have been completely quiet if not for the infernal chorus in which the frogs, it seemed, tried to outcry each other.

The dark landlord grove was left silently behind, enshrouded by patches of white mist.

The boat struck the bank. Ostap lifted his saddlebags and kissed Solomia.

“Farewell... Take care of my grandfather... Tell them not to worry. I'll make out somehow...”

“Alright, Ostap, I'll tell them... Well, may the Mother of God guard and protect you from evil... Farewell.”

Ostap jumped to the bank and, with an easy movement, threw the saddlebags across his shoulders and soon disappeared into the bush. Solomia, like a gigantic iron statue, stood in the boat a long time. Leaning on the pole, she stared into the bush where, together with Ostap, her happiness was disappearing.

Ostap went straight, avoiding the crooked narrow paths beaten by animals and shepherds. He was well familiar with this bush, with its maimed and twisted growth which had been gnawed by the cattle. He also knew the distant lands which dissipated in hazy contours amidst the dark of the night. After a while, Ostap stopped and looked back. The sleepy village appeared before his eyes as an indistinct dark blot and only a solitary tavern window shone brightly and caught his attention. This solitary light from the sleeping village seemed the last “farewell” from his native soil, a thread which tied him to his homeland, to all which he held dear. But, in a moment, the window went dark and Ostap felt that together with the snuffing of that light his heart had been broken and the village had withdrawn from him. Ostap unconsciously sighed and went on.

Whether under the influence of the parting and Solomia's tears or as a result of the reaction to his sufferings, sorrow

engulfed him. He couldn't have explained this sorrow and he didn't even think of it. Sorrow simply grabbed his heart and welled in his throat. Some heart string sounded, touched by the sorrow, and from the bush and the field, so dear and precious — he felt this at once — all his childhood reminiscences swept across him like a flood. They were hazy and indistinct, yet they demanded that part of his heart remain in the land which he was now leaving, perhaps forever.

Each bush, hillock, vale, each path — all was familiar, spoke to him. Here, in the company of his fellow shepherd boys, he had played his endless games. Here he had tended the landlord's animals. The landlord's! That was it, the landlord's. As if he himself hadn't been merely one of the landlord's animals all his twenty years. His father, mother, Solomia, and even his grandfather who had gone to the Sich and had later put landlords to the sabre in Uman — hadn't they all become such animals?... If they weren't landlord animals, then the landlord would not have been able to separate him from Solomia and forcibly give her in marriage to his coachman. He wouldn't have been able to whip his grey-haired grandfather in the stable... he wouldn't have boasted of lashing Ostap for his courageous words...

"Just try to beat me..." Ostap gloated to himself. "Try and catch the wind in the field..."

And he clearly envisioned how enraged the landlord would be when he learned the next day that Ostap had fled.

If only his grandfather wouldn't have to suffer on his account. And what could happen to him? He's already old, he could go any time... Remembering his grandfather, Ostap felt warm inside. He had listened to those true legends about the Sich, the Cossack brotherhood, about the struggle against the landlords for freedom, holding his breath and focusing his excited eyes on his grandfather's lips. They awoke, in his child's head, fanciful dreams, the zeal of a warrior. Many a time the calves and sheep, while quietly grazing in the bush, had witnessed Cossack attacks and the Uman campaign executed by shepherd boys under Ostap's leadership. Freedom, freedom, and still freedom! This enchanting word, made poetic by his hundred-year-old grandfather, fired the boy's blood and later, as the years passed, under the influence of the conditions created by bondage, gradually acquired more concrete form and

deeper meaning. The people groaned in servitude, but groaned secretly, without protesting, and when Ostap, raised by his grandfather according to the ancient tradition, began to state that the time had come to pull their necks out from under the landlord yoke, people sympathized with him, but sympathy was not followed by action. There were even such who whispered in the landlord's ear of the youth's rebellious talk. And now Ostap, humiliated and hounded, was forced to leave his native land. He had only been ten when emissaries had arrived in their village from beyond the Danube, from the Sich. He remembered them well. Lying on the *pich* \* and feigning sleep, he heard their long discussions with his grandfather, their stories of the Turkish lands, of the customs there. They said that life under the Turk was good and called people to the free lands. His grandfather remained, for he wanted to die on his own soil. But uncle Panas went, and not a word had been heard of him since...

Ostap had been walking for an hour. He didn't notice when he left the bush and entered the field. The unending field of green crops which were just beginning to ripen slumbered in the quiet night. It was so quiet that Ostap's footsteps echoed across the fields like a flail threshing grain. Yet, he didn't notice this, as he didn't notice the grandeur of the summer night which spread out across the unending expanses, so fresh, green and fragrant. Ostap was panting from the rapid pace he was keeping. He sat down by the edge of the field and removed his boots. A pleasant coolness enveloped his body and brought him relief...

Meanwhile, the dark blue of the night sky began to gradually lighten. From the East, a breath of wind reached Ostap and at once he felt light and happy. He felt free. A young unspent strength, like a wave, hit his chest, flowed through his veins and begged to be set free... Ostap jumped to his feet and, instead of walking, ran on. He wanted to shout at the top of his lungs the words of a song, or to just yell. He wanted to take something in his hands, something large and strong, and break it. But he restrained his urge.

Now he walked quickly, swinging his staff strongly, as if putting all of his young strength into that pace, into those movements. His thoughts, one after another, as if on wings,

\* The stove which occupied a central place in all Ukrainian peasant huts. It was built in such a manner as to provide sleeping space above the oven area

flew before him. Not so much his thoughts as his visions. He imagined the Danube — as wide as the Danube is wide. Beyond the Danube — the *Sich*. Horses, their necks bent like snakes, gallop with mounted Cossacks... Cossacks — like fields of poppy... Their jackets red, their mustaches black and long, and sabres at their sides. And in front — Ostap himself. The mount under him — fiery, ravenblack, like the one left behind in the landlord's stable; his clothing abounds with silver and gold, his sabre — long. He tells the Cossacks why the landlord wanted to lash him, and what kind of bondage reigns in Uman. He tells them that they must go and free the people from bondage, to please his grandfather in his old age and to release Solomia from her husband because she doesn't love the landlord's coachman, but him, Ostap... The Cossacks bow before him, spur their horses onward, plunge into the Danube, cross it, and gallop onwards — Ostap leading — over hill and dale to the village, at Uman... Do you see, Solomia?...

Suddenly — a fluttering! Something heavy, like a bullet, sprang with a screech from under Ostap's feet and brushed a wing across his chest... Startled, Ostap jumped backward as if lashed unexpectedly across his thighs. His heart jumped — and sank. A cold shiver ran down his spine.

"Whew! Damn it!..." he caught his breath at last. "That's scary!" He went on.

His dreams had gone as if the bird had dispersed them with its wings. Ostap again found himself in the field, fleeing, still not far from the landlord and danger.

It was becoming light. Against the pale sky, the dawn glowed brightly. The sea of grain glistened under the dew in the dim light. It shimmered from the fresh breath of the morning. Light flowed from the reddening East and its soft waves poured between heaven and earth. In the heights over the field, the sky-larks were already singing.

Ostap stepped onto the road and looked behind him. Something loomed on the road in the distance, as if some traveler with sacks on his back was trudging along the road from the village. It was dangerous to be on the road. Ostap calculated that the landlord, having learned of the flight, could send people after him. It would be better to leave the road and enter some ravine or gully. There, one could even sleep through the heat of the day and resume his journey at twilight. But as soon as Ostap turned off the road, he heard someone calling. He looked around.

Quickening his pace, the traveler waved at him, asking him to halt, apparently. What apparition was this? Ostap's first thought was to run. But considering it was one on one, there was nothing to fear. Ostap halted, waiting and scrutinizing the traveler. He, obviously, was in a hurry because he wasn't satisfied with his rapid pace and at times began to run, holding his sacks on his back. In a quarter of an hour, Ostap was able to make out his slender stature.

He was a young beardless youth, strongly built, dressed in a high grey hat and short jacket and carrying a long staff. It seemed strange to Ostap that the lad seemed to be grinning, but as soon as the lad approached and greeted him, Ostap cried out in surprise: "Solomia!... Have you gone crazy?"

"Perhaps I am crazy..." Solomia laughed.

"Damn it, you look just like a boy... Why are you here, where do you think you are going?"

"Beyond the Danube, to the *Sich* with you... Do you accept a comrade or not?..."

"Have you really gone mad, girl, or are you just joking?..."

"What do you mean, joking? When you left, I stood in the boat and went numb. I was cold, so cold, as if I had died!... Later, when I came to myself, I felt that everything was disgusting, detestable: my husband, servitude, my unhappy life... Let it all fall when it may... I'll go where my eyes lead me... At least with you my heart will feel better... So I hastened home, grabbed my bag and filled it for the journey. It occurred to me, though, that the landlord would come after us. But I'm also not stupid. The devil he will!... I rushed to the storeroom. My husband wasn't home; he had taken the landlord's wife to visit someone. So I took a shirt and trousers... Then I took off my skirt, put on the trousers, put a jacket on my shoulders, and a hat on my head and look — a real Cossack... Look all you want, landlord, for a young man with a girl... Nobody has seen them. People have only met two lads. And what was I to do with my own clothes? I was afraid to leave them behind, lest somebody guess... Hiding them under my jacket, I ran to the pond, tied a stone to them and threw them in... May they rest in peace. And then I went through the village and onto the road and began to run to catch up to you. Whew, I'm out of breath... What do you say? Do you accept this lad as a comrade or not?"

“Listen, what am I going to do with you in the *Sich*?”

A stupid thing to say! Naturally, she wouldn't join the brotherhood of the *Sich*. And why should she, when all around the *Sich* were homesteads, and in those homesteads people lived with their wives and children. The Turk was giving away land — take as much as you can work. People had told her this. They would settle on a homestead, she would run the place, and he would often come home from the *Sich*, or simply settle down to work the land... Meanwhile, on the journey, she could wash his things, look after him and wash his hair. Misery loves company... Doesn't he know the proverb?... Let him not look so downcast like an owl on a branch. Let him look more gladly at his Solomia who, for his sake, dressed in trousers and is willing to follow him to the ends of the Earth...

Ostap smiled. Of course, he was happy to see Solomia. But the unexpectedness was what confused him.

“Let a fly kick you for imagining such things!...” Ostap felt more at ease. “And why are we standing here?” he said, collecting himself. “The day is well on, and something's already raising dust on the road...”

Indeed, the sun was already high and gazed upon the world with its fiery eye. On the horizon, something was hanging over the steppe like a cloud of dust.

Ostap and Solomia left the road and entered the field and soon found what they needed. Here, in a dried-up riverbed whose high banks were spotted with red poppies, they were safer and more comfortable. They came across a spring which shed its tears and slowly filled a natural depression overgrown with grass. Further on, it wove its way along the curves of the ravine. Here they decided to rest. A shared breakfast and an opportunity to exchange candid thoughts with someone close finally reconciled Ostap with the unexpected event. Solomia's arguments considerably comforted him and the two friends, already without unnecessary worries and tired by the night's events, slept the sound sleep of the young.

The sun was low on the horizon when Ostap awoke. He wanted to awaken Solomia but, as soon as he glanced at her, he grabbed his sides and burst out laughing.

“Ho-ho-ho!... That's a Cossack, a real Cossack!...” laughed Ostap. “Ho-ho-ho!...”

The laughter awakened Solomia. She started, rubbed her eyes, and looked at Ostap in bewilderment.

"What's with you?"

"Rub your eyes... Ho-ho-ho!..."

"I can see already... What's with you?..."

"Now let's go."

Ostap helped Solomia to her feet and led her to the spring.

"Get on your knees and look into the water..."

Solomia bent over and gazed into the pool. Gazing back at her was a fresh face with dark eyes. Her face was so expressively white, framed by the kerchief tied around her head and strands of dark hair which had fallen from under it while she had slept.

"Now look at your feet."

Solomia looked and immediately gave a merry laugh.

"Ho-ho-ho!..." Ostap couldn't stop laughing. "A girl's head and a boy's feet..."

They laughed as children; hers was the clear ringing voice of a young girl: his — deeper, the bass of a twenty-year-old lad.

"What are we going to do?" asked Ostap after a while. "If somebody notices your kerchief, trouble won't pass us by."

"This is what we'll do!" Solomia resolutely said. And with these words, she tore the kerchief off her head. Thick dark braids fell across her shoulders and down to her waist. "Cut them..."

"What are you saying?" asked Ostap with horror.

"Cut them, I say..."

"Won't you be sorry, Solomia?"

"Not in the least... Cut them!" the young girl stubbornly demanded and sat down.

"But I don't even have any damn scissors."

"Use a knife!..."

Ostap stood, uncertain, but seeing the young girl's stubbornness, took out his knife, sharpened it on his whetstone and began cutting the locks of Solomia's hair.

The long strands of her dark braids, like dead vipers, quietly slipped off her shoulders to the ground and lay there like strange vines.

However, Solomia had been fooling herself thinking she wouldn't regret losing her braids. As soon as the knife slashed her hair and the first locks of her braids fell to her feet, Solomia felt a pain in her breast. Something grabbed her heart and tears welled in her eyes.

It was done. Ostap stepped back from Solomia in order to better examine his work from a distance. Solomia, silent and pensive, sat there amidst her shorn hair and stared off into the distance.

With its red glow, the setting sun illuminated this scene — him, slender and strong, with dark eyes, aquiline nose and dark young whiskers on a suntanned face, and her, resembling a white-faced dark-haired boy, looking into the distance with saddened dark eyes.

“Well, time for us to go... Hey, you, lad, what’s your name, Semen or what?”

“Let it be Semen...” Solomia sighed and rose to her feet.

11

It was a dark autumn night. A heavy mist, like a dark veil, joined the sun-scorched plain with the sky. In the valley, in the distance, a wide grey strip disappeared into the night.

It was the Danube.

An even thicker gloom filled the deep gullies which descended into the valley from the slopes of the riverside hills. On the very bottom of one such ravine, deep and twisted in all directions by the spring waters, people moved. These were the fugitives. For two days and two nights they had sat here, in the dark and damp, hiding from the Cossack patrols spread along the left bank of the Danube. It was today, after midnight, that they had to sneak into the riverside weeds and there await those who would ferry them across the Danube.

There were thirty of them, with children and household belongings, even with the sick who could not be left behind in the strange land.

On the bottom of the ravine, low, muffled sounds could be heard. This wasn’t the murmuring of autumn waters running into the Danube; this wasn’t a wind rustling in the crooked gully. People talked quietly, almost in whispers. Some young voice, with a note of longing, told a common fugitive story... “I fell into the hands of a Greek, and I knew a bondage even harsher than at home. He drove me to work both day and night, and fed me worse than he would a dog... My shirt was black and worn, I was eaten by lice... I walked like a beast of the forest and I couldn’t even utter

a word against my master because he threatened to set his henchmen on me..."

"Oh, ho," came from somebody's chest like a quiet complaint and died in the dark gully.

Somewhere from afar, a muffled song buzzed as flies in the springtime.

"Our Father... thy will be done..." somebody prayed quietly, emotionally.

A sick woman breathed heavily and quietly moaned.

Ostap and Solomia were amongst the fugitives. Having suffered much, they had finally reached the Danube and, together with the others, were waiting to be ferried across.

"Are you sleeping, Solomia?" Ostap inquired quietly.

"Almost... I so much want to sleep, so much... If we could only leave here sooner..."

"It's too early, it's a long time till midnight... And the cold — I'm frozen!... Ivan!" Ostap turned in the other direction. "What do you think, a bunch of dried leaves for the campfire wouldn't do us any harm, would it?"

"Oh, Lord, that would mean climbing up, wouldn't it?" a shrill horrified voice like that of a woman responded from the darkness. It snorted several times like a cow in a barn.

"Now, where are you sending him? On his short legs he won't be able to climb up top," Solomia threw in.

"Ha-ha, you've invented God knows what, I've climbed even higher..." said Ivan, insulted. And with these words, they heard him climbing the steep slope of the gully, snorting often and heavily.

"See, Kotyhoroshok is doing his best..." said someone from the darkness. "If a young maid told him to, he would climb into Hell itself."

A few minutes later, a bunch of dried leaves flew down into the gully. Following it, raining dirt into everyone's eyes, slid the triumphant Ivan.

"So, I can't climb... so, I have short legs... eh? If not for my short legs, you would have to huddle together all night... and now we'll have a fire..." He chuckled. "What do we want now? A flint? Here it is. Tinder? I have it too. So, we'll start the fire, eh?..." he chattered on.

Ivan busied himself uselessly running from one place to another, rustling dry leaves, breaking them up and building a pile.

Finally, he struck the steel against the flint, a spark jumped and the walls of the gully flickered.

Ivan dropped to the ground and blew. The red spot which he almost touched with his lips, was coming to life; it grew, reddened, jumped like an angry cat and, finally, no longer restraining itself, burst into flame, producing grey smoke and poured light over the bottom of the gully.

The unsteady light illuminated a short, coarse figure with a round, kind face overgrown, as if with weeds, with strands of dun-coloured hair. The light glittered over the scattered bundles and the fugitives who sat and lay on the ground in groups. The yellow of the gully's steep clay walls stood out in the dark, and only on top, in deep depressions, the disturbed gloom beat its wings.

Ostap and Solomia moved closer to the fire.

Suddenly, from the distance, from the riverbank, the thumping of horses' hooves could be heard. Everybody became tense.

"Put out the fire!" demanded somebody in a worried whisper. "God preserve us, lest they notice..."

Ostap unwillingly began to stamp out the fire, although it was difficult to do so. The glowing embers scattered everywhere like fireflies, hissing and smoking.

Meanwhile, the thumping of the hooves faded into the distance and, finally, could no longer be heard.

It became dark once again in the ravine. Everyone kept quiet.

"Ivan," somebody finally broke the silence, "tell us again how your wife beat you and how you fled from her all the way here..."

"What are you inventing? A wife beating her husband — that's against the law, there's no excuse for it. That could never be..." Ivan laughed somewhat unsurely, as if trying to raise his own spirits.

Ivan had joined up with Ostap somewhere on the road. They came from the same county, even their villages were close. This brought them together and, from that time, Ivan hadn't separated from his fellow countrymen. His merry and generous character had served them in good stead during their long and difficult wanderings across strange lands.

Ivan openly talked about his homelife. From his story, one could come to understand that he had fled, not so much from servitude, as from his ill-tempered wife who possessed two overly large fists for such a short man like Ivan. This was why people often teased Ivan about his

shrew. Yet, he never angered and good-naturedly joked his way out.

Although Ivan's ample body had already rested a bit from his wife's fists, his soul was still searching for that familiar submissiveness. He attached himself to Solomia, whose burly stature reminded him of his wife. Should she but say the word, he would readily plunge into hell. Not only Ostap, but everybody noticed his attachment to Solomia and made fun of this poor short-legged knight.

"Tell me," the same voice teased Ivan. "She probably thrashed you with a flail. If you hadn't fled, you'd probably be part of the threshing floor."

"So what?" Ivan energetically rejoined. "Do you think I'm afraid of death? Lord preserve us!... Let God send death even tomorrow. You only die once. You die — and that's the end, you won't get up again."

"No, Ivan, better not die here, we won't get a good price for your hide."

"Tee-hee... The devil take you and your talk," chuckled Ivan, like a bottle being emptied. However, nobody responded to his laughter. People were serious, even grim. Only a child sometimes whimpered and filled the gully with sorrow.

"Isn't it time for us to go?" inquired Solomia.

"Old Ovsy makes that decision, he's in charge here," responded Ostap.

Obviously, this question interested everyone, for a whisper passed along the gully. "It's time, it's time..." People began to gather their belongings.

"Quietly, quietly, not all at once," mumbled old Ovsy and made his way through the crowd, stomping on their feet.

They set off.

However, getting out of the dark, crooked and narrow ravine was not easy. They often stumbled, feeling their way along, falling, encumbered by the bundles, raising themselves and again stumbling. This confusion took almost an hour. Finally, a breeze blew. Before the fugitives lay the Danube lowlands. Everybody breathed more freely, although it was here that the danger began. They had to cross a flat, bare and open space to get to the reeds. Old Ovsy formed everyone into a line and himself took the lead. The night was dark, almost black, and nothing was visible beyond a few paces. A light fog hung over the Danube,

along its banks, and enshrouded the fugitives. They moved forward quietly.

"I'm holding onto you as a blind man holds a raft," whispered Ivan to Solomia, following her. "Whither thou goest, I shall go... To be together... If it's too heavy give me your bundle. I'll carry it for you," he murmured, snorting heavily...

"Don't snort so, like a blacksmith's bellows," Solomia instructed him. "And I won't give you my bundle because I could carry even you on my shoulders, together with your bundle..."

"And if your feet get stuck in the mud, and water sloshes in your shoes, and still something else — we won't mention the word — gets stuck to your feet and won't let you go..."

The marsh, overgrown with reeds, began. One could hear the rough leaves of the reeds rustling and the occasional crackles of dry twigs breaking under someone's feet.

They hadn't gone far. Their old guide stopped, ordered everybody into the reeds, told them to put down their bundles and to be ready, and disappeared somewhere.

Nearby, the river, invisible in the darkness, breathed its cold dampness. Something began to fall from above, either rain or drizzle. The fugitives spread out across the marsh and water sloshed under their feet. They sat motionless, squatting, afraid to move or touch a rustling reed. They looked in front of them into the thick damp gloom. Their legs went numb, the drizzle covered their clothing with a cold dew, water flowed into their shoes. Waiting for the assistance which was to come from the unknown free lands to liberate them from bondage strained their nerves and made time drag immeasurably. All sense of reality was lost, everything assumed an extraordinary, fairy-tale character. Strained eyes saw shadows in the darkness. They moved in the dusk, approaching, withdrawing, assuming unusual proportions. At times, a fire would sparkle in the distance and disappear, only to reappear in another place. And again darkness. Something slapped on the river, once, twice... One could swear that these were oars beating their rhythm on the water, that boats were cutting the waves and their bows would strike the bank at any moment... Yet, everything was quiet... The wide river slumbered peacefully in the light fog. The black sky continued to sow the dew... It seemed that the long autumn night would never end.

Vain hopes... futile expectations... Nobody would come, nobody was even thinking that cold and worried people were sitting here, awaiting rescue, as they would a god from the heavens... All was in vain... But the eyes were again attracted by wandering fires and moving shadows. Ears again caught uncertain sounds which gave birth to hope, awakened consciousness...

The body turns numb, like wood. Water-soaked feet disappear somewhere, one cannot feel them. Reluctant sleep envelops the person, indifference creeps into the heart... Everything is normal, as it should be. Does it make any difference whether one dies here in this bog or at home, in bondage?...

Suddenly — what's this? Is it a dream or a miracle? Far beyond the river, something flashed, as if a flame had fallen to earth from the heavens and then flickered like a huge candle. There was another flash nearby, and then a third, bright flame burst out. The three fires were burning like candles in a church and it was impossible to tell whether this was happening on earth or in the sky. It seemed as if a cool breeze had blown and touched the face. Everybody started. But scarcely had they collected themselves when the flames went out and, at the same time, a hungry wolf howled mournfully somewhere nearby in the reeds. That sad complaint rolled across the river and struck the fugitives.

"He must be hungry," Solomia said with a note of sympathy in her voice.

"You would howl even louder if your stomach was stuck to your ribs... Or, perhaps, he senses you and is crying because he can't take you... Tee-heel..."

"Sure, just touch Kotyhoroshok, and he'll start chattering," said Ostap angrily.

"See what kind of people you are!... What did I do? Did I do something wrong?..."

"Fallen asleep, eh?" suddenly mumbled old Ovsy, having returned from the bank. "The ferry will soon be here..."

People started to move. And here it was — the ferry... There was a sigh of relief... Suddenly, they found their feet — wet, cold, and numb. Their stiff bodies wanted to move, reality dispersed their visions and awakened their brains.

"What, the wolf howled well?" whispered the old man into Ivan's ear and burst out laughing.

"May a bear gnaw your bones, God forbid!" Ivan responded in surprise. "Didn't I say so, didn't I know?"

One could hear in his whisper such bewilderment at the old man's tricks and such naive belief that he had immediately seen through those tricks that Ostap and Solomia couldn't help smiling.

Quietly and cautiously, everybody moved to the bank. With impatience, they stared into the darkness and saw nothing, and heard nothing. The river was slumbering. To the west, it was getting lighter. Against the dull sky, the contours of dark hills were carved like heavy clouds. From across the river came the rustle of the reeds.

Despite the old man's promise, the ferry had not come yet. People were impatient. The children were cold and whining and it was hard to comfort them. It was a dangerous place — the border patrols often came here and could appear at any moment. The people became nervous. The grumblings fell on old Ovsy. Everybody was anxious to leave this dangerous place as soon as possible and again hide in some hole. There, at least, they could build a fire and warm up. They even forgot to watch the river...

All of a sudden, they heard a splash. Two boats gently beached themselves on the sand and a quiet voice asked, "Is everybody here?"

The bank came to life. Everybody crowded around the boats, everyone wanted to get a place, to stow his belongings as soon as possible. It was not easy for old Ovsy to calm the fugitives and restore order. Kotyhoroshok was one of the first to jump into a boat and he vigorously tried to drag one of Solomia's bundles after him.

"Solomia... Ostap... here... to me!" he called in a whisper and snorted, and groaned, and tossed his head, busying himself with the unruly bundle.

Suddenly, a horse snorted quite nearby. Everybody was stunned.

"Get in, faster," hissed the ferryman.

It was too late.

"Who's there?" an angry voice called from the darkness.

At that very moment, a horse came upon the crowd and a Cossack bent down, as if searching for something on the ground.

"Aha!" he drawled, as if addressing himself. Taking his rifle from his shoulder, he shot over the heads of the hushed crowd.

The people came to their senses. After all, he was only one and they were many. The bravest fell upon the Cossack but could do little with bare hands.

The shot, apparently, had been heard for, from the darkness, the pounding of hooves, the clanging of weapons and coarse voices were already approaching the fugitives.

“Catch them! Tie them up!” shouted the Cossacks, falling on those who hadn’t yet managed to get into the boat. They jumped from their horses and attacked the fugitives. Confusion reigned everywhere.

One husky *Moskal*\* grabbed Solomia around the waist and started dragging her off, but Ostap jumped him from behind and freed her.

“Help!” a shrill female voice shrieked above the sound of the battle.

Meanwhile, the boats fled. The water was boiling under the oars. The boats shuddered and jumped across the water as if alive.

“Halt!” sounded from the bank, “or we’ll shoot!” A few shots thundered and shattered the air.

Bullets whistled over the heads of the fugitives, but Ivan ignored them. He was still waving his arms and, in a pleading, desperate voice, cried out, “Ostap!... Solomia!... What are you doing?... get in quicker... here, to me...” He didn’t notice that a wide stretch of water separated him from the bank and the din on the shore muffled his weak squeaky voice...

\* \* \*

What followed, neither Ostap nor Solomia were quite able to recall. They only remembered that they ran desperately through the reeds, through water, in complete darkness, feeling like animals chased by the dogs. A number of times, Ostap plunged into water almost to his waist. Often Solomia ran into willow bushes. And each time, they collected themselves and again rushed onwards, exhausting the last of their strength. Finally, something blocked their way and they fell to the ground. It was even for the better. Lying on something hard and cold, they were able to catch their breath a little. Their legs trembled and they breathed heavily. They lay there and listened. It was quiet all around

\* Word used to refer to those serving in the czarist army

and not a single sound reached them from the bank — obviously, everything there had come to an end. A light rain was falling, the darkness again thickened. No longer feeling pursued, Ostap and Solomia slowly came to their senses. Ostap cautiously felt what he was lying on; it was a mound overgrown with grass. "Aha!" he thought to himself, "we must have come across the high bank." Encouraged by the quiet, they rested a while, rose to their feet and carefully made their way along the hillside in the hope of coming across a ravine where they would be able to find shelter from the rain and cold. In fact, they soon felt water-washed clay under their feet and entered the dark jaws of a gully.

Here they sought out a quiet dry place and only then did they sense that they were extremely tired and overheated by their frantic race. Their exhaustion was so strong that it overpowered everything else; they simply fell down. Without words, without thoughts, they fell into a deep sound sleep.

They awoke late. The sun was probably high in the sky, for its yellow beam was already crawling along the wall of the ravine. A blue strip of clear sky shone above them.

Ostap's first thought was to find out where they were. He went to take a look and soon returned to comfort Solomia. It was quiet and peaceful everywhere. The day was warm and clear. They began to discuss the situation.

They both remembered that a miller who lived near the River Prut — one-eyed Yakim, a fugitive like themselves, only from Podillya — had boasted that he knew a way to cross over into the Turkish lands. They would have definitely turned to him if Kotyhoroshok and old Ovsyiy hadn't urged them to flee across the Danube together with them.

Now there was nothing left to do but to turn to that miller because to hide longer on this side was dangerous. They could be caught, sent back to their landlord or thrown into prison.

They barely climbed out of the deep ravine and found themselves on a sun-burnt grey meadow. The lowland, which during the night had assumed unreal and hazy forms, seemed very pleasant in the daylight. The wide and quiet Danube sparkled in the sun like a crystal and, beyond the still green willows on the riverbank, the blue spires of faraway hills rose into the sky.

Looking about carefully, Ostap figured that it was about thirty *versts* \* from where they were to Kyshnytsi where Yakim's mill was located. If they hurried, they might be able to make it there by nightfall.

And, cleaning up a bit their Moldavian clothes which had been muddied the day before, they set off without delay. They went now by roads, now taking shortcuts, trying not to attract attention to themselves.

"Now our Kotyhoroshok is conversing with a Turk somewhere," commented Solomia.

"If he isn't feeding the Danube crabs," Ostap rejoined. And they remembered the night's events.

They avoided the small town of Reni and continued along the Prut. From the road, they could see the deep and muddy Prut snaking along the valley. Beyond the river, as far as the eye could see, were marshy meadows, ruddy with ripened bull rushes. They waved like a field of grain. On the horizon, something was burning and smoke hung low over the reeds. Often, a rider galloped along the bank of the Prut and disappeared beyond a sharp bend in the river.

Beyond the Prut lay the Turkish lands.

It was already night when they approached the windmills of Kyshnytsi, which were lazily waving their wings. To their joy, a light was burning in Yakim's windmill. They opened the door and entered. No one was there so Ostap and Solomia sat down on some sacks. The mill was permeated by the warm and pleasantly sweet smell of freshly ground corn flour. Dust from the flour hung in the air and the walls, beams and millstones were covered with it, as if with snow. A white cobweb hung from the rafters like festoons, waved from the slightest movement of the air and cast strange shadows in the yellow light of a solitary lantern. The millstones softly ground the grain; the flour basket feverishly shivered; something squeaked mournfully from above. Beyond the walls of the windmill, in the village, the dogs howled...

The flour-covered miller soon appeared. Looking closely with his one good eye, he recognized Ostap. Ostap immediately told him why they had come.

"Alright..." Yakim replied curtly, "I'll finish up and we'll go."

\* Unit of distance equal to 0.6 miles

Although Ostap and Solomia were tired from their journey, they didn't mention it.

They rested a little and had a bite to eat while the miller poured grain and moved sacks.

Around midnight Yakim told them, "Let's go." They went outside.

Over the village hung an autumn fog. It came, apparently, from the river, from the marshy meadows, for the lower they descended, the thicker it became. The village looked as if it was under water — a pale light shone here and there through the mist. It was hard to breathe. All three silently descended and then turned towards the village. They went on in this direction for about two *versts*, now descending, now climbing small hills.

At last, the miller told them to stop and went ahead by himself. Ostap and Solomia gazed into the darkness and saw nothing. Suddenly, the miller's figure disappeared, as if dissolving into the mist. After a few moments, he returned and led them downward along the steep and slippery slope. While they were cautiously descending the hill, two fires glowed nearby and instantly disappeared. "It's a fox," the miller explained.

Finally, they stopped. The miller struck a fire and lit up a narrow cave resembling a fox's lair. It seemed that people had recently been here, for a pile of dry leaves and a few rough willow branches lay about.

The miller's plan was very simple — build a small raft capable of carrying two people and, on a dark night, hiding from the Cossacks, cross into the marshy meadow. There it would be safe. If the wood hidden here was insufficient, more could be found on the riverbank. But cautiously...

One-eyed Yakim gave Ostap a length of rope and a loaf of bread, said farewell and disappeared into the mist.

The miller's plan greatly appealed to Solomia. She was willing to build the raft immediately.

By the light of a wax candle which they had obtained from the mill, they began to work and became so involved that they forgot about tiredness and sleep. But there wasn't enough wood for the raft and they had to put aside their work.

The next day, Ostap went to look around. It became clear that their hideaway was in a basin but, as soon as one climbed up top, there, almost under one's feet, flowed the swift waters of the Prut. Here, it made a cut into the

bank. Its two extremities were hidden beyond the high river-side promontories. The place was quite convenient for the crossing for, should a Cossack border patrol go beyond a promontory, the curve of the river would disappear from his sight.

Scattered on the bank were branches, pieces of board and even uprooted willows which had been cast ashore by the spring flood. Smoke crept in black strands across the meadows.

Only at night did Ostap and Solomia dare approach the bank. Climbing up from the basin, they saw a red horizon, as if the moon was rising.

"I just can't understand it," commented Ostap. "It's not the time for a moonlit night."

Solomia, who had already made it up top, suddenly backed away and almost yelled, "Look!... Look!..."

Ostap looked and was stunned.

In front of him, on the horizon, stood high fiery mountains. But no, they weren't standing. They moved, as if alive, swayed, trembled, sank in one place only to spring up in another. They quietly glowed like a heap of scintillating gold or burst up into a red column of flame. Now they died down, wilted and bent with the wind. Then they again grew, again blazed. When one fell, a second caught it up, rose, and quickly broke the line of sparkling flames. From them, a cloud gathered in the heavens and burned together with the distant sky.

The marshy meadows were burning.

Ostap and Solomia gazed at this scene with horror.

"No, it's not coming towards us, the wind is driving it to the side," Solomia finally sighed with relief.

It seemed that a raging sea of fire was boiling, roaring, splattering fiery foam, now red like garnet, now white like lightning. Its angry waves advanced on the defenseless black meadows which hid themselves and trembled in the darkness of the night.

However, there was no time to admire the scene. Looking about themselves and listening, they reached the bank. It was deserted. Against the distant light, it seemed even darker down there. A fog rose from the marshy meadows.

They found what they needed and, with great caution, remembering that a Cossack could appear at any moment from behind the promontory, dragged bunches of willow branches uphill.

By midnight, the raft lay ready, as if begging to be set on the water.

It was heavy, crude and had to be carried in such a way that the ropes wouldn't weaken.

Ostap and Solomia groaned, stopped and rested, soaked in sweat and again dragged it uphill.

Not a soul could be seen... Yet, they were lucky this time! The fog was as thick as pea soup; it was a long time till sunrise and the border patrol was either asleep or had perished.

"By the time the sun rises, ho-ho! where will we be..." Ostap whispered happily.

"Don't count your chickens before they've hatched..."

The bank was also quiet and deserted. The muddy Prut breathed a damp coolness. The grim marshy meadow, barely visible through the fog, rustled inhospitably.

Ostap and Solomia quietly launched the raft. It splashed and sat deeply in the water. When Solomia had settled herself on the raft, Ostap pushed off from the bank and then jumped on.

The raft rocked and water came through the bottom. The swift current turned it and carried it downriver. Ostap fought the current with all his strength, but his pole was of little use; the raft was in the middle of the river. They drifted for some time in the fog, far from dry land and helpless. With great difficulty, they finally managed to break themselves free of the flow of the river and approached the bank. But even here the water also carried them onward and it was difficult to beach the raft. However, Ostap was lucky to somehow latch onto a riverside willow. Solomia grabbed its branches while Ostap held the raft. They both jumped on shore, tired and wet. The water immediately caught the raft, slowly turned it around and carried it down the river, together with the food which they had left behind. But this was a trifle; they had crossed the border.

A strange feeling came over Ostap. Instead of joy, a strong indignation rocked his entire being. He at once felt all those humiliations and torments which he had suffered in the land that he had left behind... Now, having firmly set his feet onto a new land, free of bondage, he clenched his fist and shook it at the other side of the river.

"May you collapse, you damned country with your ways!..." he cried out loud.

At the same moment, a thumping of hooves could be heard on the other bank.

"Who's there?..." called a Cossack border guard into the darkness and, without waiting for a reply, shot blindly with his rifle.

Ostap uttered a cry, grabbing his chest and staggering.

"It's nothing!... If I haven't hit you, then flee with God's blessings," the Cossack said good-naturedly and slowly went on...

### III

"What's happened to you?" Solomia jumped to Ostap and supported him. She was cold all over and trembling from fear.

Ostap groaned quietly. "He hit me here, under the heart."

Solomia seemed not to understand what had happened. She grabbed Ostap by his clothing, pulled him after her and repeated in a frightened voice; "Let's flee... Let's flee... he'll shoot again, he'll kill you..."

Noticing that Ostap was standing still, she took him under the arm and firmly pulled him after her. She entered the reeds and ran quickly, as fast as Ostap and the thick reeds allowed. The soft ground of the marsh yielded beneath her, as if it were on springs. At times, her feet sank into the ooze up to her knees, the rigid reeds broke, cracked and hit her across the face. They entangled her feet but she kept running onward, driven by fear, noticing nothing, wanting to run as far as possible, to escape from sudden death.

Ostap unconsciously yielded to her. He ran after her, although with each breath and movement a pain stabbed in his chest and weakness at times swept over him. And from under his hand, which clasped his wound, something warm and wet was flowing.

"If we could only flee this place... if we could only flee, everything will be left behind... there'll be no evil..." the thought wandered through his head. And he ran, exhausting the last of his strength, lest he become separated from Solomia.

At last he felt that he was fainting. "Stop... I can't..." he whispered, sinking to the ground.

"What's wrong?" the girl came to herself and bent over him.

"I've lost a lot of blood," uttered Ostap with difficulty.

"You're wounded? Where?" Solomia cried out, kneeling beside him and trying to examine the wound.

But it was dark like in a cellar. Even the reeds which densely grew around them like rye in a field, could not be seen.

"Where are you wounded?"

"Here, under the heart."

Solomia ran her hand along his chest and could feel his wet, sticky shirt. Ostap moaned from her touch.

Solomia's head cleared. Her fear disappeared without a trace. She knew what to do.

She carefully unfastened his shirt and exposed his chest. It wasn't sufficient. She tore it further, pulling back the blood-soaked cloth, and then ripped a long strip from her underskirt and, with Ostap's help, tightly bound his wound.

"Water!..." pleaded the wounded man.

Water! Easy to say! In this darkness, in this black unknown wilderness where one need only take a few steps to become lost, it would be hard to search for water. That plea from Ostap tore at Solomia's heart, but her head searched for a way. Aha! But they were already on water! To this, the quagmire yielding under their feet bore witness. Solomia began digging a hole with her hands and finally reached water. It was a thick and sticky liquid with an offensive odour. Solomia ladled it in her hands and gave it to Ostap. He wetted his lips, but was unable to drink it. Solomia moistened his forehead, removed her outer clothing and placed it under his head. There was no thought of going further through such a dark and unknown land. They had to wait till light.

Ostap lay in the reeds and felt himself weakened. His chest wheezed and it was painful to breathe. Now sleep, or was it unconsciousness, glued his eyelids shut.

"Are you here, Solomia?" he asked and slumbered on.

"Here, here... beside you..."

Solomia's heart ached from sorrow and worry. It would have been easier if the bullet had hit her.

And yet, if she could only see his wound, his face — it seemed it wouldn't be that hard for her. And here you have this darkness, this damned black gloom. It surrounded her from all sides, blurred her vision, hung above her head, crept under her skin, enveloped her and obsessed her heart... She strained her eyes in vain — she couldn't distinguish her

finger from her hand. That gloom lived, moved, breathed, whispered something in thousands of voices, incessantly, stubbornly, whistling like an old woman. Solomia sat terrified and bent her ear to what the gloom was murmuring.

“Sh... sh... sh...” it began from afar. “Sh... sh... sh...” echoed near her. “Sh... sh... sh...” came from all sides — and why should she have cursed?... “Sh... sh... and now he’ll die... you’ll see — he’ll die... sh... sh... sh...”

Solomia became terrified. “You’re lying, lying!...” she wanted to throw in the face of the evil gloom. “He’s mine... he’s going to live... he’s not that badly wounded... look how far he ran...”

But the gloom stubbornly repeated his own: “He’ll die... sh... sh... sh... he’ll die... sh... sh... sh...”

And, as if in response to it, Ostap breathed heavily, quietly moaning in his sleep.

Solomia shut her ears and closed her eyes. This darkness, now more familiar, more tamed, didn’t torment her that much. Instead, she felt damp cold sweep her body. And yet, she didn’t want to take her clothing from beneath Ostap’s head. She only huddled herself to warm up a little. She no longer heard the evil murmurings of the gloom and surrendered herself to hoping for the best. He’d get well, he’d live... she wouldn’t let him die... Oh, if it would only be light already, if it would only be light.

Weariness took its own; Solomia, sitting there, fell asleep.

When she awoke, a grey light fell from the cloudy sky. The fog still hung over the reeds and it was slowly rising. The marshy meadows seemed to be burning.

Ostap lay there with wide open eyes; his young face seemed wilted, his lips parched.

“Well, how do you feel?” Solomia bent over him.

“Not bad... only it’s hard to breathe... I’m burning from thirst... give me some water...”

Something had to be done.

“Can you walk?”

“I don’t know... help me to my feet...”

With Solomia’s help, Ostap got up. He clenched his teeth and tensed himself, trying not to moan — each step hurt ever so much. Solomia supported him and, in this manner, they slowly proceeded through the high walls of yellow reeds.

It didn't take long for them to find water. Soon, a quiet mirror-like pond shone amidst the reeds.

Solomia gave Ostap water, examined and washed his wound. She placed a cool wet rag on his wound and Ostap felt better.

They began to discuss how to get out of the marsh and where to go. Ostap thought it over.

"Where's the sun?" he asked.

Solomia looked at the sky. Over the tops of the slowly waving reeds could be seen pieces of lead-grey clouds. And beyond the high dense brush-like reeds, nothing could be distinguished.

"Which way is the wind blowing?" Ostap asked further.

And even this was hard to determine. It was quiet in the marsh, like in a forest. Only the tops of the reeds rustled, bending now one way, now the other.

It seemed to Ostap that they should keep to the right. Solomia, on the contrary, proposed that they go left against the wind because it seemed that the reeds were bending to the right. Solomia's stubbornness annoyed the wounded man and she was forced to go along with him. They set off. The way was difficult. Even for a healthy person, it was difficult to wander through the thick reeds, overgrown with morning-glories. It was difficult to jump from hassock to hassock without falling into the swampy abyss. They often had to circumvent small inlets and ponds, where Ostap refreshed himself with cold water and moistened his feverishly burning forehead. Solomia almost had to carry Ostap. However, they had to stop often, for the wounded man became tired and needed to rest... Yet, they continued slowly onward, lonely, lost amidst the boundless sea of reeds which waved above them with fluffy tassles and whose monotonous rustle depressed them. They went on in this way for a long while, not knowing the time of day because a piece of leaden sky still hung above them. Around them, the high dense yellow reeds bristled as if moving along with them, enchanted. At times, it seemed to them as if something, a dog or wolf, was rushing through the reeds. Sometimes they avoided, with disgust, sleepy vipers, numb from the cold. These lay in heaps on the hassocks or lazily slithered through the reeds.

Once, they heard above them a noise different from those of the marsh and they guessed that this was a flock of some type of bird, perhaps a gaggle of wild geese. It seemed that

the marsh was endless. Everything around them remained the same, as if they had been standing in one place.

Things began to worsen. Ostop lost his strength and became extremely ill. He was racked with fever. Solomia laid him down beside a pond and began to think. After all, they could perish here without human assistance, without food, and proceeding so slowly! Hunger was already gnawing at her belly. Obviously, they had lost their way and were now wandering in circles through the marsh. And who knew how long they could wander like this through the wilderness. Wouldn't it be better to leave Ostop here and to go and search for a way by herself? She couldn't help him alone, in any case. This approach would be quicker and more sure.

"Leave me by the pond so that I can get some water, and go ahead yourself, look around..." Ostop agreed with her.

"You're probably famished. Do you want to eat?"

"No, I only want to drink."

Solomia bent some reeds and made a bed for the sick man. Without getting up, he could ladle himself a handful of water.

"It'll be good like this..."

Solomia looked around and began to think.

She would go against the wind, for it seemed that the tops of the reeds were bending more toward the right... She wouldn't say anything to Ostop because he would become irritated and begin to argue.

"Don't be lonesome here without me, I'll return soon." She looked back at him and disappeared into the reeds.

She walked and tried to recall the marshy meadows as she had seen them from above, before the crossing.

On the right, it was burning... yes, on the right it was burning. The wind was blowing fire in that direction. On the left, there had been hills and willows. That meant that she had to go in that direction, against the wind. Energetically, she jumped from hassock to hassock. With each passing moment, hope grew in her heart, although the situation hadn't changed. At times, she had to force her way through such dense growth that she was barely able to crawl her way through the yellow walls. Slipping, Solomia fell into the mire above her knees.

Under her feet appeared an abyss but, luckily, she was able to grab a bunch of reeds and pull herself out. She took off her boots, poured the water out of them and continued

on. Here and there amongst the reeds small ponds glistened. Round-leafed water poppies rested peacefully on the ponds, their green pods protruding from the water. Solomia stopped for a moment a few times to gaze from afar at a wild gander which was diligently preening the feathers on his mate's head while she swooned, clicked her beak and spread her wings. At times, vipers swam across narrow stretches of water with a wavy motion. Raising their heads, slowly rocking from side to side like well-bred ladies, they peered everywhere with their round eyes. Perhaps, man had never set foot in this impenetrable wilderness. Here were uncountable secret nooks. Everywhere were the lairs of wild beasts, strewn with the tops of reeds and dry moss. On older reeds, abandoned nests waved. On ruddy, almost red hassocks, made slippery by the fog, were scattered feathers and the discarded skins of vipers. There were so many adders that Solomia quickly ceased to pay any attention to them. Sometimes, pods of the reeds brushed by Solomia burst and covered her, as if with snow, with their white fluff. Solomia walked as if on the bottom of a sea while, above her head, the tops of the reeds rustled like the rolling of turbid ruddy waves. Solomia figured that if she turned to the left the marshy meadows would soon come to an end, for in that direction they wouldn't stretch far. But she had to keep moving against the wind. Suddenly Solomia halted and almost fainted from a horrifying thought. It came into her head that she might not be able to find Ostap, for she had not marked her path in any way. She should at least have broken reeds. She had to turn back immediately while she hadn't yet gone far and hadn't forgotten the way. Her heart beat restlessly as she ran back, searching for her traces. She didn't have time to be cautious, the reeds beat against her face and even injured her feet. But those were trifles. If she could only find Ostap quickly, then she would again set out on her search, only she wouldn't be so stupid, she wouldn't forget to mark her path. At first, everything went well. She found her tracks and followed them back. But soon the tracks vanished. It seemed to Solomia that she had strayed to the left. She went slightly to the right and unexpectedly came across a rather large oblong pond. She hadn't been here, this she remembered well. She had to backtrack a bit to circumvent this obstacle. Now Solomia was unsure which direction to take. It would be better to be guided by the wind; it was necessary that it

blow from behind her. Then she would go with the wind. Solomia looked up. The tops of the reeds waved first to one side, then to the other. It was hard to decide. However, it appeared to Solomia that she should go straight ahead. And so she went. Having gone a ways, Solomia became convinced that she was going against the wind. Should she turn back? She came to a halt. Obviously, she had lost her way. What should she do? Her legs were trembling from the difficult pace. Confused thoughts and speculations wandered through her head. "What should I do?" It seemed that her unsteady glance was asking the reeds. The reeds surrounded her like a hostile throng and whispered at her. Solomia reckoned that she couldn't be very far from Ostap, that he would be able to hear her, and called out, "Ostap!... Ostap!..."

Her voice sounded muffled. The wall of hostile reeds wouldn't allow it to carry far, they absorbed it, swallowed it. Solomia called again, with the same results.

Solomia's heart sank and her arms hung limply. But not for long. A new wave of energy, of fierce daring, permeated her spirit and she threw herself forward, pulling aside and breaking the reeds with the blind courage of a wounded deer. From time to time, she called to Ostap. There was no response. She began to cry at the top of her lungs in the hope that, if not Ostap, then someone else would hear her. It was impossible that she could have strayed so far from the bank where people occasionally traveled. The noise of the reeds already overpowered her. Birds, frightened by a strange voice, circled over Solomia's head, uttering worried cries. The reeds rustled loudly. They pricked at her from in front, pressed her from the sides, reached at her from behind, grasped her feet with their roots, jabbed and cut her with their rough leaves. Yellow, smooth, high, they mocked her, waving their ruddy forelocks above her head. Solomia felt hatred for them, as for a living being. They irritated her. If she had a sickle or a knife, she would cut them until they were all lying flattened on the ground or she herself fell dead. Solomia threw herself at them and began to brutally smash them from anger like she would an enemy.

She tore at them, broke them, twisted them and beat them under her feet. They bent, resisted, their tops became entangled. They wounded her hands and only their roots trembled as if with suppressed laughter.

Exhausted, Solomia fell to the ground. She found it had to breathe. Drops of sweat rolled down her face, her lungs breathed heavily, and her eyes glistened like those of a trapped animal. It meant there was no way out. She would perish here and, because of her, Ostap would die in another place. Solomia was not so much sorry for herself as for Ostap. She pictured to herself how he was now lying, sick and lonely, in the wilderness and looking for her through the reeds. She felt sorrow for that young and wasted life, and began to weep.

Meanwhile, the short autumn day was fading and night rose over the marsh. At first, gloom crept from amongst the reeds, and after that the ponds and the hassocks breathed a white fog.

It was becoming damp and cold. There was no sense carrying on at night. Solomia sat holding her head in her hands and thought. No, she didn't want to die here! As soon as it would become light and it would be possible to go on, she would set off straight, and would continue going straight until she reached the end. She would find people there, would give them all her money which hung sown in a pouch around her neck. With these people she would search the marshy meadows and find Ostap. If she could only wait through the night...

The darker it became, the stronger, it seemed, the wind grew. At least, the reeds made so much noise that it drowned out even her thoughts. Nothing could be heard except the unending, monotonous, eternal sh... sh... sh... True, at times she noticed something rushing low through the reeds, and then their rustling leaves cracked. The birds were restless, they fidgeted, beat their wings amidst the reeds and raised a din as if before a storm.

Solomia sat like that until she fell asleep. She wasn't aware how and when this happened. Tiredness and the noise of the reeds lulled her to sleep.

On awakening, she was unable to say whether it was early or late. Even lower than the day before, the leaden sky descended over the reeds. Solomia's entire body ached, as if beaten. Against her will, her heavy eyelids closed, her head felt stale. However, Solomia couldn't afford to waste a single minute. She went straight ahead from where she stood, and was determined to carry on as long as she had the strength and stamina. She ran, although her legs were weaker than the day before. The air was somehow dense

and it was hard to breathe it in. Besides that, Solomia was tormented by hunger. It was the second day that she hadn't eaten anything. A sickening feeling under her heart gnawed at her stomach. While walking, Solomia pulled out the stems or roots of waterplants and chewed these offensive plants which smelled of mud. The further she went, the more she wondered why today she was encountering so many living creatures. Three times she noticed the grey spine of a wolf in the reeds. Once, she caught a glimpse of a fox's tail and, in the distance, it seemed she could hear the snorting of a wild boar. Today, adders and vipers displayed a special motion because they slithered and slithered in the same direction Solomia was going. She had to be especially careful not to step on the slimy and cold body of a snake. The birds circled over the marshy meadows in large clouds and screamed so loudly that they muffled even the noise of the marsh. Solomia continued onward. She gathered all her energy, all the willpower, all the strength of her body and stubbornly and persistently went forward with the belief that her broad shoulders would break through all obstacles. Yet the marsh was unending. Reeds, ponds, inlets... And again reeds, and again water, and again that same steady, monotonous sound of rolling sea waves. By evening, she sensed smoke and she rejoiced. It meant that people were close. The further she went and the darker it became, the more noticeable the smoke was. The birds were even more restless. The air became warmer. That warmth came from behind and from the sides, as if from a stove. Solomia found it hard to breathe. Those changes in the marsh greatly surprised and even disturbed her. What was happening around her?

Turning around and looking at the sky, she saw red, granite-like clouds and immediately came to understand that smoke which she had smelled, and the warmth, and the restlessness of the birds, and the flight of animals. The marsh was burning, the fiery mountains were advancing and bringing death to everything. Yet the fire was still far off. If she could run faster, she could escape. But it was so stifling, so hard... as if someone was pursuing her from behind and breathing and pressing downwards. Solomia's ears could already catch the distant crackle of dry reeds, an indistinct humming, as if a gigantic beast was smashing something, chomping and snorting heavily. A visible death was reaching for her!... There was no rescue here. Nothing

and nobody could help. Indescribable fear enveloped Solomia. Crying "Oh, my God!... Oh God!" she ran with the last of her strength and blindly threw herself into the reeds, following the vipers, beasts and everything living which, escaping from imminent death, rushed in mad fear from the approaching breakers of the fiery sea...

And yet it was coming. It rolled after them in unremitting, indefeatable, merry waves. It spread like gold across the marshy meadows, devouring the reeds, guzzling the water, setting the sky ablaze...

\* \* \*

After Solomia's departure, Ostap felt himself cut off from the world, from people. The fever burned inside him, he constantly wet his hand in the water and cooled his forehead, his eyes, his head. Looking at the yellow wall of reeds wearied him and he closed his eyes. He was thinking. Recalling his former plans, he wondered why he had come here to the Turkish lands, why he had left his native village and his grandfather. How was his grandfather now? Was he alive and well? Did he recall Ostap? If he could only come and see his grandson — wounded, exhausted, left in the reeds to be eaten by wolves and ravens.

He was delirious and in his fever he called for his grandfather.

His grandfather came. Silently and unnoticed, he climbed out of the reeds and stood before Ostap, his arms folded.

"You're wounded, my son. Were you fighting with the Polacks?"

"No, grandfather, a *Moskal* shot me when I was crossing the border."

"And where are your comrades from the Danube *Sich*? Why are you lying alone amidst the reeds?"

"Oh, grandfather, do you think the *Sich* is still there? No, there's no *Sich* anymore, grandfather... There was, but it's gone. *Hladky* \*, perhaps you've heard, has taken the brotherhood to the Azov steppe. He's left the Turks..."

"So what are you going to do in the foreign land, my son?"

\* Cossack leader who led the Zaporizhian Cossacks back to the Russian Empire in 1828

"If I live, I'll till the soil, live by fishing... all the same, it's better to be free than under the landlord... Some of our people are still there, grandfather, under the Turk..."

Ostap conversed with his grandfather and he lifted Ostap's spirits, gave him advice, recounted the past and spoke about what was happening in the village at present...

Whenever Ostap opened his eyes, his grandfather hid in the reeds, but it was enough to close them for his grandfather to reappear and again listen to Ostap's adventures or speak about himself.

By the evening, Ostap began to worry what had happened to Solomia, why she hadn't come back yet. Why hadn't she returned? After all, she knew that it was difficult for him to even move, that he couldn't extricate himself from this labyrinth on his own.

Or, perhaps, she had deserted him?... "Solomia... Solomia..." moaned the sick man, but his moans were muffled by the noise of the marsh.

It became worse during the night. He was racked with fever. It burnt like a fire and it so stabbed at his chest that only with great effort was he able to reach for water. He wanted to cough, but the pain wouldn't allow it. And Solomia still hadn't returned. Ostap didn't sleep and only on occasion, for a few minutes, fell into a restless slumber. The night dragged on, as endless as death... And there was no Solomia... Where was she, what had happened to her? Ostap yearned for her.

At daybreak, Ostap felt a living creature near him.

"Is that you, Solomia?" he asked and opened his eyes.

"Is she joking that she's transformed herself into a dog?" he thought and became a bit more conscious.

In front of him stood not a dog, but a wolf. He was huge, grey, splattered, with hungry burning eyes. He perked up his ears and extended his muzzle toward Ostap, debating whether it was safe to attack or not. Ostap lay there defenceless and stared at the wolf. He could distinctly see the wolf's slightly twisted, deep and salivating mouth, the tufts of hair on his chest and his strong wet paws.

The beast stood motionless. Finally, he advanced one paw, then another, and came a bit closer to Ostap.

Ostap ladled up a handful of water and showered the wolf with it. Several drops reached his muzzle and fell on it. The wolf snarled and sat on his haunches, but didn't retreat.

Ostap again sprinkled him with water. The wolf snapped his teeth and blinked his eyes. He was displeased. After sitting a while longer without taking his eyes off Ostap, he suddenly stretched his neck, moved forward and howled so mournfully that a cold shiver ran down Ostap's back. He howled long, held several notes with great taste, his eyes closed. Finally, he went silent, sat for a while and again approached Ostap. Ostap's only weapon was the water, with which, from time to time, he splashed the wolf, not letting him approach. The wolf finally became bored. Several times he angrily and fiercely snapped his teeth at Ostap, turned and disappeared into the reeds.

After this encounter, Ostap began thinking about death. His time to die had come.

All the same, either dead or alive, he would be eaten by wolves or riddled by the worms in this maze. Did it make any difference?

Ostap recalled Kotyhoroshok. "Do you think I'm afraid of death?" Ostap heard his squeaky voice. "Not at all. Let God send death now. You only die once. You die — and that's the end, you won't get up again..."

Ostap was also not afraid of death. He only wanted to see Solomia before he died. He had seen his grandfather; he had come to him. But there was no trace of Solomia... Perhaps she had lost her way in the marsh or the wolves had torn her apart. And Ostap felt sorry for Solomia, terribly sorry. She was so good, she loved him so. She had followed him on the long journey, she hadn't spared her braids for his sake. She had taken care of him like his own mother and was faithful as a friend. And now that they had attained their freedom and should have begun a new life in happiness and joy, death was coming and was drowning them like unwanted puppies in a river... "Drowning... drowning... drowning..." the reeds on his right sang his death prayer to him. "Death... death... death..." was taken up from the left.

Ostap lay there an infinitely long time. The autumn day dragged slowly, the grey sky filtered a pale light.

Ostap was bored. He imagined that he was waiting for the ferry... soon he would cross... very soon... and he couldn't, something wouldn't let him... "Be quiet, people, don't grab..." whispers old Ovsy, and the sky is ablaze. The fires burn, grow, and the heat from them burns Ostap, boils his blood. A hot wave beats against his heart, his

head clears. He doesn't want to die. He wants to live... the world is so beautiful... Ostap is still young, he still hasn't lived, hasn't known anything... He still wants to gaze at the sun, to see God's world, people, to embrace Solomia... He is still alive, he won't lie here like a log, he won't wait death's approach...

Ostap slides off the bed and begins to crawl.

It hurts. But nothing. Endure it, Cossack!... He'll crawl, grabbing not only with his hands and feet, but even with his teeth. And he will crawl out of this swamp.

Ostap is crawling. It's hard. He has to take each hassock by storm. His lungs ache and his breath is halting. His legs are heavy, as if shackled. He rests, fainting at times, comes to and again crawls along the bottom of the reedy sea. A hot wave rolls across his heart. A wild indefeatable thirst for life burns within and fills his entire being.

Suddenly he hears above him, "Ostap! Ostap! Is it you? Are you alive?"

He knows whose voice it is; it belongs to his faithful Solomia, descended from heaven to take him to herself.

"It's me, it's me, beloved..." he responds to her and feels her helping him to his feet, taking him into her arms, like a baby. And they fly together into the night, into the starry heaven... He feels so happy, so good...

#### IV

Beside the beaten-down road by which the peasants of the Danube villages go to Halats, a small Gypsy settlement hid itself among a group of willows, amongst the reeds. It consisted of merely three huts resembling chicken coops — low, crooked, and plastered with clay like swallows' nests.

Obviously, nobody lived in two of them, for the windows were pulled out, the reed roofs were dilapidated and the ends of rafters stuck out like the ribs of a skeleton. Only in one clay-plastered hut two windows were lit and smoke rose from a chimney made of willows...

There lived the single Gypsy family in the settlement.

Most of the space in the hut was taken up by the *pich* with its large chimney which stretched almost to the ground. The oven was so low that the fire burned almost on the ground. A grey-haired disheveled Gypsy woman warmed her tattered clothing near the fire, putting more reeds on

to burn and smoking a short pipe. On a bench, in a comfortable and picturesque pose, a young Gypsy was stretched out. His black curls stuck out through his torn straw hat and his sparkling eyes and merry, bearded, pock-marked face smiled at a young woman who, bending over, was struggling to pull a boot off her husband's foot. Her slender frame bent from strain like a tight bow and her fantastically blue cloak and red skirt could not conceal the strong build of her young body.

On the threshold stood a tall old Gypsy, as if debating whether to enter the hut or not. Finally, he crossed the threshold, came up to the *pich* and drew near the fire. His stern clean-shaven face glistened like copper. Then he said to the young man, "Have you driven in the wretched nag, Radu? So she doesn't somehow get loose into the marsh and get burnt."

Radu was about to answer when something rapped strongly against the window.

Everyone startled. The young Gypsy woman rushed out of the hut. Soon afterward, her shrill throaty voice could be heard from outside, "*Radu, aorde!*" \*

Radu lazily rose from the bench and went outside. The old man followed him.

Under a window, in a pleading pose before the young Gypsy woman, was some strange woman — pale, bare-headed, in torn mud-stained clothing. She was trying to say something. Her lips moved, but the voice didn't come. This tormented her and she spoke with her eyes — red, frightened and fearful. At last, she managed to gasp, "Good people... save him... save him!... Ostap is lying there, not far away... let's go... save him!..."

The Gypsies didn't understand a word.

"*Sodesh dusha?*" \*\* asked the old Gypsy.

However, Solomia wasn't listening to him. She turned to Radu, grabbed the young Gypsy woman by her cloak, and pleaded with the old man. She moaned and pulled them after her.

The Gypsies weren't enthusiastic. They discussed, argued, yelled. At last, they came to a decision — Solomia noted that. She grabbed the young Gypsy woman by the hand, as if she was afraid to lose her, and ran in the direction of the

\* "Radu, come here!"

\*\* "What are you saying?"

burning marsh. The Gypsies could barely keep up with her. Crossing the road, they continued along the edge of the marsh.

"*Kai zha?*" \* Radu worriedly yelled at Solomia.

But she didn't reply and continued running onward. Finally, she stopped, bent toward the ground and uttered, "Ostap!..." There was no reply.

The Gypsies also bent over, looking. A man was lying there. The old Gypsy struck a light, set fire to a reed and brought it closer to Ostap's face. Ostap's eyes were closed and, on his white face, his young moustaches and thick eyebrows were distinctly black.

"*Sanshukar...*" \*\* whispered the young Gypsy woman, bending over Ostap.

This praise, apparently, irritated Radu, for he snapped at the woman in a wild throaty voice and pushed her away from Ostap.

"Good people," pleaded Solomia on her knees, "be kind, take us into your home... you can see for yourselves — we are perishing... my man has been shot, he's barely alive, we almost died in the marsh... I'll repay you, I'll work for you... take everything I have... everything... only don't forsake us... Here..."

With these words, Solomia tore the pouch from her neck and poured a few silver coins into the old Gypsy's hand. The old man clinked the coins in his palm, tossed them up and put them in his pocket.

"*Mishto!* \*\*\*..." he said curtly.

After discussing it with the younger one, they took Ostap — one by the arms, another by the legs — and gently set off for the house.

The old Gypsy woman became enlivened when they brought in the wounded man. Her ugly yellow witch-like face immediately became kinder. Her grey hair, which fell from beneath her black kerchief, gently lay on Ostap's chest as if on that of her own son when she washed and bound his wounds. Soon, having drunk some herbs, his wound dressed, and warmed by the heat, Ostap opened his eyes. This so pleased the old Gypsy woman that she chattered something lively, puffed heavily on her pipe and patted Solomia's shoulders with joy.

\* "Where are you going?"

\*\* "Handsome"

\*\*\* "Good!"

The old Gypsy woman took Ostap under her wing. She fussed over him, prepared herbal drinks for him, examined his wound, and gave him goat's milk, especially when Hitsa and Radu left the house.

In the presence of the men, the young Mariutsa didn't pay any attention to Ostap and even pretended that she was angered by the entire situation. She often cursed loudly in a harsh crow-like voice and cast an unwelcoming eye into the corner where the wounded man lay. Yet, Solomia noticed that all of this was done more for Radu's sake because, in her anger, the young Gypsy woman surreptitiously glanced at her husband, obviously interested in what effect this had on him.

However, whenever the men went outside, Mariutsa turned into a good kind woman and helped Solomia and her old mother to attend to Ostap. She covered him with the warmest of her rags, brushed his hair back from his forehead, shooed away the autumn flies and did all this with such a willingness, with such lively and graceful movements, that she appeared like a delicate plant bending in the wind. Glancing with her sparkling dark eyes now at Ostap, now at Solomia, she asked Solomia, "*Manush? Manush?*" \*

And when Solomia, not understanding what was being asked, nodded her head randomly, the young woman inquired further, "*Sarbu shos?*" \*\*

Sometimes, because of Ostap, the Gypsy women were late in their search for alms. Each morning, they harnessed the small, thin and mangy mare to a two-wheeled cart, took burlap sacks with them and climbed into a wooden box made of old boards which served in place of a seat in their cart. The box was so high that the old Gypsy woman completely disappeared in it. Only her frightful head with its unkempt white hair, her red pipe in her teeth, peered out. Mariutsa knelt in the box and jerked the reins. The small mangy nag sadly bent her head and refused to move. Mariutsa clucked at her, hit her with the reins, used first one end of her whip, then the other, and encouraged her with throaty sounds. The nag still refused. Then the old Gypsy woman released a wild inhuman cry from her dry breast, lifted her fist with the smoking pipe, shook it, and

\* "Is he your husband?"

\*\* "What's his name?"

cursed so horribly and vehemently that the reeds bent over from terror and shame. When the men were around, they helped the women with their yells and their hands. Amidst this indescribable uproar, the old nag finally thought it over, stretched her spine, expanded her ribs and, barely shifting her trembling feet, began dragging this strange cart along the dusty road.

They visited the villages, begged, got an egg in one place, a handful of flour or corn in another, dug dirty shabby rags out of garbage heaps and, in the evening, unloaded such a wide variety of things from their cart that it was hard to believe that all of these were the donations of well-wishing and generous people.

In the evening, Hitsa and Radu woke up — they had a habit of sleeping by day and disappearing at night — and the smokey hut became merry and noisy. The fire burned in the oven, the women prepared some kind of concoction and, like magpies, filled the hut with their throaty calls and recounted their adventures. During supper, vodka and wine appeared. Everybody drank, called out, waved their arms, bent like reeds, flashed their dark eyes whose whites displayed a bluish tint, and exposed their dark naked chests. On occasion, neighbouring Gypsies came for supper. They were sombre and uncertain figures who also drank, called out and banged their fists on the table.

The dark shadows of the dark Gypsies danced on the walls and it seemed that the hut was as crowded as a bazaar.

Ostap couldn't sleep because of the noise; he lay with his wide-open eyes in a fever and imagined that he had fallen into hell.

The merry company invited Solomia to join them and offered her wine, but Solomia, not understanding the Gypsy language, turned down the invitations — all the more so because she had other worries.

By night, everything became silent. Hitsa, Radu and the guests set out for somewhere and the Gypsy women climbed onto the *pich*. The next day it all repeated itself.

Left alone in the hut when the women went begging and the men were snoring on the benches by the walls or had disappeared somewhere, Solomia placed cold water beside Ostap and went to work. She whitewashed the black smokey walls of the hut which resembled a wild cave, swept the floor, dusted Hitsa's violin, washed the table and even the

neglected window-panes through which could be seen the ruddy sea of reeds and the white goat wandering near the hut.

Solomia kept trying to thank the Gypsies for their rescue and protection. All the same, nothing she did pleased the old Gypsy. She gathered this from his spiteful glances and his grumblings. But what was she to do? She could not go and find work in the city or village and leave the sick man alone without care, for Ostap constantly needed her. Even while she was cleaning the hut, he often called her in his weak voice, "Solomia!..."

"What's wrong, Ostap?" she replied, leaving her work.

"Sit by me..."

She sat down on the bench and he silently gazed at her with his eyes red from fever, or talked nonsense.

Yet Solomia didn't lose hope and didn't even worry much. Youth can endure. If they hadn't died in the marsh, if they hadn't perished to this point, then already they wouldn't — if only Ostap would get well more quickly.

And Ostap was getting better. The fever soon eased, the wound healed quickly and his strength began to return. After two weeks, he was already able to raise himself from the bench, stagger to the window and sadly gaze with his eyes at the waves of ruddy, almost red, reeds.

Now Solomia could leave Ostap alone during the day. She discussed with him whether she shouldn't go through the villages with the Gypsy women. Perhaps, somebody would hire her for day-work. And maybe she would meet their own people. Unlike these strangers, maybe they could advise her and help them.

"So, go," Ostap agreed. "Maybe you'll ask for something for me when I'm healthy..."

The next day, just as soon as the Gypsy women had started off to beg, Solomia followed their cart. They noticed and were surprised.

"*Kai zha?*" Mariutsa yelled, turning around.

Solomia only waved her arm, indicating that she was going the same way they were. The Gypsies muttered a bit and relaxed.

Solomia walked along the marsh. From the side, during the day, it didn't seem terrible, and even beautiful. The strong high reeds glistened like gold in the sun. Their tops swayed in the wind and rustled invitingly, like a field of high ripe wheat. Although the weather was sunny and dry,

a cold autumn wind was blowing and cut through Solomia's poor clothing. "Winter is coming," she thought, "and neither Ostap nor I have anything with which to protect ourselves. I'll have to earn some money."

Solomia was lucky. The Gypsy women had apparently guessed why she was following them because, in the very first village they came to, they led her to a wealthy Bulgarian who hired her to clean wool. From that day onward, Solomia brought home some money and bought better food for Ostap.

However, old Hitsa understood which way the wind was blowing. Noticing that Solomia was bringing money home, he approached her one time, stretched out his palm, glared at her menacingly and demanded, "Give me the money! Do you think I'm going to feed you for nothing?..."

Solomia didn't understand the words but she guessed what was wanted.

All the same, Hitsa, to make everything more clear, pulled a coin out of his pocket, put it in his palm and, pointing at it with a black finger from his other hand, stubbornly and angrily demanded, "*Para! Para!*" \*

Solomia gave him what she had. It was the same with all her further earnings. They disappeared into Hitsa's deep pocket.

With each passing day, life in the Gypsy hut became more and more difficult. Once the following happened. The dressing on Ostap's wound slipped and he was unable to cope with it; he was unable to rebind it. At that time, Mariutsa was at home. She noticed it and helped Ostap retie the kerchief. At that moment, as she was bent over Ostap, Radu entered the house. The Gypsy immediately turned white and his beard and hair changed from black to blue.

"*Aordel!*" \*\*

He thundered at the woman in an angry, tight, hoarse voice. His hands instinctively clenched into fists.

Without haste, Mariutsa tied the kerchief and stood before Radu — straight, tall, taut like a bowstring, with a calm but threatening look on her face. Her eyes unblinkingly stared into his as if to say, "Just try to touch me." For about a minute they stood there like statues, one facing the other. Radu was first to gather himself; he raised his hand and

\* "Money! Money!" (*Turkish*)

\*\* "Come here!"

put it on her shoulder heavily. Then his hand unclenched and pulled at her braids. Mariutsa bent over, as if submitting to Radu, but immediately jumped up and scratched his pale face with all ten of her claws. He roared with pain and pulled her to himself, clutching her. She squirmed and twisted in his grasp like an eel and her blue cloak hung from one shoulder like a broken wing. The fight inflamed them. They flew at one another, bumping their chests like enraged roosters. They bit and clawed like cats, roared with anger and shook each other so fiercely that their hair bristled and stuck out like the stuffing from their torn rags. At last, they broke apart, their eyes shining marvelously, their chests panting, their nostrils breathing fire on their pale proud faces...

Ostap trembled, frustrated that he didn't have the strength to beat the Gypsy.

"I'd show you," he thought. "If only the *Moskal* hadn't drained the blood from me."

Quite a lot of blood had been drained, for his health returned to Ostap slowly, his strength built up drop by drop and, for a long time, his white lips wouldn't redden.

Moreover, he wasn't free. The sea of reeds rolled toward him with its ruddy waves from every direction and wouldn't release him. It was as if he were its captive.

Left entire days on his own, Ostap tested his trembling legs like a fledgling its wings. He was sad and sorry that he couldn't find the strength in himself to quickly leave this Gypsy home. Examining the life of that home, Ostap saw much out of the ordinary, and even worrisome. During the daytime, Hitsa and Radu slept. At night, they disappeared somewhere. Often, during the night, interrupting the peaceful slumber of the hut, came a sudden knock at the window and the house was filled with a whole gang of strange people who drank, yelled, flashed their greedy eyes and argued like wolves on the run. Once, Ostap couldn't sleep. He opened the outer door to get a breath of fresh air and saw Radu drive home someone else's horses, hobble them and lead them into the reeds.

"Aha," thought Ostap. "So that's how it is!..."

The more Ostap looked, the more he understood and the more he became certain that he had fallen into a den of thieves.

The marsh was a good place for caching stolen goods. The old and young Gypsies lived with them like kindred

souls and audaciously entrusted them with all the secrets of their dangerous trade.

"We should flee from here!" Ostap told Solomia, relating his observations to her. "We could yet find ourselves up to our necks in trouble. Radu has it in for me because of his long-nosed woman — damn her! He beats the young girl for no good reason."

However, Radu didn't always argue with his wife. There were days when the whole family, as if by prior agreement, stayed at home and rested. They ate together, drank wine and were merry. If, from time to time, anyone flared or the sinister bluish gleam in their eyes disturbed the peacefulness, then it was only for a moment. Immediately after such incidents, laughter again burst forth and the joy was as wild as the argument.

After dinner, Hitsa would take his fiddle off the wall. The whole family already knew what to expect and took their places outside the house. The old Gypsy woman packed her red pipe with fresh tobacco and made herself comfortable on the *pryzba* \* Hitsa pulled his shabby straw hat over his forehead, took his position by the door and began. At first, Mariutsa only stared at Radu with her wide-open eyes and he slightly winked his fiery eye and dark moustache at her. But as soon as the fiddle became more lively and began to move their dancing sinews, the young woman could not restrain herself. She tore herself off the bench like a black bird and threw herself into the dance so fervently that her blue cloak became inflated and flapped in the wind. Radu was alert. All his movements, normally slow, became light and alluring in the dance, his feet barely touched the earth, his arms bent like rubber, his entire body resembled a slender and pliant branch. At first, they danced slowly, lithely, as if bending in the wind. But suddenly, Hitsa bent down and hugged his fiddle. He raised a note and pulled it yet higher and higher so that it quivered and made everybody gasp for breath. Finally, the note tore from its height and tumbled downwards. At first, it tumbled alone, jumping and gaining momentum and then, as if casually, it joined a second note, a third. Those notes rang out and together tumbled downward like stones from a mountain, ever quicker and quicker, gaining yet more momentum, joining yet more notes, transforming them-

\* Low bench-like foundation structure running along the wall of a house.

selves into a landslide of sound, a powerful musical waterfall in which could be heard the wild savagery of movement.

That waterfall completely engulfed the dancers and roused their every sinew. The dancers increased their tempo, enticed each other with their arms and their eyes, coming closer and drawing back, swooning with pleasure, avoiding the embrace with a swift movement and again rocking in the dance like black swans on the waves. Even in those moments when it seemed that they were standing still, every muscle in their dark bodies trembled under their clothes, their chests panting heavily, their white teeth glistening through parted lips and, from their breasts, flew a short cry of passion.

The old Gypsy woman, barely visible through the smoke from her pipe, clapped her hands. Beside her, the white goat stood and, without blinking, gazed upon her masters as if enchanted by the melody of the Gypsy dance.

Ostap also crawled out of the house to watch the dancing. "Oh, how they dance, as if they were drunk," he thought to himself and recalled the musicians in his village whom he had once hired to play for Solomia.

\* \* \*

Unexpectedly, an event occurred which agitated the entire Gypsy band. Once, before dawn, Radu carried a beaten, bloodied Hitsa into the house. The old Gypsy quietly groaned, leaving behind him a trail of blood from the threshold to the bench. The women were frightened. The old woman hissed and cursed Radu and he, somber and upset, explained something to her in a whisper, as if afraid that someone might overhear what he was saying. The old Gypsy woman kicked up a row, setting everyone in motion. Solomia had to light the stove; Mariutsa and her mother examined the wounded man; Radu hastened to throw Hitsa's blood-stained clothing into the fire and to scrape away the traces of blood from the floor. He was restless, pacing in and out of the house, disappearing somewhere and again reappearing to secretly consult with the women. They didn't go out begging. The ragged mare wandered the whole day around the house, exposing her starved ribs to the wind and gnawing at the last yellowed and dried grass. The old Gypsy woman was obviously worried. She shouted,

cried and wouldn't leave Hitsa's side. Mariutsa was calm, but pensive. Hitsa quietly lay in the corner although he, at times, summoned everyone and then three dark heads hung over him and secret discussions were held. Something extraordinary must have happened. What exactly, Ostap didn't know, although he could guess. Hitsa's incident bothered both him and Solomia, and they resolved to quit this dangerous place despite the fact that it would be difficult for Ostap to set foot on the road. The next day, Solomia would have to ask the Bulgarian to give Ostap shelter for a while and, as soon as he was better, they would have to leave this marshland immediately.

But it worked out differently. The next day, around noon, Turkish soldiers fell upon the Gypsy hut, searched it, found some items in the reeds and bound everyone in the house, even the weak Hitsa. Ostap vainly assured them that he was a stranger here; he vainly told the story of how he had come to the marshland. They ignored him as they ignored the lamentations of the women and Radu's curses.

They put Hitsa onto the cart driven by the ragged mare, barred the door with a pole and, praising Allah and cursing, drove their captives along the road to Halats.

Only the goat was left as master of the house amidst the reeds. She bleated pitifully as the autumn wind tousled her white fleece...

## V

Solomia was lucky that day. Nobody was working at the Bulgarian's for it was some local holiday. She went to her master's parlor to ask about Ostap. Because of the holiday, the Bulgarian was a bit tipsy and merry. He willingly permitted Ostap to spend the night together with his hired hands and even gave Solomia some money in advance. Solomia decided to make use of the free day and the money to go to Halats to buy warm clothing for Ostap. Her spirits were particularly cheerful and light that day. It felt so good to breathe the frosty air and everything bad in life receded into the background, paled away. Confidence that everything would end well and that she would yet know a happy life was growing. Solomia didn't notice how she appeared in the bazaar. Her eyes were dazzled by the long rows of

stalls filled with heaps of different clothing with mountains of white and ruddy *kachula* \* which lay on the stalls, looking as if a flock of sheep had come to rest there. There were heaps of light goat-skin shoes and their smell spread throughout the bazaar. She didn't know where to turn first and probably would have stood there for a long time if somebody hadn't pulled at her sleeve from behind.

"Solomial!" a goat-like voice called at her. "Is it you or your ghost?" it chuckled.

Solomia turned around to find Kotyhoroshok standing in front of her.

"Ivan! How did you end up here?" she cried, greeting him like a long-lost brother.

"What? Did you think I had been lost?... Where's Ostap?"

"Ostap... let's get away from here, sit down somewhere and I'll buy what I need later..." And Solomia led Ivan, touched by such affection, out of the crowd.

"Ho-ho-ho! It's a small world, isn't it?" he laughed, barely keeping up with Solomia on his short legs. His well-fed body rocked with laughter.

Ivan had gained some weight, had become more prosperous-looking, and gave the impression more of a master than a servant. His short woolen shirt was tied with a wide green belt and his wide cossack pants were not tucked into his high boots. Because of this, he looked even shorter. He was sporting a goat-like beard which lay in a dignified manner across his chest, as if he were a man of status and means. They found a place on the stairs leading to a store.

"There you go!" exclaimed Ivan. "It's as if I'm dreaming that I see you... Tell me at least what miracle brought you here?"

Solomia began to explain but Ivan kept interrupting her.

"Ho-ho! I call out — 'Ostap! Solomial!' and when I look, there's only water all around... only the splashing of the oars, only the splashing... and the bank simply disappeared into the darkness..."

"Oh, misery!" Ivan lamented like an old woman. "So he got hit under the heart, eh..."

Ivan stared with his wide-open eyes at Solomia and waved his goat-like beard in wonderment.

\* Sheep's wool (*Turkish*)

“Sure, sure. They could have roasted him like a boar and a Christian soul could have been lost like a pinch of tobacco...

“...And what do you think — exactly the same thing happened to me; and so we reached the bank...

“...There you go! Oh that damned Gypsy woman!... so he beats her and she tears his eyes out of his head, that’s the way it is...”

Ivan kept interrupting Solomia’s story, trying to relate his own adventures instead. Finally, he succeeded in recounting his tale.

“We climbed out of the boats, stepped onto Turkish soil and the whole world seemed so foreign to me, oh God!... Imagine! A man thinks about the company of good people, and here he only has your bundle in his hands... The next day we go to the *konak* \* to register, and the only thing on my mind is you and Ostap, and I’m almost crying with sorrow... They registered us and said we were free... Well, a man lives and thinks — ho-ho-ho!... Some of our group set out for Tulcha, for Isakcha, to their relatives, but I saw that our people are also here — so I stayed behind. I thought that I might hear some news about you — oh, God!... Wait, don’t interrupt... So I went to the bazaar, stood among our people and watched those who were being hired... Turks pass by, croaking like our Jews... Dark Greeks rush back and forth... One man came up to me — they call them Rumanians here \*\*.— ‘Come and be my *argat*’... In their language, *argat* means a hired hand... But I didn’t know what he was talking about... ‘What do you want?’ I ask. And he — ‘*Argat, argat*’... Finally, people explained to me... ‘Why not?’ I say and went with him. Oh good man, praise be to him, he feeds well... Whenever his wife starts yelling at me, he softens so that I don’t leave. ‘*Bun \*\*\* argat,*’ he says, ‘*bun,*’ and pats me on the shoulder... He probably thinks that I’ll thresh his grain till I die!... Aha, just wait and see, ho-ho-ho!... Savka — you remember Savka — so tall and thin?.. Oh, you don’t remember that Savka... He was so thin and tall that they nicknamed him ‘Stretch’... he has invited me to Tulcha... ‘Go there,’ he says, ‘the lands there are free, take as much as you can work, clear the forest, build a house,

\* Police station (*Turkish*)

\*\* The traditional Ukrainian word for Rumanians was “volokhy”, from the Rumanian province of Vlachia (Wallachia)

\*\*\* Good (*Rumanian*)

you'll be a master yourself.' ...You know what, Solomia, you know what? Let's all go there, oh, God! And Ostap with us... It'll be so good! Let's go to your place right away, we'll discuss it with Ostap... yet wait, today's a holiday... well, so what! So what!.. I couldn't even dream about this... It's true what they say; it's a small world... ho-ho-ho!"

Ivan shook his head from side to side; from this happy thought his well-fed face and round eyes glistened as if covered with butter. He incessantly bleated in his goat-like voice, boasted, hoped, promised in God's name and pleaded.

Solomia herself thought about those lands to which Ivan was calling them. While working for the Bulgarian, she had heard about the homesteads of those who had fled and was only waiting for Ostap to get a bit better. Now together with Ivan and that Savka — which Savka was that? — she was more willing to set out to a new place.

"Well, alright. Only wait until I make my purchases..."

"I'll go with you... I'll stick to you like a drowning man to a raft or else I'll lose you again... ho-ho-ho!"

Soon, Solomia and Ivan were walking through the marshland toward the Gypsy settlement. Ivan was joyful, merry. He trotted on his short legs and chattered incessantly like a magpie. They saw the white goat first. She was rubbing herself against the trunk of a dry willow and bleating pitifully. Approaching the house, Solomia felt an inexplicable anxiety. Why, she didn't know, although the anxiety had poisoned her blood. Solomia, no longer paying any attention to Ivan's chattering, ran to the door. It was barred from the outside with the pole. What had happened? Why had they locked Ostap in? She kicked the pole aside and ran into the house. It was a mess; overturned benches lay upside down, rags were scattered everywhere, the house was dark and deserted. Not a soul. Where had everybody gone? Where had Ostap gone? Maybe she was mistaken and had entered the wrong house! Solomia ran outside. No, it was the same house, here was that crack in the wall, and those same willows, and the same goat... Perhaps, Ostap had gone outside and barred the door?

Solomia called him. No one responded. Why was there such disorder in the house, why was everything overturned, lying in disarray?... Where was the wounded Hitsa? He couldn't even move when she had left the house, he was barely alive. What had happened?

Solomia ran around the house and looked in the shed.

The horse and cart were gone. She ran to the other houses and looked through their broken windows — nobody, nothing. Her legs were trembling. Her whole body was trembling. The anxiety was strangling her chest and throat. Where was Ostap?

“There you go!” said Ivan in bewilderment. He ran after Solomia, stared at her and pestered her with many silly propositions.

“What have they done with him?” the young woman asked herself. She looked at Ivan without seeing him. She couldn’t understand anything; a string of thoughts and ideas jumped about in her head.

“Well! God knows what’s happened! Let’s go to the *konak*,” Ivan advised. “‘There was a man,’ we’ll explain, ‘and now he’s disappeared’... You’ll see, they’ll find him...”

Solomia was eager to grasp at anything in order to find Ostap. And there was nothing left to do but to follow Ivan’s advice. To be certain, she once again searched every nook and cranny in the house and called to Ostap in the marsh several times. Ivan joined her in his squeaking voice. It was all for nothing. Then they made their way back to Halats as fast as they could, for dusk was already falling.

It was already night when they got to the *konak*. Here they had to wait because the officer in charge had gone to the mosque and hadn’t yet returned and the Turkish soldiers couldn’t understand them. Finally, they were summoned. A stout good-natured Turk with a curved nose and dark, glistening moustaches on his fresh face calmly listened to them through a dragoman. He exchanged a few words with another Turk and again through the dragoman calmly explained, “You needn’t look any further; we have him here, under lock and key. The bird has fallen into our hands... For a long time, we’ve set out snares for those sparrows and, finally, they got caught. We’ve caught a whole nest of them. They’ve sent a soul into paradise and have themselves fallen into hell. Tell us, young woman, when did your man receive that bullet in his ribs? Probably not when Hitsa received his, perhaps on another occasion, for his wound is already healing... From a *Moskal*, you say, during the crossing... I knew that he was a *Rus* \*, an escapee... So we’ll send him back, we have enough of our own trouble-makers... Let them caress his back... Don’t plead, don’t

\* A word used to refer to a person of Eastern Slavic descent

beg — I won't help you... Well, why are you standing there? *Aida!...*"

"And who are you?" the Turk said, noting Ivan. "You're also, obviously, from the Gypsy camp?"

"I... I'm no one... I'm nothing. What are you talking about — I work here for a vintner, Todoraki is his name — don't you know him? There you go!..."

Solomia froze when she heard of Ostap's misfortune. She indignantly cast aside those charges, recounted her entire history, pleaded, almost cried. The Turk didn't want to listen. He looked away and began to talk with another. The dragoman waved Solomia out with his arms and almost pushed her out the door.

She left the *konak*. What could she do, to whom could she turn?

They silently walked along the dark streets of the strange city. A fog hung in front of them and through it they could clearly see only wet yellow tree branches illuminated by the upper-story windows of stone buildings. They encountered few passers-by. But on benches by the gates, merry and talkative Rumanians sat in rows like sparrows on a fence. All this was so strange, so indifferent to Solomia's grief, even more indifferent than the marsh. And why had she and Ostap come here? And why had they gone through so much, why had they suffered so much in Bessarabia, and almost perished in the marsh? Wouldn't it have been better to rot in landlord bondage, amongst their own people?

"Don't worry," Ivan comforted her, "They'll make a decision there in the *konak*... They won't harm an innocent man... You'll see, they'll set him free... And tomorrow we'll consult with people... I'll go to my employer, he's from these parts, he knows the customs... Don't worry, it won't help... Hey, where can I put you up for the night?... Maybe Savka knows. Let's go to Savka, he's got a good landlady..."

After long wanderings through dirty and dark streets, they finally reached Savka's place. He wasn't home, but his landlady put Solomia up for the night.

"I'll drop over tomorrow, about noon... perhaps I'll ask some time from my employer..." Kotyhoroshok parted with her.

Solomia cried all night and didn't go to work in the morning. She impatiently waited for Ivan. And truly, Ivan appeared, as he had promised, around noon.

“So, what?” Solomia jumped at him.

“They want *bakshish*... You don’t know what *bakshish* is? Something in the hand, a bribe... If we don’t give it, they’ll deliver the poor soul to Reni, to the *Moskals*... And they won’t pat his head, oh no... Savka said — you remember Savka? — that when he was taken to the other side of the Danube, the *Moskals* whipped him so mercilessly that the blue scars can still be seen... They also shaved half his head, burned a brand on his forehead — you didn’t see it because he covers it with his forelock — and sent him back to his landlord... He spent so much time in jail that he lost count of it. And what his master did to him he doesn’t even want to remember. So, he again fled here to Tulcha, he said he’d go, the determined lad... ho-ho!... We have to gather some *bakshish* to free Ostap, and where shall we find the money? Where? Tell me! My head is spinning from the thought of it...”

Despite all the horrors recounted by Ivan, Solomia began to see things more clearly. If it was only a question of money, she’d force herself but she’d get it. She’d give up her last crust of bread, she’d save her last penny to buy his freedom. Maybe Ivan would also help.

“Here’s everything I’ve saved. Let’s put it all together...” said Ivan as if guessing her thought and unwrapping a kerchief containing a handful of silver coins. He was ashamed and blinked his eyes. “And maybe there’s something in your bundle which you can sell...”

Solomia took the money. In her bundle were some coral beads and clothing. She sold it all, assisted by Savka’s landlady, but there was little money. All the same, the next morning, Solomia ran to the *konak*. There she was allowed to see the officer in charge. She didn’t see the dragoman and the soldiers sneered and grabbed at her. Solomia burnt with shame and anger.

“Oh you, infidels... I would stab you all, I’d wring your necks like chickens... You seized an innocent one, and then you torment me...” Solomia almost cried and showed with her strong hands how she would wring the soldiers’ necks. Yet there was no other way out than to go to the *konak* and to see the dragoman on whom she placed much of her hopes. The dragoman, however, promised little.

“They won’t release your man and don’t hope for it. Once you’ve fled to us, then sit quietly, and if you do anything

wrong, back you go... Don't cause trouble for nothing, you won't see him now..."

"Be merciful, free him, an innocent man is perishing." Solomia shoved the money at the dragoman. He took it, counted it and shook his head. "Not enough."

"I don't have any more... It's all I could get..."

"Oh well... come in three days... no, better in a week... perhaps I'll be able to tell you something..."

Solomia paced about the *konak* each day — angry, irritated, like a hungry she-wolf. She didn't know why she went there, but something unconsciously pulled her in that direction. She paced till she was exhausted and frozen. A light snow, falling gently like cherry-blossoms in the wind, lay on the ground and covered Solomia, but she paid no attention to it. She was determined not to allow them to take Ostap across the Danube. How that would work out, what she would do, she didn't know, but her determination in that grew with each passing day. She was ready to die if that was necessary. Solomia believed that some extraordinary event would take place, that some unknown force would come in her hour of need. That belief was so strong in her that Solomia quit her job. She didn't want to work and save money as she had in the beginning. To what purpose? It would work out one way or the other. She simply had to wait for what the dragoman would say.

Calmly, tormentingly calmly, she went to the *konak* on the day prescribed by the dragoman. He approached her indifferently.

"Nothing will come of it... He'll be returned... And since I don't want your money for nothing, I'll tell you that they'll take him the day after tomorrow, in the morning... As soon as it becomes light, go to the bank and you'll see your man... That's all!..."

Just as calmly, not even saying anything in reply, as if she had long been reconciled to this, Solomia left the *konak*. "They'll return him... return him... return him" — something hammered in her head with each step as she hastened to meet Ivan. She took him from the threshing floor and led him aside.

"They'll return him..." She looked at him with dry eyes.

"Whom will they return?"

"Ostap."

"Really? When?"

"The day after tomorrow... We'll free him by force..."

“Who’s we?”

“You and I.”

“There you go! What do you mean? How are we going to free him by force? He’ll be escorted by the Turks.” Kotyhorshok said in fright.

What about the Turks? She had a plan, a very simple plan. He would get rifles for both of them — each Rumanian kept them in his house. They’d go to the bank in the morning, untie a boat and row out on the river. There they would wait until Ostap was being ferried and would fall upon the Turks. Ostap would help when he saw them... What, is he afraid? Doesn’t he want to free a comrade with whom he has travelled a long road, with whom he has eaten and drunk?... She now knew that this lump of a man had only the courage to flee from his wife... That’s when she discovered his true value and understood his fawning character. She would do without him, she alone would give her life to rescue Ostap... But on parting, she would remind him of his wife and here, to shame him in public, she would thrash him like the Jews did Haman \*.

“And what are you doing... what kind of a person are you... may God protect...” the frightened Ivan defended himself from Solomia’s attack. “I’d follow you into hell itself... Do you think I’m afraid to die, or something?... If you say the day after tomorrow, then let it be the day after tomorrow... I’m ready, if you...” Ivan turned red, his eyes twitched and he watched Solomia with fright.

Solomia stepped back and collected herself. They made peace and already calmly, without arguing, decided how and what. Then they parted.

That day, as soon as it had become light, Solomia was already on the bank. The broad river lay in front of her between its snow-covered banks like a dark and quiet abyss. The fog had already lifted and the sky had become grey. In the quiet warm air, the dark willows on the river bank cast their dark shadows on the dark mirror of the river. The wet and swollen willow branches steamed lightly, as if breathing in the cold air.

Solomia looked towards the city. She was waiting for Ivan. Could it be that he wouldn’t come?

\* A reference to *Purim*, the Jewish festival commemorating the defeat of Haman’s plot. (See *Esther*, Ch. 9)

There were still few people about. Only here and there stooped persons crossed the muddy street. Suddenly, a short and well-fed figure appeared. Ivan was carrying oars on his shoulders and resembled a fisherman calmly beginning his working day. Ivan threw the oars into the first boat he came to, pulled an old Turkish pistol from under his shirt and gave it to Solomia. It was all he had been able to acquire.

"Is it loaded?" Solomia inquired, taking her place in the boat.

"It's loaded," Ivan responded quietly, pushing off from the bank. He was uncommunicative and sombre, as if the mournfulness of the winter scenery had changed his disposition. They rowed to the middle of the river. The swift current carried them down river and they could see the white banks and dark willows passing them by.

Solomia didn't take her eyes off the bank. There, by the water, a group of people were about to get into a boat. Were there three or four of them? This question tormented Solomia and she was unable to count them. She saw them getting into the boat, the boat rocking on the water and leaving the bank. Both boats glided on the dark mirror and left the city behind. The Turkish boat also made for the middle of the river. It, obviously, wanted to make use of the strong current. They floated far from one another without coming any closer. Soon, the city was totally hidden behind the willows on the riverbank. Then Ivan pulled on the oars and his boat began to gain on the other one. They were already able to make out four people in the other boat — two on the oars, and two facing one another. Solomia recognized Ostap. He had to be warned.

"Ostap!.. she called, as if singing. That musical sound rolled between the white banks, reached the person in the other boat and roused him.

"Ostap!" sang Solomia. "We're coming to free you!... Ivan will kill one... I'll shoot the second and the third one is yours..."

A fine strong voice sang over the water, coming ever closer, ever stronger, and the Turks listened with delight. They didn't even notice that the boat was flying straight at them and was about to ram them.

Solomia's boat turned sideways and was less than a yard from the other one when the Turks began their croaking. But it was too late. The boats bumped and rocked. At

that moment, with the cursing Turks bending over to push them apart, Ivan raised his oar and dropped it on a red fez with all his might.

At that same moment a shot rang out and a puff of smoke rose. "Allah!" cried the stunned Turks. Ostap was strangling one of them.

It all happened so quickly that it seemed like a fragment of a dream. After having dropped his oar on the Turk's head, Ivan raised it again and froze for a moment, looking at the rocking boat jumping on the water with its frightened passengers. A fierce glare from dark eyes burnt Solomia through a veil of smoke and it seemed to her that she was shooting incessantly, although she could shoot only once.

Suddenly, Ivan felt that something had burnt him in the stomach. He mechanically dropped his oar on a Turk, but it slipped and fell from his grip. The Turk's red fez seemed to expand before his eyes as if it had grown, and then disappeared. Ivan threw out his arms, staggered, and it came into his head that something was wrong with him.

"Oh, my God!" he suddenly cried and flew backwards into the water. The unstable boat rocked over under the weight of his body and threw Solomia overboard. The icy water sent needles through her body, her dream disappeared and the now returned consciousness freshened her mind. Trying to grasp the overturned boat, Solomia saw that Ostap was struggling in the arms of two Turks, and the third — who had been under Ivan's oar — was holding a still smoking rifle in his hands. The long boat quivered on the water before her eyes like a large fish.

It meant that neither she nor Ivan had killed anyone... It meant that all was lost... But that was no longer her concern. She feels the mighty current taking her in its embrace. The dark depths pull at her feet. Death is coming. But she won't surrender. She has strong arms and the bank is not far off. She hears some shouting behind her, Ostap's voice, but it's not her concern. She must hurry before her body freezes... Wild, untamed forces of life are rising, swelling, and filling her chest, growing into rage... She must use all her strength, all the warmth of her blood, all her will... Now the shore is closer... Now the shore can be seen... And there it's so beautiful, there the sun is shining, there it's green, there the sky is blue, there is happiness, life... The soul reaches for the sun but the black abyss pulls

the body to itself. It shackles her, weighs her down with stones, clutches at her with its cold hands... Her body becomes heavier and heavier; deeper and deeper it sinks into the water...

"Ostap!..." her soul cries in despair.

"Solomia!..." the cry of his heart comes to her.

"Solomia!" she hears through a cold wave which lashes at her eyes, touches her forehead, unbraids her hair....

The yellow, muddy light silently moves upward... remembrances of her life flash like sparks and die out, turn into ashes, like all sparks...

Down the dark river, between the white banks, swiftly floats a boat. It fades into the distance and is transformed into a spot... after it the water carries a second, empty one, lapping against its white sides and staining them with a red color.

Silence hangs in the air...

\* \* \*

Much water has flown down the Danube since that time.

On the high Bessarabian plains, where a dirty wave of sheep rolls by day and, by night, the wind howls mournfully, stands a high solitary monument raised in memory of the river of human blood. There, at one time, Turkish Janissaries fought with the army of Moscow.

Dimly glows the window of a small hut where a watchman is cooking his miserable supper. Dry reeds crackle merrily in the stove and rumble in the chimney. Something is bubbling in the oven. A grey-haired old man warms his beard by the fire and listens to the voices of the wind.

Whatever one may say, that wind is alive. He flies from faraway, over quiet villages, and along the way he takes to himself the quiet of the village, the din of the city, the rustle of a dark forest, the murmuring of waters and the swishing of ripe wheat. He carries in himself all the echoes of the earth, from the quiet buzzing of a fly to the roar of thunder, from tender sighs of the heart to cries of mortal despair.

One need only know how to listen. And the old man has learned. Long years of solitary life amidst the boundless expanses in the kingdom of the wind have taught him to understand this secretive language. To this day, his devoted

friend brings him all the news of the world and casts them, as if they were a precious gift, into the chimney of the hut.

The old man raises his bushy eyebrows and listens. His dull eyes gaze into the distance and a smile hides his wrinkles.

"I hear you, I hear you... he whispers and goes outside. Darkness and emptiness envelop him.

He turns to that side where, far away, beyond the villages and the fields, the Danube flows, and he whispers, "You're calling me again, Solomia? Wait, I'll come soon, I won't linger much longer..."

And the wind howls, blows at the old man's beard and carries to him a quiet, barely audible call, as if from the bottom of the Danube, "Ostap!..."

"Very often she calls me like that," the old man explains to those people who sometimes come to his hut. "As soon as the wind starts howling, she calls me to herself... she calls into the chimney, or calls from outside, and sometimes wakes me in the middle of the night... But she doesn't come herself, no... And praise be to God for that, for the poor soul would be saddened to read the story of my life, the way it's written on my back..."

And Ostap willingly lifts his shirt and displays his tortured blue spine on which, as he says, the story of his life is written.

"Here on my back is a memento from my landlord, and in front between my ribs, I have a gift from a *Moskal*... I'm patched all over... I'll join God like this... I paid much for my freedom, I paid a bitter price... Half of me lies on the bottom of the Danube, and my other half waits and can't wait until they join each other."

*Chernihiv*  
*November, 1901*

## ON THE ROCKS

The only coffee-house in the Tatar village afforded a good view of the sea and the gray sands of the shore. The limpid blue of the sea, protracted to infinity by the blue sky, seemed to flow into the open windows and doors and onto the long slender-columned veranda. Even the stifling air of the summer was tinged in soft blue hues in which the outlines of the far-off coastal mountains seemed to melt and dissolve.

A wind blew from the sea. The visitors, lured by the briny coolness, ordered coffee and sat in groups near the windows or on the veranda. Even the proprietor, the bow-legged Memet, eager to satisfy the desires of his clients, merely rapped out to his younger brother, "*Jepar, bir kave... eki kave!*" \* while he himself leaned out of the door to catch a breath of the moist cool air and to remove for a moment the round Tatar cap from his shaved head.

While Jepar, red-faced with the heat, fanned the coals in the stove and tapped the pan to whip up a good *kaimak* \*\* on the coffee, Memet looked out at the sea.

"There'll be a storm," he said to no one in particular. "The wind is getting stronger, and they're taking in the sails on the boat."

The Tatars turned their heads to the sea.

True enough, they were furling the canvas on the black cutter, which seemed to be heading toward the shore. The wind bellied out the sails, which strained in the men's hands like great, white birds. The black vessel leaned over and lay with its side on the blue waves.

"She's coming this way," said Jepar. "Why, I recognize her — that's the Greek's cutter, carrying salt."

Memet also recognized the Greek's boat. It was important for him, because besides his coffee-house he kept a shop, also the only one in the village, and was a butcher, so he needed salt.

When the cutter came nearer, Memet left the coffee-house and hastened down to the shore. The visitors quickly drain-

\* "Jepar, one coffee... two coffees!"

\*\* foam

ed their cups and followed him. They crossed the steep and narrow street, went round the mosque, and descended the stony path to the sea.

The blue sea was agitated and seethed in foam on the beach. The cutter was rocking where it lay, splashing like a fish, unable to make the shore. The gray-whiskered Greek and the young hired oarsman, slim and long-legged, plying the oars with all their might, could not propel the boat onto the sand of the beach. Finally, the Greek cast anchor into the sea, and the oarsman kicked off his boots and rolled up his yellow trousers above the knees. The Tatars exchanged words with the Greek from the shore. The blue waves seethed with milkwhite foam at the Tatars' feet, dwindled and hissed on the sand, and rolled back to the sea.

"Are you ready, Ali?" the Greek shouted to the oarsman.

Without answering, the oarsman Ali thrust his bare legs over the edge of the boat and leaped into the water. He deftly caught hold of a sack of salt which the Greek handed him, slung it on his shoulder, and carried it ashore.

His slender figure in tight yellow trousers and blue jacket, his healthy, sea-weathered face, and the red kerchief on his head stood out beautifully against the background of the blue sea. Ali dropped his burden on the sand and leaped back into the water, plunging his wet, pink calves into the light foam the color of beaten white of an egg, which washed them off in the clean blue waves. He ran up to the Greek and waited for the moment when the boat subsided level with his shoulders, so that he could take hold of the heavy sack. The boat rocked on the waves and strained at the anchor like a dog at its chain, while Ali ran from the boat to the shore and back again. The waves kept overtaking him and casting clumps of white froth at his feet.

Sometimes Ali missed the right moment; then he would grip the side of the boat and rise with it like a shellfish clinging to the hull of a ship.

The Tatars gathered on the shore. Even the Tatar women appeared on the flat roofs of the houses, like clusters of flowers in beds, and looked on in spite of the heat.

The sea grew stormier. Sea gulls rose from the solitary rocks of the shore, alighted with their breasts on the waves and wept over the sea. The water changed to a darker hue. Small waves merged together into greenish glassy blocks, stealthily crept to the shore, fell on the sand, and broke into

white foam. The sea gurgled, seethed and clanged under the boat, which bobbed up and down as if riding on white manned steeds. The Greek often glanced behind him, looking with alarm at the sea. Ali ran swifter from boat to shore, bespattered with foam. At the shore the water became turbid and yellow. The waves hurled on the beach stones and sand from the bottom of the sea and, receding, dragged them back with a rumble like a giant gnashing his teeth and growling. During this half hour the surf, leaping over the rocks, flooded the road along the shore, and approached the sacks of salt. The Tatars had to withdraw so as not to wet their slippers.

"Memet! ... Nurla!... Lend a hand, or the salt will get soaked. You join them, Ali!" shouted the Greek hoarsely.

The Tatars got busy, and while the Greek rocked on the waves in the boat, looking miserably at the sea, the salt was carried to a safe place.

Meanwhile the sea was working itself up into a rage. The monotonous, rhythmic rumble of the waves grew into a roar. First there came a low gasping sound, then sharper and shorter noises like a distant firing of a cannon. Gray cobwebs of cloud raced over the sky. The turbulent sea, already turgid and dark, pounded against the shore and poured over the rocks, down which it swirled in streams of dirty foamy water.

"Hey, hey! There's a storm coming," Memet shouted to the Greek. "Pull the boat ashore."

"What? What are you saying?" shouted the Greek hoarsely, straining to make himself heard above the roar of the surf.

"Pull the boat ashore!" Nurla bellowed at the top of his voice.

The Greek burst into frenzied activity and, amidst the spray and roar of the waves, began to disentangle the chain and lash the ropes. Ali rushed to the chain. The Tatars kicked off their slippers and began to roll up their trousers, ready to go to his aid. At last the Greek managed to lift the anchor, and the black cutter, caught up by a muddy wave which swept over the Tatars, moved toward the shore. The group of soaked and straining Tatars, shouting amid the roar of foaming water, pulled out the black cutter ashore as if it were a sea monster or a giant dolphin.

The cutter was finally hauled up the sand and made fast to a stake. The Tatars shook off the water from their clothes

and began to weigh the salt with the Greek. Ali helped out, though at times, when his employer paused to talk to his customers, he stared at the unfamiliar village. The sun had already declined toward the mountains. The Tatar huts, built of unhewn stone, topped by flat clay roofs and standing above one another like houses of cards, clung to the bare gray ledge of a cliff. There were no fences, no gates, no streets. Winding paths crept up the stony slopes, vanished on the roofs, and reappeared somewhat lower at the foot of masonry stairways. The village was black and bare. On one roof only a thin mulberry tree grew as if by a miracle, its dark crown seeming from below to spread over the blue of the sky.

Beyond the village, however, a marvellous world spread out toward the horizon. Masses of rock, rose-tinted under the evening sun, or dense bluish groves thronged the deep valleys, green with grapevines and bathed in blue-gray haze. Rounded mountains like giant tents cast black shadows, and the far-away bluish-gray summits resembled frozen jagged clouds. From behind the clouds the sun sometimes flung slanting strands of golden threads which pierced the haze at the bottom of the valley, and cut across the rose-tinted rocks, the blue woods, the heavy black tents, and illuminated the sharp peaks.

Against this fairy-tale background the Tatar village looked like a cluster of savage rocks, and only the file of slender girls who returned from the *chishme* \* with tall pitchers on their shoulders enlivened the stony waste.

A brook flowed among walnut trees in a deep valley on the edge of the village. The breakers stemmed its flow and it spread among the trees, reflecting their verdure, the colorful robes of the Tatar women, and the naked bodies of the children.

"Ali," shouted the Greek, "help me with the salt."

Ali could hardly hear him for the roar of the sea.

A briny mist of fine spray hung over the shore. The turbid sea raged. The waves had swollen into angry breakers, and long plumes of foam swished off their white crests and flew upward. The whitecaps rolled on and on, covering the returning waves, leaping over them and, flooding the shore, cast fine gray sand upon the beach. Everything was wet

\* spring

and dripping; pools of water formed in the hollows of the beach.

Suddenly the Tatars heard a loud crash, and at the same time water rushed over their feet. A mighty wave had lifted up the boat and tossed it against the stake. The Greek ran up to the boat and saw with horror a gash in its side. He cried out in grief, swore and wept, but the thunder of the sea drowned his lamentations. The boat had to be dragged further up the beach and tied up anew. The Greek felt so wretched that, though night was falling, he declined Memet's invitation to spend the night at the coffee-house and remained on the beach. Ali and he roamed like spectres amidst the spray, the wrathful growling of the surf and the strong smell of the sea, which penetrated them to the bone. The moon had long since risen, and hopped from cloud to cloud. Under its light the strip of beach was white with foam as though covered with fluffy snow. At last, Ali, lured by the village lights, persuaded the Greek to go to the coffee-house.

The Greek brought salt to the Crimean coastal villages once a year, usually allowing his customers credit. The next day, so as not to waste time, he ordered Ali to mend the boat, while he climbed the mountain path to collect what was owing to him. The path along the shore was flooded so that from seaward the village was cut off from the rest of the world.

At noon the storm began to abate and Ali set to work. The red kerchief on the oarsman's head fluttered in the wind as he worked on the boat, humming a song that was as monotonous as the beating of the surf. At the proper time he spread his kerchief on the sand, and kneeling down, said his prayers like a good Moslem. In the evening he built a fire on the beach, cooked some pilau with the wetted rice that remained in the boat, and even prepared to spend the night near the boat, but Memet called him into the coffee-house. The latter was full only once a year, when the grape buyers arrived at the village, but now there was plenty of room.

It was comfortable in the coffee-house. Jepar drowsed near the stove, around which hung shiny pots and pans, and the fire drowsed and burned low in the stove. When Memet woke his brother shouting "Coffee!" Jepar started, jumped up and began to blow the fire with the bellows. The fire in the oven burst into tongues of flame, spattered

sparks, and gleamed on the copper pots. The fragrant odor of fresh coffee filled the room. Flies hummed under the ceiling. Tatars sat at the tables on broad upholstered benches. Some were playing dice, others cards, and everywhere stood small cups of black coffee. The coffee-house was the heart of the village, where all interests converged, all the life of the people inhabiting the rocks. The most distinguished men of the village sat there — the stern old Mullah Asan, wearing a turban and a long robe which hung like a sack on his stiff, skinny figure. He was an obscurant and as stubborn as a mule, and therefore everyone respected him. Here also sat Nurla-Effendi — a rich man who owned a red cow, a wattled oxcart and a pair of oxen, and the prosperous *yuzbash*\*, who rode the only horse in the village. They were all relatives, like all the people in this little, out-of-the-way village, though that did not prevent them from dividing into two hostile camps. The cause of the feud was the small spring flowing from under the cliff through the very middle of the village, between the Tatar vegetable gardens. It was this water that gave life to everything that grew on the rocks, and when one half of the village turned the water into their gardens, the hearts of the other half ached to see the sun and rocks withering their onions. The two richest and most influential men in the village had their gardens on different sides of the stream — Nurla on the right, the *yuzbash* on the left. When the latter turned the water onto his land, Nurla would dam the stream higher up, and make the water flow to his plot. This enraged all the left-bank people and, forgetting ties of blood, they defended the rights of their onions to life, and cracked each others' skulls. Nurla and the *yuzbash* were the respective chiefs of the warring parties; *yuzbash's* party could be considered the stronger, for the Mullah Asan was on their side. The hostility was noticeable even in the coffee-house. When Nurla's adherents played dice, the *yuzbash's* supporters showed their contempt by playing cards. The enemies agreed on one point—they all drank coffee. Memet, who had no vegetable plot, and as a man of commerce stood above party contention, hobbled on his bow legs from Nurla to the *yuzbash*, endeavoring to calm and pacify them. His rotund face and shaved head like that of a moulting ram,

\* chief or captain

and his cunning eyes, which were always red, roved with an uneasy glimmer. He was constantly harassed by something, was ever meditating, scheming, calculating, and every now and then running to the shop, to the cellar, and back to his guests. Sometimes he would rush out of the coffee-house, lift up his face toward the flat roof, and call out:

“Fatma!”

Then a heavily veiled woman would detach herself like a shadow from the wall of his house, which stood above the coffee-house, and walk noiselessly across the coffee-house roof to its edge.

He would toss up to her some empty sacks, or give her some orders in a sharp rasping voice, curtly and peremptorily like a master talking to his servant, and the shadow would vanish just as inconspicuously as it had appeared.

Ali saw her once. He was standing near the coffee-house and he watched yellow slippers treading softly over the stone steps that led down from Memet's house to the ground, and the light green yashmak that fell in folds over her slender figure from her head to her red trousers. She descended quietly, slowly, carrying an empty pitcher in one hand and holding up the folds of her yashmak with the other, so that the stranger could catch a glimpse only of her big, elongated black eyes, expressive like those of a chamois. She let her eyes rest on Ali, then lowered her eyelids and went on, quietly and serenely like an Egyptian priestess.

Ali felt that those eyes had penetrated into his heart, that they were still with him.

As he repaired the boat by the sea and hummed his dreamy songs, he saw those eyes. He saw them everywhere — in the waves, transparent and ringing like glass, in the rock, hot and glistening in the sun. They looked at him even from the cups of black coffee. Time and again he gazed at the village, and he often saw under the lone tree above the coffee-house the vague figure of a woman turned toward the sea, as if looking for her eyes.

The villagers quickly grew accustomed to Ali. The girls coming from the spring would uncover their faces as though by accident when they passed the handsome Turk, then they would blush, quicken their pace and whisper to one another. The young men liked his merry disposition. In the cool and quiet summer evenings, when the stars hung over the land and the moon over the sea, Ali would take out

his lute, which he had brought with him from Smirna, settle down near the coffee-house or elsewhere and talk to his native land in sad, heartstirring tones. The lute drew the young people — the males, of course. They understood the song of the East, and soon, in the shadows of the stone huts, softened by the blue light, a party would begin. The lute would repeat the same tune — monotonous, vague and endless like the chirping of a cricket — until one felt languid and one's heart became troubled, and the giddy Tatars began to chant to the rhythm of the song:

“Oh — la — la ... oh — na — na...”

On one side dozed the mysterious world of black giant mountains, on the other lay the calm sea, sighing in its sleep like a little child, and a golden trail shimmered under the moon.

“Oh — la — la... oh — na — na...”

Those who looked downward from their stone nests sometimes saw an outstretched hand caught in a moonbeam, or shoulders quivering in a dance, and heard the monotonous, insinuating refrain to the music of the lute.

“Oh — la — la... oh — na — na...”

Fatma also listened.

She had come from the mountains, from a remote mountain village, where the people were different — a village that had its own customs and where she had left behind her girl friends. There was no sea there. The butcher had come, had paid her father more than the boys of her village could, and had taken her away. He was repulsive, unkind, alien to her — like all the people here, like this country. She had no kindred here, no girl friends, no people who wished her well. This was the end of the world; there were not even any roads from here.

“Oh — la — la... oh — na — na...”

There are not even any roads, for when the sea begins to rage it takes away the only road along the shore. There is nothing but sea here, sea everywhere. In the morning the blue of the sea blinds your eyes; in the daytime green waves pitch and rock; at night the sea gasps like a sick man. In good weather it irritates you with its calm; in bad weather it beats against the shore, it roars like a wild beast and keeps you from sleeping. The pungent smell of the sea even penetrates into the house and sickens you... You cannot escape from it, hide from it, it is everywhere, it stares at you. Sometimes it heaves, is covered by a fog as white as

mountain snow, and you think it is gone, vanished — but it still tosses underneath the fog, roars and bellows, just like it is doing now.

Boom!... boom!... boom!

“Oh — la — la... oh — na — na...”

It is tossing under the fog like a baby in swaddling clothes which, in the end, it throws off. Long, torn-off scraps of fog float upward, cling to the mosque, envelop the village, force their way into the house, and settle on your heart — you cannot even see the sun... And now — and now...

“Oh — la — la... oh — na — na...”

Now she often goes out on the coffee-house roof, leans against the tree, and looks out at the sea... No, it is not the sight of the sea that she desires. She is watching the red kerchief on the stranger's head. She hopes to see his eyes — big, black, warm, as they appear in her dreams. Her favorite flower, the mountain crocus, is now blooming on the sand above the sea...

“Oh — la — la... oh — na — na...”

The stars hang above the land; the moon, above the sea.

\* \* \*

“Have you come from afar?”

Ali started. The voice came from above, from the roof, and Ali lifted his eyes. Fatma stood under the tree, and its shadow fell on Ali. He blushed and stammered.

“From the Smirna region. Far away from here.”

“I am from the mountains.”

Silence.

The blood rushed to Ali's head like a sea wave, his eyes were captivated by the Tatar woman, and he could not tear them away.

“What brought you here? You must feel lonely so far from home?”

“I'm poor — not a star in the sky, nor a blade of grass on the land can I call my own. I work for wages.”

“I've heard you play.”

Silence.

“It is gay. It is lively in our mountains — music, merry girls. We have no sea. Have you?”

“Not near us.”

“No? And you don't hear the sea roaring in your house?”

"No. But we have sand. The wind drives hot sands, and hills grow like camels' humps. We have..."

"Hush!"

As if by accident she uncovered her white, well cared face and pressed a finger with painted nail to her full, rosy lips.

The place was deserted. A sky-blue sea looked upon them, and only near the mosque could the figure of some woman be seen.

"Aren't you afraid to speak to me, *hanim*.\* What will Memet do if he sees us?"

"Whatever he pleases..."

"He will kill us if he sees us."

"That's as he pleases..."

\* \* \*

The sun could not be seen yet, though some peaks of the ridge were already rose-tinted. The dark cliffs looked dismal, and the sea lay below gray and drowsy. Nurla hurried down the slope, almost running after his oxen. He was so absorbed that he did not even notice a pile of fresh hay slip from the cart onto the backs of the oxen and scatter over the road. This happened when the high wheel ran over a stone, and the wattled cart bumped. The black, sturdy oxen, shaking their shaggy humps and bulging heads, turned as usual toward their master's yard in the village, but Nurla, remembering his errand, turned them the other way and stopped only when he reached the coffee-house. He knew that Memet spent the night there, and tugged at the door.

"Memet, Memet, *kelmund*." \*\*

Memet, sleepy, jumped up and rubbed his eyes.

"Memet, where's Ali?" Nurla asked.

"Ali... Ali... somewhere around here," replied Memet, looking around at the vacant benches.

"Where's Fatma?"

"Fatma? Fatma's asleep."

"They're in the mountains."

Memet stared at Nurla, calmly went through the coffee-house and glanced out into the yard. The oxen stood on the road, hay clinging to them, and the first rays of the sun were falling on the sea.

\* lady, mistress of a house  
\*\* come here

Memet turned to Nurla.

"What do you want?"

"Are you crazy? I'm telling you your wife has run away with the oarsman. I saw them in the mountains on my way back from the range."

Memets' eyes bulged out. Having heard what Nurla had to say, he pushed him aside; dashed out of the room and, swaying on his bow legs, climbed up the steps.

He ran through all the rooms of his house and then rushed out onto the roof of the coffee-house. Now he was really like a madman.

"Osma-a-an!" he shouted in a hoarse voice, cupping his hands round his mouth. "Sa-a-ali!... Jepa-a-ar! Beki-i-ir, kelmund!" He turned in all directions and shouted as if a fire had broken out. "Husein! Musta-a-a-fa-a-a!"

The Tatars woke up and came out onto the flat roofs. Meanwhile Nurla was helping him below.

"Asan!... Mamut!... Zekeria!" he yelled at the top of his voice.

The alarm flew over the village, rose to the upper huts, bounced down, leaped from roof to roof and gathered the men. Red fezzes appeared everywhere and converged on the coffee-house along steep and winding paths.

Nurla explained what had happened. Memet, red-faced and distraught, silently looked over the crowd with bulging eyes. Finally, he ran to the edge of the roof and jumped down, as nimbly and lightly as a cat.

A clamor arose among the Tatars. All the relatives who only yesterday had been cracking one another's skulls in quarrels over water, were now united by a sense of injury. It was not Memet alone that was disgraced, but the whole tribe. Some beggarly, miserable vagabond of a hired laborer... It was unheard of! And when Memet came out of his house with the long knife he used for butchering sheep and, waving it so that it flashed in the sunlight, thrust it into his belt, the whole family was ready.

"Lead the way!"

Nurla took the lead, behind him hurried the butcher, limping on his right foot; they were followed by a long file of indignant and eager kinsmen.

The sun had already appeared and heated the rock. The Tatars climbed up the familiar path, straggling out in a line like a column of wandering ants. Those in front were silent, and only in the rear of the file did the men exchange a few

words from time to time. Nurla advanced with the movements of a hound that has scented the game. Memet, red-faced and dismal, was limping more noticeably. Although it was still early, the gray masses of rock were as hot as hearthstones. The fleshy leaves of poisonous milkweed spread over the bare, protruding faces of the rocks, which were sometimes round like enormous tents, sometimes sharp like the crests of menacing waves. Further down, toward the sea, bright green caper bushes snuggled among bluish heaps of stone. The narrow path, hardly discernible, like the track of a wild beast, would sometimes disappear in the stony wilderness, or be screened by projections of rock. It was damp and cool in such places, and the Tatars would remove their fezzes to cool their shaven heads. Then they would again enter a scorched, sultry gray patch flooded with blinding sunlight. The men persistently climbed on, leaning their bodies forward, tottering slightly on their Tatar bow legs, and when the narrow path skirted a black precipice, their shoulders would graze the sharp edge of the cliff, while their feet trod the very edge of the chasm with the sureness of mountain mules. The further they went, and the harder it was to negotiate the obstacles, the hotter the sun overhead and the stones underfoot, the stronger grew the determination making their eyes bulge from their heads. The spirit of those wild, barren cliffs, dead at night but throbbing with heat in the daytime, penetrated the souls of these men smarting under insult, and they were out to defend their honor and their right with the pitilessness of the stern mountain range. They hurried. They had to intercept the fugitives before they reached the neighboring village of Suak and escaped by sea. True, both Ali and Fatma were strangers to the vicinity. They did not know the paths and could easily get lost in their labyrinths. The pursuers counted on this. However, although they were not far from Suak, they saw no one around. They felt suffocated, for the moist sea wind they were accustomed to on the shore did not reach this part of the mountain. When they descended a gorge, or climbed up a mound, small piercing stones scattered underfoot, irritating the sweating, fatigued and embittered men. They had not found their prey, and meanwhile each of them had left some work undone in the village. The men in the rear began to lag behind, but Memet, on the contrary, quickened his pace, his eyes dimmed, his head bent forward like that of an enraged bull, and hobbling

along, he rose and subsided like a sea wave. The men began to lose hope — Nurla had obviously let the fugitives escape — but kept on. The winding Suak beach with its gray sand had come into view and vanished several times.

Suddenly Zekeria, one of the men in front, cried out and halted. Everyone turned to look at him, and he, without saying a word, extended his arm and pointed to a high ledge of rock jutting out into the sea. A red kerchief flashed there for a moment and disappeared behind the cliff. Everyone's heart began to pound, and Memet uttered a low cry. The men exchanged glances — the same thought entered each one's head: if Ali were driven on to the ledge, he could easily be caught. Nurla had already thought of a plan. He pressed a finger to his lips, and when all the men were silent divided them into three groups, so as to surround the ledge on three sides. On the fourth side the cliff dropped steeply to the sea. All the men advanced cautiously, as when tracking game, only Memet, boiling with anger, rushed forward, searching the rocks with avid eyes. Now, a bit of green yashmak peered out from behind the rock and was followed by the slim figure of the oarsman, who seemed to grow out of the cliff. They climbed up, Fatma, green like a bush in spring, in front, and Ali on his long legs in tight trousers, wearing a blue jacket and red kerchief, tall and supple like a young cypress tree, towering against the background of the sky. As the two of them stood on the top, a flock of birds rose from the rocks along the shore and hid the blue of the sea with a quivering net of wings.

Ali had evidently lost his way and was asking advice of Fatma. They looked with alarm at the sheer face of the cliff, searching for a path. The calm bay of Suak could be seen in the distance.

Suddenly Fatma cried out in terror. The yashmak slipped from her head and fell to the ground. She found herself staring horrorstricken at the furious bloodshot eyes of her husband peering out from behind the rock. Ali turned his head, and in that instant men climbed to the ledge from all sides, clinging with hand and foot to the sharp rocks — Zekeria and Jepar and Mustafa, all those who had listened to Ali's music and had drunk coffee with him. They were no longer silent. Their burning breath hurled waves of insults at the fugitives. There was no escape. Ali straightened up, took a firm stand, placed his hand on his short knife and

waited. His handsome face, pale and proud, shone with the fearlessness of a young eagle.

Meantime, Fatma, who was behind him, fluttered like a sea gull on the edge of the precipice. On one side she saw the detested sea, on the other the still more detested, loathsome butcher. She saw his bleary eyes, his cruel blue lips, his short legs, and the sharp butcher's knife that he killed sheep with. In her mind's eye she saw her native village: she is blindfolded, music is playing, and the butcher is taking her over the sea, like a lamb, to cut her throat. With a gesture of despair she covered her eyes and lost her balance. The blue robe with the yellow crescents tottered over the cliff and disappeared amidst the cries of startled sea gulls.

The Tatars were horrified: this simple and unexpected death made them draw back from Ali. He had not seen what had happened behind his back. He darted wolf-like glances about him, and wondered why the men hung back. Could it be they were afraid? He saw before him the gleam of ferocious eyes, red and implacable faces, distended nostrils and bared teeth — and all this wave of fury suddenly hurled itself on him like the surf of the sea. Ali defended himself. He stabbed Nurla in the arm and grazed Osman, but at the same moment he was knocked off his feet. As he fell, he saw Memet raise his knife over him and stab him between the ribs. Memet hacked at Ali's body wildly, with the frenzy of one who has received a deadly insult and with the detachment of a butcher, although Ali's breast had already ceased breathing and the handsome face had found peace.

The affair was ended, the disgrace to the family honor had been wiped out. The oarsman's body lay on the rock, and near it lay a trampled and tattered yashmak.

Memet was in a drunken stupor. He swayed on his bow legs and waved his arms, making incoherent gestures. Pushing away the men who crowded around the body to satisfy their curiosity, he seized Ali by the leg and dragged the dead man off. All the men followed him. As they returned, climbing up and down the same paths, Ali's beautiful head with its Ganymede face beat against the sharp stones and was steeped in blood. The head sometimes bounced up and down in rough spots, and then it seemed that Ali was agreeing with someone and nodding an affirmative.

The Tatars followed behind the body, cursed.

When the procession finally entered the village, all the

flat roofs were covered with colorful throngs of women and children, and the village looked like the gardens of Semiramis.

Hundreds of curious eyes watched the procession descend to the sea. On the beach, which seemed almost white in the midday sun, stood the black cutter, leaning somewhat on its side like a wounded dolphin cast ashore by a storm. Delicate blue waves, clean and warm like a girl's breasts, tossed fine lacelike foam on the beach. The sea merged with the sun in a joyous smile, which spread far and wide — through the Tatar villages, through the gardens, the black forests, up to the gray heated masses of the mountain range.

The world was smiling.

Without a word, without consulting one another, the Tatars lifted Ali's body, placed it in the boat, and — amidst the alarmed cries of the women resounding from the flat roofs of the village like the wail of frightened sea gulls — pushed the vessel into the sea.

The boat scraped the rocks, a wave splashed, the boat rocked on it and then was still.

The cutter was afloat, and the waves played around it, splashed against its sides, sprayed foam on it and slowly, almost imperceptibly carried it out to sea. Ali was sailing to Fatma.

*Chernihiv*  
*January, 1902*

## THE DUEL

They had already had supper — Madame Antonina and her daughter's teacher, Ivan Piddubny.

He rose from the couch and pushed aside the round table with the remains of the supper, while she extended her hand for him to kiss. He did not kiss the back of the hand as is customary between acquaintances, but began on the palm and went higher. Madame Antonina did not object; on the contrary, she drew back her head and gazed down on the curly head of the young man with greenish watery eyes under lids that were red, as always after she had drunk liqueur. She unbuttoned her sleeve with her free hand, and pointing, said:

..Here... and here."

Ivan's lips crept up the blue veins to the white and soft roundness under the subdued light of the dining room lamp.

All of a sudden — bang, bang!

The window frame shook and all the panes rattled loudly. They started with wide-open eyes at the black window-panes, to which the snowladen branches of trees crept up from the garden.

"Who was that? What was it?"

"My husband — he saw everything."

While they stood rooted to the spot, helplessly expecting something disastrous and irreparable to happen, the dead silence was broken by the banging of a door, someone ran up the stairs, and the master of the house rushed into the room in his fur coat, cap and snow-covered boots. He was a short man, his eyes were angry, his beard quivered.

He had lifted his arm while still at a distance, and when he reached the dining room he extended it, pointing to the door.

'Out, out of my house!'

Ivan Piddubny's expression changed. He started to say something, bumped into some furniture, stretched out his hand, and, with head bent, staggered out of the dining-room, past the master of the house, through the next room and into the entrance hall. Behind him he heard the smothered, toneless voice of the wife remonstrating with her husband.

“Be sensible. Mykola, this is madness...”

“Out, out of my house!” shrieked Mykola in a high, strange voice, stamping his feet in their rubbers.

While the teacher was putting on his sheepskin coat, his pupil, ten-year-old Ludya, who had heard the shouting, came running into the hall. She was half undressed — her short white skirt, held up by white braces, did not reach down to her stockings and left her knees bare. She crossed her bare arms on her breast, leaned forward a little and turned blue. Her frightened eyes imploringly looked at her father.

“Dad! Dad! Don’t turn Mr. Van out.”

“Mr. Van” was the name she gave her beloved teacher. Her father paid no attention to her. He also rushed out into the hall, gesticulating wildly, and blustering.

“I took him into my home like a son, like an honest man... I fed him, paid him. A-a-ah!”

Madame Antonina said something, Ludya screamed, but Ivan no longer heard. He found his cap, absently snatched up Mr. Mykola’s umbrella from the corner, and dashed out into the street.

A sharp blast of icy air... windows lit up in the houses... voices... the bells of horse cabs ...a cry of “Look out!” He found himself in a lonely lane. He saw before him Mr. Mykola’s outstretched left arm and the two red spots on his face — caused by frost or agitation, and the words “Out, out of my house!” echoed in his ears. The scandal, the shame! The blood drummed in his ears, a lump rose in his throat. He ran on, absentminded, his sheepskin coat unbuttoned, the other man’s umbrella under his arm.

The moon had already risen. Stars had poured down from the sky and were twinkling on the snow. Objects were sharply outlined. The trees, the houses, the fences looked solid, as if hewn from marble, wonderfully calm, wonderfully sturdy. The pale blue light was sharp, piercing and seemed to be frozen.

The teacher noticed nothing — he ran through the streets wanting nothing but to get home as soon as possible, to hide from people, from disgrace.

“Out!” That shout pursued him and prodded him on. Horse cabs passed him. He would have liked to hail one, but remembered that he didn’t have enough money.

Piddubny rushed into his room and, without lighting the lamp or undressing, flung himself on his bed.

The scene was vivid in his mind. Besides the shame, besides the insult which burned in his blood, he had cut a ridiculous figure. He had been driven out like a dog, and like a dog had submitted and gone out, helpless, mute and meek. She will never forgive him his disgrace, his ignominy. He should have said something, done something... But what? He did not know. It was his first love affair with a lady of such high rank. A poor teacher of a humble middleclass family, dismissed from school, he had never entertained an improper thought for anyone above the rank of a maid or a poor young lady who put on her good clothes only on holidays, and whose hands were always red with housework. And here, this woman of forty-two, the mistress of a rich estate, a real lady, had thrown herself into his arms so unexpectedly and insistently that he had not dared to deny her. She held him captive.

She had need of him every hour and every minute, day and night. She assured him that he had good taste and capacity for commercial dealings, and so he had to buy her buttons, thread, cloth and furniture. Then she decided that Ludya ought to study more, and instead of one hour he devoted three to her. Since dinner came in the middle of their studies, he was asked to stay. She would take him to concerts and the theater when her husband was busy, and she convinced her husband that it was best for him to go fishing together with the teacher. He was compelled to listen to her music, a great deal of music, although he did not understand music, and when he sat up with them till late in the evening, not only she, but her husband as well, would invite him to stay the night at their home. He would be put up in a small room, formerly occupied by the nurse, and going to drink his morning coffee, he would have to pick gray woman's hair off his clothes.

On arriving to give his lessons, Ivan usually entered an empty, seemingly dead house. The husband was at his office, Ludya was playing somewhere in the garden or at a friend's, the servants did not dare show themselves in the rooms, and the mistress was at her toilet. She would open the door of the next but one room to her boudoir, peep out with her hair down and her arms bare, and call him. She would kiss his eyes, cheeks and lips passionately and endlessly, tickle him with her hair that smelled of stale pomatum, and twine her bare arms round his neck until his head swam.

"Ivas... Ivashechko... Ivanko, my only one, my little one," she would moan between kisses. "You're my master, my lord... the blood of my heart, the poetry of my life... You're my Romeo."

Then she would order him to kiss her, presenting her throat, shoulders, her high and well-preserved breasts; she lifted her arms to let him kiss her armpits, and giggled nervously when his moustache tickled her. She would wriggle from side to side, and gaze at him with greenish eyes under red lids, and the wrinkles in her face would smoothen out under these caresses. Then she would take folded sheets of paper from under her pillow and thrust them into his hand, hastily and surreptitiously.

"Here, that's for you."

The fine ladylike handwriting and the blue ink told him it was a letter from her.

During his lesson with Ludya he would stealthily unfold the letter and read it. Meanwhile Ludya could do what she liked.

The letter was usually a long one — five or six pages... It was written in a somewhat oldfashioned, florid style, with allegories and long, involved periods. In addition, it gave forth the specific odor of pomatum, and was smudged with kisses — not allegorical but real — impressed upon the paper to illustrate tender words. "If you would glance into the depths of my feelings and my love, bright with heavenly light..." "I wish to live for ever in your arms, to dwell there, and enjoy the unspeakable happiness and overwhelming bliss of drinking the dew of you kisses, kissing your footsteps and caressing the air you breathe..." "You are my master, my lord, my life and my death."

She wrote him such letters at least twice a day, thrust them into his hand, passed them on through Ludya, put them into his overcoat pocket, or sent them by post. The drawers of his desk were crammed with sheets of paper covered with lines in blue ink and filling his room with their specific odor. She insisted on an answer to each letter — a long passionate answer full of lofty feelings and knightly spirit. She demanded it. It was his duty to expose his naked soul before her. He decorated this soul with stagy affectation, he toiled and sweated, but his efforts came to naught. If he failed to bring a reply, or if it was short and insipid, she would make a scene, call him a dullard, a middle-class mediocrity, and afterwards fall on his breast,

caress him, thrust a still longer letter into his pocket, and put on light clothes which gave him access to her body. In her tender moods she would place a moist cigarette — she smoked endlessly — between his lips, or would snatch the cigarette from his mouth to smoke it herself. During such moments her greenish redrimmed eyes would be surrounded with wrinkles of satisfaction. Such love tormented him, but tickled his vanity. More than anything he feared to appear ridiculous in her eyes — and now!

“Out!” — and he had gone out like a cur.

Piddubny groaned as if wounded. It was his own fault. He should have done something. But what? Beat up Mr. Mykola? No. Throw a glove into his face? But he had had no glove with him. Challenge him to a duel? How should he know what he ought to have done?

His gaze lighted on the window, and he flinched with pain. The window hurt him. He got out of bed and lowered the blind, then lay down again and covered his head with the pillow. An inexpressible, shapeless discontent crept into his heart. His head swelled and became empty; only chaotic memories passed through it like fleeting shadows.

She would come to him in the nurse’s room. “Kiss me!” But when he acted too forcefully, fear overcame her.

“I’m afraid... I’m afraid, my dear, I’m afraid,” she would whisper with terror in her eyes and a pucker of pain on her lips. She would push him away and look around the room anxiously.

He had nothing to fear and did not listen to her. Then she would tremble and whine like a fly in a spider’s web, and this schoolgirl manner in a woman no longer young irritated him.

“Oh, ah! My dear, my only one, I’m afraid. Oh, someone’s coming... oh!”

And she would run away, leaving him unsatisfied.

Sometimes she would be simply cruel. She would compel him to listen to music, mostly classical — Bach, Haydn, Beethoven — all evening long, and after some fugue or symphony, which she executed with understanding and expression, would turn to him on her piano stool and ask with triumph in her eyes:

“Did you like it?”

He would say something vague: yes... no... you see... Then she would cast angry eyes on him.

“You ass, you don’t understand anything...”

She would purse her lips and turn her round back on him.

He would sit there oppressed, thinking she was right.

She was capricious, passionate, sentimental and old. Her behavior reminded him of an old French novel.

“Dad, don’t drive away Mr. Van!”

He recalled the bare arms and long legs under the white skirt and the pure imploring gaze of the childish eyes.

Why had this pure soul been made a witness of domestic filth?

How he hated that officious man with the red spots on his face, with his quivering beard and squeaking voice! He hated him for being the husband of his mistress, for his disgrace, for his timidity. What a pleasure it would be to beat him up, crush him, strangle him!

And what would she say to that?

“Vulgar fellow! Hoodlum!”

She demanded decorum — a duel!

“All right, then, we’ll have a duel!”

He said that aloud, sitting on his bed and staring into the darkness.

And suddenly the picture of a duel from a novel appeared before him. A green glade. The seconds in top hats. He aims his pistol — a puff of blue smoke, Mr. Mykola sinks to the ground, and a red stain spreads over his white shirt.

Piddubny shut his eyes, shivered, and hid his head in the pillow.

No, he could not do that. He could not. He tossed on the bed and tried to keep from thinking about blood. Finally, he was calmed by the thought that Mr. Mykola would not fight him. Mr. Mykola was an official, a loyal official. He would immediately inform the police. That was certain, absolutely certain. Then things would be still worse — questioning, a trial, the police. He would find himself in a ludicrous position. What was to be done?

Piddubny lay for a long time in the dark, meditating to the sound of the night watchman’s clapper.

“Very well,” said Ivan, and again sat up in bed. “You’ve acted like a pig — wormed your way into a family and taken another man’s wife. Then you should have the courage to do the honorable thing. Take her and build your own nest... With the ten kopecks you have in your pocket? With your poverty? And what about the child?”

A lump rose up inside him and burst out through his throat in a convulsive laugh... Take that old woman? Another man's leavings? No!

His thoughts inclined more and more to a duel. He had to wash away the burning shame with blood. Once more a picture rose before him. A shot. Something sharp and hot pierces his body at the spot where the insult lies, and he feels relieved — he is a corpse and a hero. People talk about him, sympathize with him, weep over him, and write long and tender letters to him — endless blue lines on expensive paper — letters which he will never read.

His consciousness is split in two. He sees the consequences of the duel, and at the same time knows that it is all his fancy, all nonsense. He knows that under no circumstances will he place himself at pistol point.

“Vulgar fellow!” a voice shouts in his ear.

He suppressed this thought and let his mind dwell further on the duel. He imagined what would happen if he died. First of all he would stop breathing. He held his breath and lay still: the blood is thick and cold as jelly in his veins, his limbs are rigid like papier maché, there is a void in his head, his chest, he cannot close his mouth or elicit a sound out of his throat... In a passionate impulse to live he forced a cry from his throat, felt his body and flexed his arm.

“Ow!” he cried out in protest.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet. A happy thought had flashed through his mind. It was still unformed, tenuous and elusive like the wind, and while it shimmered before him like a volatile gas, he felt worthlessness, falsity and compromise surge from the very depths of his being and glare at him with green eyes, writhing like vipers and deranging his mind with their oppressive hissing.

At last the idea became clear in his mind. He would challenge him by letter, only this letter would first pass through Antonina's hands — and she would not let things go too far, either in one direction or another.

He sprang to his feet almost merrily. Under the blind the window formed six distinct gray patches, the pale winter light entered the room from the courtyard. Day was breaking. Snow had fallen during the night. Piddubny lit a candle.

In what style should the letter be written? He did not know. There were some novels in the room, and he could get hints from them. He began to rummage. The devil,

where had they disappeared? Well, no matter. He only knew that he would sign it "yours, with complete contempt"; that was a brilliant idea — "yours, with complete contempt."

"Dear Sir," he wrote, and here he stopped.

Thoughts filled his head, but they vanished when he tried to form them into words. At last, after a great deal of crossing out and rewriting, he composed the following letter:

*Dear Sir,*

*Yesterday you took it on yourself to offer me a grave insult. Only blood can wash it away. Please, appoint the time and place to which I can direct my seconds.*

*Yours, with complete contempt,  
Ivan Piddubny.*

Then he crossed out "yours, with contempt," replaced it with "yours respectfully," rewrote the letter and addressed it to "Highly respected Madame Antonina Tsyupa (personally) for Mykola Tsyupa."

There!

It was still early — half past seven. The Tsyupas got up about nine o'clock. Piddubny strode up and down the room, and kept looking at his watch. Time passed slowly. At last he put on his sheepskin coat and went out.

There was a great deal of snow, but it was warm and sunny. Fluffy snow covered the ground and houses, marked out the line of fences, clung to the trunks and branches of trees. Through the white tracery of the trees the sky was a bright blue, and on the snow bluish shadows shimmered on the gold of the sunlight. The sun and air caressed his cheeks, while the green of fir branches peeped out from under the snow, looking so fresh that it seemed as if spring had arrived clad in white raiment.

A crow flew by and perched on a fence.

How was he to hand over the letter so that it reached Antonina? How to avoid encountering Mr. Mykola, who sometimes left his house earlier?

A herd of cattle was being driven to slaughter — a mass of red bodies, legs and horned heads. How fresh the air is! You drink it in like warm milk. The sun lit up a star on a snow-covered twig.

The letter was heavy in his pocket. It had to be handed over by somebody. It would be brought to her. She would

come out. A letter? From whom? Let me have it... aha! Her expression changes, and she carries it to her husband.

A lonely street. Two rows of white houses under white roofs, snow between them. Smoke curls upward... A soldier runs by with a basket. Hey, there, soldier, hey! The soldier comes up to him, his eyes goggling.

"Deliver this letter. Over there... you will see two windows. Hand it to the mistress personally. Do you hear? You will get ten kopecks." He groped for the last ten kopecks in his pocket. Then he walked up and down the street, waiting.

The soldier returned, bowed.

"The lady herself?"

"Personally."

"Here you are."

Ivan returned home. What will come of it? How will it end? The day was long, endless, anxious. The sky was smiling at noon. Drops were falling from thatch roofs, the room was flooded with golden sunshine. He walked to and fro and brooded.

His dinner stuck in his throat, his mouth was dry, his head heavy. What will come of it? After dinner he lay down on the bed — cold, indifferent, bereft of feeling, without hope. It would end one way or another.

Gray shadows wandered about the room, the window became dim and hazy; the evening gloom lay heavy on his heart. No one and nothing all around.

A knock.

Who can it be?

"May I"

Whose voice is that? Ivan trembles and springs out of bed.

"Come in."

It is Mr. Mykola. His voice is hoarse, he turns his eyes away. He does not take off his overcoat or offer to shake hands. He sits down. Ivan gropes for matches with a trembling hand, and cannot manage to light one.

"Please, don't bother."

Ivan keeps on striking matches.

"Don't... don't be angry with me," says Mr. Mykola hoarsely. "I was drunk yesterday, simply drunk, that's all. And when a man's drunk, you know..."

Aha! Why, of course, he was drunk, drunk as a lord — that's all, that's all. How was it he had not noticed that the

man was drunk — drunk like a hundred gallon cask of vodka, like a tavern-full of peasant women... ha, ha! — how was it he had not noticed it?

“Ludya misses you. Come and give her a lesson tomorrow, and forget what happened between us.”

Ha, ha! Oh, you guzzler! He was drunk like a — that’s all. Well, he will come. Of course he will come. Ha, ha!

His entire being was laughing and rejoicing inwardly. He had a great desire to choke the hoarse throat of that gentleman, but he suppressed both his joy and this desire.

Very well, he will come — and nothing more. Ha, ha — ha!

And not a word about the letter! The pig!

\* \* \*

Piddubny felt refreshed after sleeping soundly all night long. At about twelve o’clock he tucked Mr. Mykola’s umbrella under his arm and went to the lesson. The familiar feelings of a teacher hurrying to a lesson calmed him down. Only when he entered the hall and saw the stairs he had run down two days before, and especially when he placed the umbrella in the corner, did memories pour over him like cold water and trammel his movements.

Ludya was already waiting at the door. She hopped on her long legs and stretched out thin arms to Mr. Van.

“Mr. Van, Mr. Van,” she squealed joyously, looking at him with infatuated eyes like her mother’s.

They got down to work at once. Everything was as before. The lesson was interrupted at the same hour as always, and they were called to dinner.

And so he passed through the same room he had gone out of lately, and saw the dining-room, and the round table, and Mr. Mykola, and Madame Antonina.

Mr. Mykola shook hands with him coldly. Madame Antonina looked fatigued but radiant, and found a propitious moment to thrust into his hand such a mass of paper that he had difficulty in hiding it.

They ate in silence, though they made some attempts at conversation. Mr. Mykola was polite and complaisant, perhaps overmuch so. He helped Ivan to dishes and, his eyes fixed on some point behind his guest, would say invitingly:

“Have s-s-some of this.”

That s-s-some came out under such pressure as if he had a whole nest of wasps in his mouth.

Ivan was not quite himself yet. He kept his eyes lowered and ate incessantly with the same persistence as he was invited to.

Madame Antonina often dropped her napkin and, bending down for it, would pinch Ivan's leg. Ludyā sighed and lifted her eyes heavenward. "Thank you, kind God, now everyone's happy."

*Chernihiv*  
*February, 1902*

## APPLE BLOSSOMS

I shut the door of my study tight. I cannot stand it any longer... I really cannot bear to hear the sound of the smothered harsh breathing which seems to fill the house. My child is lying in my wife's bedroom, dying. I have been pacing up and down my study for the third sleepless night, tensed like a tuned aeolian harp whose strings resound with every puff of wind. Under its wide cardboard shade my lamp divides the room into two tiers: the upper one — dark, frowning, oppressive, the lower one — flooded with light, with bright beams and a pattern of shadows. The unruffled bedclothes on the couch are especially irritating to the eye. Beyond the dark window lies the world submerged in night, and to me my room resembles the cabin of a ship sailing in an unknown black sea, carrying me with my affliction and fears. I wonder at my noticing things, when grief has enveloped me utterly and holds me captive. I even set a photograph straight when passing the desk. Now it is right!... But the harsh breathing has not been stilled. I hear it even through the closed door. I will not go into the bedroom. What for? I see everything as it is. I see my little girl with her bare arms on the blanket; I see her chest heaving under the blanket; I see her parting her parched lips to gasp for air. The little one, usually so shy, now winds her chubby arms around the doctor's neck and willingly opens her mouth. She is such a submissive little kitten now... It breaks my heart. I wish the end would come quicker!

I keep listening. The least rustle or knock, and my heart sinks. I imagine that something supernatural is about to happen: a being with large black wings will enter through the window, a shade will scurry through the room, or someone will cry out suddenly — and a life will be cut short. I listen. No, the house is not asleep... Something big, unknown, is living in it. I hear it breathing, sighing. I hear the beating of its heart and the throbbing of its pulse. I know it is anxiety. It holds in its grip the very air of the room, and I feel a great urge to escape from its embrace, to leave the house and throw it off.

But I keep on pacing, with even, deliberate strides, from one end of the room to the other, from corner to corner. From corner to corner. I do not feel my legs, I cannot

control them. They carry me themselves, like a wound-up mechanism, and only my mind spins a lacework of thoughts as the spider spins its web. The night stares through the window, endlessly long, deep black spaces. Somewhere in the distance the night watchman rattles his clapper. How many ages has this clapper broken the silence of the night with its wooden tongue, how many people and generations has it outlived. It always arouses in me a feeling of a link with the remote past, with the life of my ancestors. There is something simple and cheering in the utterance of the clapper, whereby it promises, amidst the silence and loneliness, to safeguard the peace of your sleep... Why should I not take such a night for the episode in the novel I have begun, in which Khristina, after leaving her husband, finds herself suddenly removed from the large city to a remote little town? She cannot fall asleep. She opens the window of her room... A sea of trees in blossom... soft black waves rolling... the town is asleep... it looks like a heap of black rocks... There is nothing to be heard or seen under the gloomy sky. Only odors stifle the breath, and far away the muffled beat of the clapper is heard, like the heart beat of an invisible giant... All this is new and strange to Khristina. She feels...

I shudder. God, what is the matter with me? Have I forgotten that my child is dying? I press my ear against the door to catch the sound of her breathing... The same harsh breathing... How hard it is for her to breathe, how she suffers, my poor little one... My own breathing is stifled by that harsh sound, and I begin to inhale deeply in time with her breath, as if this could help her...

However, I feel chilly. Cold shivers, starting from my back, run over my whole body, my teeth chatter... I have not slept for three nights... Grief is gnawing at me, for I am losing my only and beloved child. And I begin to pity myself. I feel so hurt, so wretched and lonely, so shrunken; my face is plaintively contorted, and my eyes fill with bitter tears.

What is that? A door banging and the patter of bare feet... Is that the end?

I stand stock still, my heart has stopped. Something is being poured out, and the iron handle rings against a pail. Katerina has carried something into the house. I see this worried and drowsy woman; she stays up dutifully at night, for she too loves our Olenka. The kind soul!

Once again all is quiet, except for the harsh breathing of the strangled throat, the hissing of imminent death. Where can I run away from this sound, where can I hide? I have no strength left to listen to it... At the same time, I am sure that I will not leave the room, for I cannot bear not to hear it. It fetters me. As long as I hear it, I know my child is still alive. So, I pace up and down the room and suffer, and all my nerves are racked with pain because of that sound.

It is late. The lamp is beginning to smoke and die down. I hear the wick crackle and see the light flicker, rising and falling like my child's chest. I watch with terror this struggle of light for life, and it seems to me that the moment it dies out, Olenka's soul will fly away.

How terribly superstitious I have become! I light the candle and, suddenly gathering courage, put out the lamp. The room becomes darker, the beams and numerous shadows disappear, a gray, sad hue covers everything. My room has become gloomy. I drag my tired feet amidst gray pieces of furniture and my hunched shadow silently drags behind me. Thoughts race through my head. What am I thinking about? I am thinking about something alien, irrelevant, insignificant, but I am nevertheless aware that I have not forgotten my woe. Voices seem to say to me, "Don't you want some herring?" What's that? What herring? I put it out of my mind. Some stranger has asked the question, and I leave it at that.

"Hydroquinone... hydroquinone... hydroquinone..." There is something about that word that I like, and I repeat it with every step I make, careful not to omit a syllable. This word eases my burning eyes wonderfully. They feel rested, and long green meadows begin to spread before them, with fine, fresh grass... I no longer hear the harsh breathing. The clapper is silent.

The dining-room clock strikes two. The two loud, sharp strokes descend on me like thunderbolts, like the blade of the guillotine. They almost kill me.

When you are grief-stricken, when you expect some disaster any moment and your mind is tense as a fiddle string, I advise you to stop the clock. If you watch it, it prolongs your torment endlessly. If you forget it, it will remind you of itself like a brick falling on your head. It registers your suffering in a detached way, and its long hands bring nearer the moment of disaster.

The green meadows have vanished from my eyes, and I again hear the distant sound of the clapper.

The window is turning gray. Everything in the room is the same as it was; — as before, the yellow flame of the candle is being bent downward by the motion of the air; as before, the shadows flicker, and gloom hangs above; but still, there is something new. Of course, the gray window.

My senses are inordinately acute, my eyes notice things they did not see before. I even see myself striding from corner to corner amidst furniture which is of no use to me, and seems not to be mine. I see my heart, which is empty of grief. If she dies — so be it; if she lives — well and good!

The door of the study creaks, and the doctor silently enters the room. A good old friend! He has just come from the bedroom, from my child. He presses my hand and looks into my eyes. I understand him. No hope? None, his honest eyes answer. He is not needed and goes off, and on the threshold stands my wife, whose eyes, full of supplication and hope, follow him as he walks through the room, as if he were carrying away with him the life of our Olenka.

Then she turns her eyes to me, eyes fevered and dark from sleepless nights and anxiety, bright with tears and beautiful. Her black hair, bound up in a rough bun, is so soft and warm. All this I see. I see all this. I see her dear, tearstained face, her bare throat, and the cleavage of her breasts, whence issues the warm fragrance of her youthful body; and when she leans softly sobbing against my chest I embrace not only a friend, but an attractive woman, and as if in a dream, I am aware of the unuttered thought in my mind: "Don't weep. All is not yet lost. We'll have other..." How vile! How could such obscene thoughts crop up to the sound of the breathing of a throat being strangled by death? Olenka is dying... No, that cannot be... It's outrageous, absurd... Who is taking her away? Who stands in need of her life?... Who can drain my heart's blood while I am still alive? My Olenka, my joy, my only child... No, it cannot be... It is preposterous, I say.

Alarmed by a groan from the bedroom, my wife rushes there, and I tear about the room like a wounded beast and in unrestrainable wrath kick the furniture with a desire to destroy everything. "It's vile, it's preposterous," something within me cries out, and I grind my teeth because of the pain hidden in my heart. "Hell, this is an outrage," my

whole being rebels. "It's a law of nature," something in the back of my mind says reasonably, but I do not listen and keep dashing about the room. Coarse profanity hangs on my lips; I give utterance to it, and am frightened at my own voice. Shivers torment me, a cold sweat covers my brow... I sink into an armchair, and cover my eyes with my hand... Ah!

I sit in this posture for a long time.

Do I imagine it, or has the breathing really quietened down? Is this the end? But my wife is silent, I do not hear her cry. Maybe she is better? Perhaps, my child is feeling better? Maybe all will be well, she will fall asleep, and tomorrow her eyes will smile to her father? Is it impossible? Was not I myself dying in childhood, and did not the doctor give me up, and nonetheless... Lord! There must be some power that one can supplicate!

The breathing? She really seems to be breathing easier... If she could only fall asleep... Perhaps, I misunderstood the doctor's expression when I said good-bye to him. He could hardly have looked me so boldly in the face if...

Suddenly a wild scream, a mother's cry, rouses me from the chair. My legs grow weak, but I run... I rush blindly, knocking things over, banging my arms against the door, and collide with my wife, who is wringing her hands in a fit of hysteria... I understand everything... This is the end!

Well, there is nothing I can do for my child, I must calm my wife. I embrace her, console her, pronounce some words which I myself do not believe, and kiss her cold hands, wet with tears. With the help of Katerina, laurel drops, kisses and cold water I finally succeed in bringing my wife to her senses, and lead her out of the bedroom. She is no longer screaming, she is weeping bitterly, inconsolably. Let her give vent to her grief, poor thing!

I run to the bedroom. Why? How do I know? Something draws me there. I stand on the threshold and look. I feel that my face has withered to the bone, my eyes are dry and unblinking, as if someone had set them in a horn frame. I see everything with extreme vividness as in a delirium.

In the middle of the room, on white sheets in a wide double bed, lies my little one, already turning blue. She is still breathing. A faint wheezing sound comes through her parched lips and tiny teeth. The half-closed eyes have already taken on a glassy look, and my own eyes, my brain,

greedily drink in all the details of this terrible moment, recording everything — the big bed with the little body, the timid light of early morning penetrating into the still gloomy room, and the unextinguished candle, forgotten on the table, casting death-like hues on the child through its green shade... the water spilled on the floor, and the gleam of candle-light reflected from the medicine bottle... So as not to forget, so as to forget nothing... neither the ribs that raise and let fall the blanket with the last breath... nor the already dead golden curls spreading over the pillow, nor the warm odor of the cooling body which fills the room... All this can be of use... some time or other... as material... I hear this and realize that someone is saying this to me — some stranger who sits inside of me... I know that he is looking with my eyes, that with the insatiable memory of a writer he is absorbing this picture of death at the dawn of life... Oh, how abominable it is, how horrible, how this consciousness wounds my paternal heart... I cannot stand it any longer... Away, I must get away from the house as quickly as possible.

The apple trees are in blossom. The sun has already risen and is coloring the air golden. How warm it is, how joyous! Birds are chirping under the blue sky. I mechanically pluck an apple blossom and press it, cold with dew, to my cheek. The pink petals fall apart at the rough touch of my hand, and drop slowly to the ground. Is not that what happened to the life of my child?

And nonetheless nature is jubilant.

And what the picture of woe had been incapable of doing, the joy of nature achieves. I weep. Tears of relief drop down after the petals, and I gaze with pity at the green leafy cup that remains in my hand...

I cannot bring myself to return to the house, and so remain in the garden. Well, it has happened after all. It is a fact. Perhaps she is better off now. How do I know?

It is a fact!... Oh, how hard it is for me to believe this fact, to reconcile myself to it. Not long ago, only six — no, five days ago she ran about in this garden, and I listened to the patter of little bare feet. Have you ever noticed what a joy it is to hear the patter of little bare feet? Not long ago, it seems only yesterday, I stood with her under our favorite cherry tree. The tree, laden with blossoms, looked like a bouquet. We held hands, lifted our heads and listened to the humming of the bees amidst the blooms.

Glimpses of the sky could be seen through the white blossoms, and the spring sunshine played on the grass.

And now...

She was so amusing; my wife and I often laughed at her whims. When I brushed my hair, she would say, 'Daddy is sweeping his head'; she called my collars hoops, did not pronounce the letter "r," and instead of "nasty" would say "natsy."

Can I forget how, when undressed ready for bed, she would come to say good-night to me in a short nightie, all warm and rosy, with bare arms and chubby legs? She would press her nightgown to her chest with one hand and, throwing the other arm around my neck, would present a cheek flushed with play for my kiss.

I cannot forget the happiness of carressing her silken curls, cannot forget her soul shining out of her blue eyes — my soul, only far more beautiful, pure and innocent.

How is she now, my little daughter? No, I must not think about it, she is gone. Gone! Where have they put her? How is she now? I want to know. I pluck sprays of apple blossoms and carry them into the house. I do not know where I shall find my child, where they have put her... and in the first room I enter, the drawing-room, I come up against a table, and on it...

Here is where you are lying, my little one! How big you have grown all of a sudden, as if you were six years old instead of only three...

I surround her with apple blossoms, strewing all around her flowers, so delicate and pure, like my child.

Then I look at her.

She is lying, reaching out bare arms, stiff and unnatural like a waxen doll. She is dressed in a short white dress and new yellow felt slippers with pompons, which I bought her recently. She was so pleased with them.

A light is burning at her head — a strange, unnatural light, pale as death in the bright daylight. Its trembling beams caress the dead cheeks.

I look at the wax-like body and a strange feeling enfolds me. I feel that this body is alien to me, that it has no bond with my own living body, in which warm blood is flowing, that I do not love it and do not grieve for it, but grieve for something quite different, something alive, which has remained in my mind's eye, impressed on it with golden rays...

And my memory, my secretary who never leaves me, is already noting down the frail look of the body amidst the apple blossoms, and the play of the light on the blue-tinged cheeks, and my singular feeling...

I know why you are recording all this, my tormentor! You will find use for it... some time or other... as material! You are not angry with me, are you, my darling daughter?

*Chernihiv*  
*November, 1902*

## LAUGHTER

Madame Natalia, pale and sleepy, opened her bedroom door, which led to the dining room, where Varvara was already dusting. Buttoning up her white morning robe as she went, she asked softly and fearfully, "Have you opened the shutters?"

Varvara stopped dusting and started to run off.

"I'll do it now."

"No, no... don't... leave them shut all day," the mistress said to the servant quickly and in an apprehensive tone.

Varvara, a stocky woman, lifted up her wide, sallow face to her mistress in astonishment.

"There are disorders in town today. Violent men are walking in the streets. They might invade our house. Don't go to the market today. Have we anything to cook?"

"There is no meat."

"That's all right. We'll do without. Cook what there is. Don't go out and don't let anyone in. We are not at home. Do you understand me? Everybody has gone away. Unless, of course, it's sobemody we know."

Madame Natalia spoke these words in a low voice, almost into Varvara's ear, and her bright near-sighted eyes roved uneasily.

When Varvara left, Natalia looked around the room, which was in semidarkness. Only yellow strips of light penetrated through the slits in the closed shutters, forming dusty streams in the air. Madame Natalia pulled at the iron bolts of the shutters, tightened the nuts, and softly moved to another room, bent and as white as a ghost. Examining all the shutters on the street side, she put her ear against the window from time to time and listened intently. She heard indistinct confused noises, which at times seemed to her unusual and alarming.

She wondered how the day would end. Had they not trampled down enough people with their horses, had they not shed enough blood that they had to instigate the ignorant mob against the intelligentsia? She had implored her husband so many times to leave town during these times and take the children with them, but he had refused. Now they were in for it. Oh Lord, why was it so?

She involuntarily recalled the filthy, stupidly worded, brutal proclamations that had flooded the town during the past few days. They called on the people to beat and kill all enemies of the government. Their name was in them — yes, lawyer Valeryan Chubinsky — a name the police hated, and now it figured in the list.

Howls and shouts of the children were heard in the next room. Madame Chubinska rushed there.

“Hush! Keep quiet! Oh, Lord, stop that noise.”

She despondently waved her wide white sleeves, like a bird’s wings, and furrows of unutterable pain formed round her pale lips. She quieted the children and glanced at the window, as if afraid that the children’s voices would penetrate through them to the street.

Varvara came to her aid. The unruffled way she moved about the room, gathering the children’s clothing and dressing them, the confident heavy tread of her bare feet, her grave face — all had a calming effect on Natalia. Everything seemed safer with such a faithful, sensible person.

“Did you go out into the street, Varvara?” asked the mistress.

“No, I didn’t. I just stood a while at the gate.”

“What is it like? Peaceful?”

“Why, yes... Some men came up and asked for the master.”

“Men? What men?”

“Who knows? Men.”

“What did they... what were they carrying?”

“They were carrying sticks.”

“Sticks?”

“I told them that the master was not at home... that everybody had gone away.”

“You did the right thing, Varvara. Remember there’s nobody in the house except you... Oh, my God!”

“Varvara, Varvara,” came Mr. Chubinsky’s irritated voice from the dining-room. “Why haven’t the shutters been opened?” Madame Natalia held Varvara back with her hand and rushed to the dining-room.

Her husband stood there, half dressed, peering with nearsighted eyes. He had not yet put on his spectacles, saw things badly, and his face, surrounded by fair hair, looked perplexed and flabby.

“Valeryan, dear, let them be. I told her not to open

them. You know how things will be today. I won't let you go out..."

"Oh, nonsense. Have her open the shutters at once."

"Oh, Lord... I beg you... for my peace... for our children."

Madame Natalia's cheeks were flushed. Valeryan was angry. It was all imagination! It would not help, anyway. In the back of his mind, however, he felt that his wife had done right.

Varvara soon carried in the samovar, and they all sat down at the table.

The room was dark and somehow strange. Yellow sunbeams quivered on the walls and sideboard, the wind tore at and rattled the shutters. The children — a boy and a girl — astonished at the unusual circumstances, whispered to each other. Mr. Valeryan tapped the table with his fingers in vexation. A glass of tea grew cold in front of him while he impatiently bit his thin blond beard and gazed at something over his spectacles. During the last few days he had noticed that some suspicious-looking men were shadowing him wherever he went. Dark figures loitered near his windows at night and hugged the fence when they were noticed. Then, when walking in the street yesterday, he had distinctly heard behind him curses that were obviously meant for him. "Orator, orator," a big swarthy rowdy muttered savagely and glared at the lawyer when he turned around. Valeryan did not tell his wife about these incidents, so as not to worry her. Suddenly he saw before him a sea of heads — sweaty heated faces and thousands of eyes looking at him through a haze of gray vapor. He was speaking. A hot wave beat in his face, pressing into his lungs with every breath he took. The words flew out of his mouth, bold and swooping like birds of prey. The speech was a success. He managed to depict the antagonism of interests of those who hire and those who are hired so simply and vividly that the matter became clearer even to himself. When he was applauded, he knew it was the aroused consciousness of the audience that was clapping. Yes, but what will happen today?

Chubinsky glanced at his wife. She sat tense and listening, her face set in the expression of a frightened bird.

There was really something irritating about those closed shutters. What was happening beyond them, in the streets, in those unfamiliar streams in which alien people floated,

that any moment could swell like a sea of passion and flood the banks?

Suddenly something hit against the shutter. Madame Natalia started in her chair. They all sat mute for a minute.

"Well, why are you frightened?" said Valeryan angrily. "Some children have banged on the shutter in their play. That happens quite often, and you imagine all sorts of things..."

Varvara ran in from the kitchen.

"What's the matter, Varvara?" asked Madame Natalia in a frightened voice.

"Young Mr. Horbachevsky's come... He came through the yard to the kitchen door."

"I see, let him come in." The student Horbachevsky had already appeared behind Varvara's back.

Valeryan greeted him and asked: "What's new? Tell us..."

"Things look bad. They say there was a Black Hundred meeting at Mykita's that lasted all night. They drank and decided who was to be beaten. First of all the 'orators' and 'democrats' were to be killed."

"Oh, my God..."

"Don't get frightened, ma'am, maybe nothing will happen. Something suspicious is going on in town. Men are roaming about the streets in groups of three and four... grim, angry faces and savage, predacious eyes that flare up when they see anyone of the intelligentsia... May I have some tea?"

Madame Natalia poured out a glass of tea with trembling hands, and spilled some of it when handing it to the student.

"Well, what else?" asked Valeryan, springing up and stumping about the room.

"Thank you. I walked through the market place. Crowds of people. They're handing out vodka there. Some secret conferences are going on, but it's hard to tell what they're discussing. I only heard some names — Machinsky, Zalkin, yours..."

"Oh, Lord!"

"Now don't be frightened... There are always more people on Sunday and more vodka is drunk. May I have some bread? Thank you. Still, I wonder why you didn't leave town. I was running to your place and saw that the shutters were closed. I thought you had left and only ran in to find

out where to and for how long — and here you are sitting. You're taking a chance — a big chance."

"There, you see... Didn't I say so, didn't I beseech him to leave for somewhere, taking the children..." said Natalia on the verge of tears, pressing a hand to her breast and looking at the caller with the same imploring eyes that she had turned to her husband.

"Bah, what's the use of talking about it now," growled Valeryan irritably and kept on striding about the room. He smoked one cigarette after another, his head plowed through clouds of blue smoke which trailed after him in long wisps like mist in the mountains.

"Ah, what is going on!... whatever is going on!"

This was pronounced by a newcomer with a high female voice.

All turned toward the kitchen door, through which, letting in the light for a moment, a short round woman hurried into the dining room. Her cap was turned to one side, her hair dishevelled and blazing. She seemed to have brought a fire in with her from the street.

"Oh, how dark it is here! Where are you? Where?" Without greeting anyone, she ran up to the table and sank into a chair. "My darlings, my dears... are you still alive? I thought you... It has already begun. A mob is walking the streets carrying the Czar's picture. I've just seen them beating Sikach."

"Which one?"

"The young one, the student... He didn't take off his cap to the picture. When I saw him his cap was gone, his face was bleeding, the jacket torn and he, bent double, was being hurled from hand to hand and beaten. His eyes were big, red, insane... I was terrified... couldn't look at him... And do you know who I saw in the mob? The people — villagers in gray holiday peasant overcoats, wearing big boots... simple, sober tillers of the soil. There were people there from our village — quiet, peaceable, hard-working people."

"Those are the worst elements, Tetyana Stepanivna," said Horbachevsky, the student.

"No, don't tell me that, I know them. I've been teaching in that village five years, and now I've run away from there because they wanted to beat me. It's the old, savage hatred of the gentlefolk, whoever they may be. They've ruined everybody in that village. Well, in the case of rich people..."

but I'm really sorry for our neighbor. She is a poor old widow. One son is in Siberia, the other in prison. All she has is an old house and an orchard. And they destroyed everything, took the house apart beam by beam, cut down the fruit trees, ripped up her son's books... She refused to beg them, as others did. Some people went out to meet the mob, carrying icons and leading little children, got down on their knees in the mud, implored for hours and kissed the hands of the peasants. The mob spared such people."

"Oh, how horrible!" exclaimed Natalia mechanically. She was still sitting drawn up and tense as if waiting for something.

"Hush... quiet," she said impatiently, interrupting the conversation.

A din was coming from the street.

Everybody fell silent, turned toward the windows and, inclining their heads forward, listened intently.

The noise seemed to draw nearer. It sounded like a far-away torrent, like the deep growling of beasts. A-a-ah! — the high walls reflected the mixed shouts, and the stamping of feet on cobblestones sounded quite near.

"Ah, how vile... vile. I'm going out," said Chubinsky, starting up and dashing about the room, looking for something.

The rest of them, however, assailed him with voices lowered and altered, telling him that he must not go out, for the mob were looking for him, there was nothing he could do, and he must not abandon his wife and children. His wife said that she would die without him.

Meanwhile the din had decreased and soon died down. Only the frightened children were crying in a corner, their sobs growing louder and louder.

"Varvara, Varvara!" shouted Valeryan, "take the children to another room and quiet them down somehow."

Varvara came in, treading heavily and calmly, her red arms bared to the elbow, and spoke to the children so that they fell silent at once. She put her coarse bare arms around them and led them away.

The people in the dining-room calmed down too.

"How lucky you are to have such a fine servant," said Tetyana Stepanivna.

Natalia was glad that amidst those horrible events there was at least one clear spot where one could rest.

"Oh, my Varvara is a treasure... She is a true friend of

ours... Quiet, sensible, faithful. And imagine, she charges only three roubles a month."

"She has a fine character," added Valeryan.

"She's been with us four years. We are accustomed to her and she to us. She loves the children."

While talking on this theme the visitors got ready to leave, but now Tetyana Stepanivna recalled her reason for coming. She thought that after his speeches at meetings Valeryan was not safe at home. It would be better if he sat out this evil day at some neighbor's in a safe place.

Horbachevsky disagreed. On the contrary, it was better to stay at home and not appear in the streets. Their home was not well-known, since they had moved in quite recently, and when people saw the closed shutters they would think the house was empty.

"No, no, I'll stay at home... come what may," Chubinsky reassured them as he said good-bye to them.

Husband and wife were left alone. He scurried about the room amidst clouds of smoke, as if striving to dispel the anxiety.

Madame Natalia sat oppressed. Chubinsky finally sat down beside his wife.

"Now, don't worry so much," he said to her, trying to sound calm. "Nobody is going to hurt us. They'll just shout a bit and go their way."

"Oh, I'm not worrying... Don't pay attention to me... it's just nerves. I also think nothing will happen."

She found it hard to suppress her trembling.

"I'm sure the hoodlums are few, the people won't support them."

"Yes, of course, the hoodlums..."

"It won't come to bloodshed..."

"Oh, my God! Of course, it won't come to..."

Now that they were alone in the dark room, surrounded by perils and the unknown, and endeavored to conceal their thoughts and uneasiness from each other, their dread grew and pressed upon them.

Was he, an unarmed man, capable of resisting the blind rage of a savage mob that did not know what they were doing?

She knew the answer.

Well, and if they came?

Well, if they came, they would defend themselves to the end. They would barricade...

A loud, sharp ringing resounded in the anteroom.

Chubinsky leaped up.

"Don't go — don't open the door," Natalia entreated him, wringing her hands.

The bell kept ringing madly.

Chubinsky rushed into the kitchen.

"Varvara, Varvara!"

"Hush! Don't shout so."

But Varvara was not there.

What was to be done? Something had to be done.

Where had Varvara gone to?

At last Varvara ran in.

"That was the doctor ringing. He's coming through the kitchen now."

The doctor came in, almost running. Tall and stout, he waved his arms like a windmill and cried out:

"You're sitting here, my friends, and don't know what's going on... People are being beaten and killed... They'll cut your throats, I'm telling you. They wrecked Dr. Garnier's apartment, destroyed all his instruments, dragged his wife by the hair. Then they forced Garnier to go with them, and he's now carrying the Czar's picture at the head of those hoodlums. That's one case."

"Oh, Lord!"

"They dragged Ivanenko out of a cab and smashed his skull. That's the second! Zalizko was compelled to swear allegiance to the autocracy, for he was cruelly beaten. That's three! The midwife Rashkevich was beaten to death, they say. There are no police in sight, they've vanished. They've abandoned us to the drunken mob. We must defend ourselves... We must all gather on the square near the town hall. Do you hear? At once. We must gather at once and defend ourselves with arms."

The doctor was shouting as loudly as if he were on the square addressing the people.

The shouting tore at Madame Natalia's breast. Oh, quiet, keep quiet, they'll hear you, implored her eyes and terrified face.

She pressed her hands to her breast and whispered in fright:

"Oh, doctor, doctor, please... Oh, Lord!..."

The doctor did not hear her.

"Take your revolver," he shouted, "and let's go at once."

"I haven't a revolver," cried Chubinsky angrily.

"Phew!" the doctor whistled. "So, you have no weapons? We are only able to deliver speeches, but when something must be done... No, my friends, that won't do... Well, you can sit here until you're caught like a chicken, but I'm going..."

"Where to?" shouted Valeryan. "That's madness. You can't do anything."

But the doctor waved him away, and ran out of the room with a shout.

Terror now overwhelmed Chubinsky, disgraceful, vile terror. He knew it was so. What was to be done? Where could he go? He did not want to die such an inglorious, horrible death. Hide? No, not he himself, of course — all of them, obviously. He looked around the room. His wife was moaning half-consciously, her hands pressed against her head. Varvara was stamping around the table. Run away? Where to? Dozens of plans were revolving in his mind, flaring up like will-o'-the-wisps, to be immediately extinguished. No, that won't do... No, that's not it... Wild terror drove him about the room from door to door; he tried to repress it, but was all in a tremble. "Don't lose your head... don't lose your head..." something within him said, while the thoughts revolving in his mind were those of a trapped animal. Ah! What's that? What does she want?

"Shall I serve lunch?"

Oh, that was Varvara. This brought him back to his senses somewhat.

"What are you saying?"

"I asked if I should serve lunch."

"Lunch? No, didn't you hear?"

"Of course, I heard... Ha-ha!"

This "ha-ha!" made him halt in the middle of the room. He noticed the grimace that passed over Varvara's face, like placid water ruffled by the splashing of a fish, and one of the waves that arose rolled up to him.

"They're beating people like us..." Valeryan explained sadly, and was amazed to see Varvara's stocky figure shaking with repressed laughter.

"What's the matter with you?"

"I..." Varvara began, and suddenly the restrained laughter broke through.

"Ha-ha! They're beating... Let them beat! Ha-ha-ha! You have been masters long enough... ha-ha-ha! The Lord be praised! The people have waited a long time for this..."

She crossed herself.

Her face was flushed, her eyes gleamed. Holding her sides with red arms bared to the elbow, she shook with wild laughter until her ample breasts bobbed up and down under her greasy dress.

“Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha!”

She could no longer contain her irrepressible, savage laughter which bubbled in her breast, flinging out words now and then like foam.

“Ha-ha-ha!... Do away... with all of them... Ha-ha-ha! to the very last one... all! Ha-ha-ha!” Laughter choked her.

That wild roar swept the room and was as painful and horrible as a mad dance of cold and glittering sharp daggers. The laughter poured down like a rainstorm, its bursts were murderous and deadly, and inspired fear.

Chubinsky had to lean on the table to keep himself from falling.

The laughter beat at his face. What was she saying? Something impossible, insane...

Madame Natalia was the first to rise from her chair.

“Get out!” she cried in a thin, piercing voice. “Get out! She’ll kill my children. Drive her out!”

Varvara was no longer laughing. Her breasts were still heaving, but her head was bent low. She glanced with disapproval at her mistress, and picking up an armload of dishes, turned with a heavy tread toward the kitchen.

Her bare feet stamped on the floor.

Chubinsky was flabbergasted. He shook all over. He took a few steps after Varvara and halted... It was impossible, incomprehensible, a nightmare.

He ran to the kitchen and opened the door.

The kitchen was sunlit.

He saw Varvara. She was bending over the table, dispirited and quiet, wiping something.

“Var...”

He wanted to say something, but could not.

He just stood there looking with large, frightened but acute and extraordinarily discerning eyes, which took in both the scene as a whole and the most minute detail. He saw what he had passed by every day with unseeing eyes — the bare feet, cold, red, dirty and chapped like those of a beast. The rag on her shoulders which did not warm them. The sallow face and blue rings under the eyes. We ate it all together with the dinners... The blue smoke in the

kitchen, the hard wooden bench on which she slept... amidst dishwater, dirt and smoke... hardly covered... Like in a den... Like a beast... Her wasted strength that had been given to others... The wretched, squalid life... A lifetime in a yoke, a lifetime without a ray of hope... Work, work, work... and always for others, for others, for their welfare...only for them, for the others... And he had expected her to be friendly...

He could say nothing. What was there to say? It was all so clear and simple.

He ran out of the kitchen back into the dining-room.

"Did you see her?" He flung the words at his wife. "Didn't you see? Go and take a look..."

"Why doesn't she go on strike?" he shouted in a voice that was not his own. "Why doesn't she strike?"

He dashed about the room as if someone were lashing him with a whip. He was choking and could not breathe.

He ran to the window and, hardly conscious of what he was doing, began to loosen the bolt, hastily and impatiently.

"What are you doing," cried his wife, frightened to death.

He did not hear. He pushed on the iron bolt with all his strength. The bolt struck the window with a din which echoed under the high ceiling. The window flew out, the halves struck against the wall, and dull yellow light poured into the room. The autumn wind swept a cloud of fine cold dust into the room together with some indistinct, chaotic sounds.

"Why doesn't she go on strike?"

Valeryan drank in the cold air and did not even notice the threatening roar of the street.

The street was groaning.

"Ah-a-a-ah!" the sound came from somewhere in the distance, like the noise of a burst dam.

"Ah-a-a-ah!" the wild roar came closer, and one could hear the shattering of glass, and occasional cries full of despair and terror, and the tramping feet of an enormous mob... A horse-cab tore down the street, and the mad rattle of wheels clattered after it. The autumn wind chased the yellow clouds and itself rushed away from the town. "Ah-a-a-ah! Ah-a-a-ah!"

## HE IS COMING

The signs were bad. The police officer seemed discontented with the sum he had taken, and although he gave assurances that he would not permit a pogrom, people had little faith in his word. The worst thing was that no one knew for certain whether the procession with the Savior's icon, which was to take place the next day after divine service, would be called off or not. They were talking about it with alarm in the town, and the shopkeepers, forgetting their customers, left their shops in the hands of God and gathered in groups in the square in the centre of the town. Here, speaking in hushed, secretive voices, and casting apprehensive glances around, they kept telling one another about some strangers who had appeared recently in the town, about the gentlemen of the monarchist Black Hundred League, who would be glad to have a pogrom, about their own "bigwigs," that is the rich merchants, having already begun to flee from the town with their wives and children. The discussion occasionally became heated and stormy, the words clanged like carts loaded with iron, and the white hands of the shopkeepers were fluttering in front of their red beards. However, when the loud clatter of wheels over the cobblestone road suddenly resounded, and a large waggon pulled up at a rich man's house that had all its windows facing the square, the conversations ceased, and all looked on sullenly and wrathfully as various household goods, trunks and pillows were hastily carried out of the door, and women and curly-headed children completely filled the waggon. When the conveyance at last departed in a cloud of gray dust, lively conversations were resumed, culminating in shouts. The waggoner Yosel, a tall strong man, bustled about the market place with a whip in his rough, knotty hands and boasted that he had already sent off all three of his waggons. He assured the people that there would not be a single cart in the town by the evening.

The sun had not yet set, but all the shops began to close. Everywhere iron bolts creaked, locks and keys clinked, doors slammed, screening the black mouths of the shops, and in a moment the gray old walls of the market emptied

out its people. The market became alive and populous for a minute. The old "housewives" gathered up dust-covered ring-shaped rolls and loaves of bread — all their meagre stocks — from the tables. They moaned, groaned and, bending under the weight of their heavy baskets, hurried home. Black groups of depressed, worried people went their way from the market along narrow streets, and the market place became so deserted and silent, as if all the noise of life had been suddenly transformed into gray stone.

Evening was coming on. The sun grew large, glowed and slowly descended below the horizon. A red haze rose up in the west, and bloodred phantoms seemed to advance on the town from that point, timidly and one by one at first, but then in streams. They passed in soundless procession between the deserted walls, leaving warm red tracks on the stones and reflecting their bloody faces in window-panes. At this the old furrowed walls trembled with terror and only the red poppies growing on the cornices greeted the newcomers with laughter. When the sun finally set and night came like a black reflection of the earth, the red guests vanished, and the little town was altogether still.

A council was being held by the light of tallow candles in the house of old Avrum, the shokhat. The oldest, most revered men gathered there, their pale faces wrinkled with wisdom, their white beards like those of their remote ancestors. They all spoke at once, for all were perturbed by the same anxiety. Some of them wanted to collect more money for the police officer; others had the idea of imploring the priests to intercede for them. Some of those present suggested that the people should gather once more in the synagogue and spend the night in prayer. The Great God, who led the children of Israel out of the desert, who had not let them drown in the wave of hatred of other nations, would once more divert the hand of the foe from them. All the counsels were good, but neither could unite nor reassure the people. When the waggoner Yosel, whose lungs were the lustiest of all present, outroared everybody and declared that the young people were determined to defend themselves, that they would shoot — saying this he raised his whip as if it were a revolver — horror struck all of them dumb, and the white beards withered and drooped on their chests. Then came an uproar. The old shokhat Avrum, who during his long life had cut the throats of thousands of hens and geese without a qualm, turned white and cried

out: "What! They want to shoot! Those senseless beings, those madmen! Those politicals! They want to shed blood, which will fall on our own heads. They will incite revenge, and revenge will devour, like a wolf, our children and all peaceful people. Ai-weh!"

All shouted together with Avrum, toothless mouths shouted, and wrinkles of wisdom and experience shouted, and the beards and white bony hands waved. Everybody felt breathless with indignation and shouting, and also somewhat relieved, as if their shouting had driven away alarm from the room.

The acute indignation soon passed, however, and the shouting gradually subsided. The question arose once more, as in the beginning, of what was to be done. Time passed, and each minute that fell into oblivion engendered another that brought closer the terrible unknown. No one was offering any advice now. They were all wearied, and as it became clearer that no action could be suggested, that there was not even a way of escape, since the horses were gone, people began to believe in a miracle. Something might happen to avert the disaster; the procession might pass by peacefully without hurting anybody. Everything might still be all right. Perhaps, nothing would happen.

An idea dawned on someone: What will blind Esterka say? Bring Esterka here, she will foretell...

All wanted to hear what Esterka would say.

The waggoner Yosel and Avrum's son-in-law left to fetch the blind woman.

She had not yet gone to bed. A black bulk was seen sitting on the threshold of the house, as dark as its mistress, and appeared to be singing. Low, mournful sounds, like the crying of a baby, issued from below, from the black bulk, and it was so uncanny and even terrifying to hear that chant, that Yosel stopped his companion, and could not make up his mind to address the old woman. He was unable to discern whether she was singing or weeping. He finally took courage and called out softly.

"Granny!... Granny Esterka!"

The quavering sounds continued.

"Granny!... Listen Granny!"

The chanting ceased, and a long, mournful blowing of the nose was heard.

When Esterka was told why the men had come, she rose silently and stretched out into the night trembling hands

that sought support. They took her arms and led her off. The door of the dark house remained open.

Wherever they passed lit-up windows and open doors, men and women joined them, and children trailed after them. People whispered to each other that blind Esterka, who foresaw the death of her children and wept her eyes out for them, was being taken to the shokhat's.

So many people had crowded into Avrum's parlor that it was hard to breathe there. When the window was opened to let in some air, the light fell on a sea of tense, agitated faces and a hydra of dismay flew into the room through that window.

All saw Esterka — her woe-benumbed face and her red eyes from which tears flowed incessantly. The sight was a chill wind that swept over all the faces of the throng. Ai-weh!

Avrum wanted her to sit down, but she would not. She merely leaned on the arm of the chair. They asked her some questions, told her something, but she did not hear. What did all this matter to her? To her, who carried in her heart a grief so great that it could not be confined in it, and flowed out through her darkened eyes. She saw nothing but her sons, and she spoke only about them. She described details she had never seen, for she had been far away. She painted the picture as vividly as if it were imprinted on the red lids that covered her eyes. Her voice sounded like that of an ancient prophet.

"I see beasts... beasts everywhere... There is flame in their eyes and blood on their fangs... red, human blood... And their hearts are filled with wolfish lust. They carry the image of their god, and the poles to which the image is attached are stained with blood... the blood of my poor sons... Ai-weh!"

"Ai-weh!" softly sigh scores of bosoms in the room and outside the window.

"And their priests chant and praise the Lord God with black lips and there is blood on their vestments... human blood... And bloody beasts howl with the priests and smash the heads of little children on stones... Ai-weh!"

"Ai-weh!" the sigh echoes all round, and the light in the room is dimmed by it.

"There is blood under my feet... Black, clotted blood... large black pools of it... Women lie there, white as chalk, and their dead eyes stare at the men... at the children's

corpses... and drunken beasts trample over the children and howl: 'death! death!'

"Ai-weh!" people moan in the house and weep outside.

"Fire and death!... I see hands, I see eyes craving for mercy... I hear shouts... Walls are demolished... There is shooting... Oh, I'm being smothered... Oh, my heart... And now do you hear? Hush! They're running up the stairs... They're breaking down the door... my children are there... my beloved sons! Ai-weh! Help! Don't kill them... My Khaim lies there... By Leiba lies there, who supported their old mother... and they will rise no more... Oi-oi! Ai-weh!"

"Ai-weh!... Ai-weh!" — all join in the lament, and gloom and dread reign as on the Day of Judgement.

"Granny" Esterka kept on talking, and the tears kept flowing from her sightless eyes. Her weary old voice sometimes rang out like the voice of a prophet, and all were silenced around her. People held their breath and stored at the bottom of their hearts every single word of the old woman like a grievous sorrow. Perhaps it was not Esterka that was talking but their fate, and the red mist that now hung over them would become reality on the morrow. Perhaps these children who were now pressing warm cheeks to their mothers' knees would tomorrow sprawl dead in the streets, and the drunken mob would trample on them with heavy boots... Ai-weh!

People thronged at the window, and newcomers kept joining them. A disheveled woman, clad only in a chemise, jostled her way through the crowd to get nearer to the house. She hugged a curved seven-branched old silver candlestick to her breast, probably the only valuable heirloom she possessed. The large blue veins in her hands were distinctly seen in the light. Frightened children began to cry; the women quieted them and wiped their tears with their hands. The people on the edge of the crowd sighed, and all that affliction, all those tears were gathered up by the blue night and stored in the cloud that was already rearing its head above the night horizon.

When Esterka ceased talking, and when they took her arms and led her, bent and desolate, out of the parlor, the people made way for her, and murmuring, followed her all the way to her house.

The shokhat's guests also departed, carrying dread with them into the night.

The town spent a troubled night on the eve of the

Christian holiday. Lights were burning in the houses till early morning, and people were busy preparing for the next day as for a fire. Belongings were packed in bundles, and everything was hidden away that could be. There was weeping and moaning everywhere.

When the sun rose, it was greeted with smiles only by the red poppies from the cornices of the market and by the paths overgrown with poppies that flowed like bloody streams among green fields of grain from the walls of the town. The houses frowned, immersed in shadows, and shadows lay under the eyes of the people. The old mosque, now filled as densely with grain as it had been with true believers during the rule of the Turks, was dark with black reminiscences of bloody events which seemed to have passed for ever, while the gray market stood frowning, all in wrinkles like an old man who has seen everything and has lost all hope.

No people were to be seen in town. Only goats wandered in the deserted streets. When the sun rose high, a bell rang out from the belfry; it shook the air and pierced the heart like a dagger. People appeared, sparsely at first like isolated peals. However, when the bells began ringing in unison, when the big, medium and small bells went into their dance, and their ringing bounded in the air like snowflakes in a snowstorm, people poured out from all directions as if attracted by the chimes. And hundreds of frightened eyes watched them through window-panes.

The shokhat Avrum, pale from lack of sleep, also heard the bells, although they had long since ceased ringing. He was trembling all over, and was himself surprised to find that his jaws were quaking and his arms and legs were shaking. For no one knew as yet whether the procession would be held or not, whether anything would happen or not. However, he was a respected member of the clergy, and could not be a mere onlooker of his people's disaster. Finally, he summoned up courage and crossed the threshold of his dwelling. At first he went along a now deserted side street, walking with short uncertain steps, looking about him and scrutinizing the terrible "goy," as if encountering him for the first time in his life. Then he turned into the square. His coreligionaries watched him from their windows and doors, and he nodded a greeting to them, forcing his pale lips into a smile. He made several attempts to say something in a hoarse and smothered voice, but stop-

ped short each time frightened by his own voice. In general, it seemed to him that it was not he who was walking but someone else, some stranger who was treading with shaky legs over some strange, light ground. He even saw this "stranger" walking. He met young men along the way, running from the church in the square. He thought he had asked them questions, but actually he merely stood still and looked them in the face. They told him what was happening as they ran — hastily, briefly, in snatches. A lot of people... from the villages... going to the church and picking up stones... hiding them under their coats... One of them had seen an axe... under the coat... And the young men ran on.

In one street where the people had poured out of their houses in alarm he saw a roundfaced, curly-headed girl (whose was she?) carrying a weasel fur and entreating everybody to hide it. The people met her with pained smiles and declined, but she sowed dread with her suppliant, almost insane eyes.

Avrum went on. The police officer rode by in a carriage, bouncing slightly on soft springs. Avrum raised his hands and shouted something to stop him. But the policeman did not even look round. His white uniform coat and golden shoulder straps flashed in the sunlight and vanished. And suddenly the shokhat felt in his heart a blazing wrath which shook him. He now regained command over himself and was able to speak. He intercepted all the people he met and shouted at them that things could no longer go on as they had... It was imperative to defend themselves. It was necessary to shoot with revolvers and kill all the rowdies... Throw firewood at them, beat them with poles, stab them with knives... He raised a terrible tumult. Frightened people rushed out of their houses and implored him to be silent.

"Quiet, Rabbi Avrum, keep quiet... Hush!"

But he could not calm down.

Pale, foaming, with terrible eyes, he shouted so as to be heard over the whole street, as if seeking to suppress his own fear with his shouts.

"Why be silent? How long will we be silent? We've been silent all the time!"

"Rabbi Avrum... please, keep quiet... hush!... Rabbi Avrum..."

Those who did not know what had caused the shouting thought the pogrom had already started. They ran out of

their houses in readiness, with their wives, with their children, with bundles in their arms and ran through back yards and vegetable plots into the field, into the tall wheat.

People gathered around Avrum. Hands were stretched out toward him, he was surrounded by pale, jaundiced faces and eyes red from night lamps. All entreated him: Hush! quiet! don't bring down misfortune on us. Avrum was silenced; and he became terrified amidst the silence. Here, in this town, where he was born and had grown up, where for so many years to his very old age he had worked for himself and for others, he found himself as on a sinking ship in the open sea, and around him waves were beating, and the wind was roaring in the dark expanses. And there was no escape anywhere. Avrum cast a glance around him. Those uneasy, gleaming eyes that met him said the same thing: there is no escape...

His body became strangely tense, and he felt in his heart the cry of despondence deeply buried in the bosom of his people, a cry which feared even to emerge from the hidden depths.

Dread came upon him... it was more dreadful here among people than in his house.

Suddenly Avrum felt something descend upon him and spread over his body in fine pains. It was the ringing of bells that had descended amidst the silence and spread over the town, leaping and roaring. The sound of tramping came from the square, and a cry was heard, "It's coming, it's coming!"

There might be a massacre there, blood might be flowing... He knew nothing. They might be cutting throats, plundering... He was only aware that everything about him was stirring, that some force had caught him up suddenly, that he was being jostled on all sides, that people were panting around him, that he was running and hearing a great tramping of feet about him, that he was hearing the throbbing of his heart in his breast. Something immense, hundred-footed and ardent ran with him. All he saw before him was the long skirts of someone's smock fluttering comically in the wind. Something chased after him. He rushed along narrow streets, he churned up deep dust with his feet, he passed the houses, turned aside, and sweat flooded his eyes. There was Moische Zweiliebe's house, and there was the house of poor Hana. There was another street ...another house and again someone's house. Whose house

was that? And there the fields began... If only he could get there in time, get there... Ah, here was the road. Was that blood on it? Two long streams of blood on both sides? Ah, no, it was poppies, so terribly red... like human blood... When would he get there, when would he be able to hide, so as not to hear those bells any more, those red bells that rushed in pursuit after him, that beat at his very heart, that swung and roared like mad?

The town was deserted. Everyone who could had fled to the fields or to the woods. Only blind Esterka, whom they had forgotten to take with them, remained along with the hungry, unfed goats that wandered around her with pitiful cries. The dance of the bells — big, medium and small — went on amidst the strange dead silence of the town. The sun smiled, spreading out carpets for the ringing to move on.

Esterka sat on the threshold of her little house, covering her face with her hands. She would meet alone the thing from which all had fled, which had taken away her sons over there, in Odessa. She did not, however, feel any fear. What was there to fear when the most terrible had pierced through her heart with fire and had burned everything there? Not fear but hatred congealed in her breast when she heard the bells. It seemed to Esterka that it was not sounds, but hundreds of bloody hands that stretched out from the belfry and waved greedily with their long fingers over the houses. She wanted to give battle to those hands and fend off misfortune from people with her own body. She rose from the threshold, stretched out her hands before her, lifted up her face, over which tears flowed from blind eyes, and advanced to meet the bells. The bent figure of the old woman with arms extended in front of her, shrivelled and determined, seemed horrible in the deserted streets. She walked on and avidly absorbed the sounds which were transformed into hatred.

Suddenly Esterka heard another kind of noise amidst the ringing. At first it sounded like a soft wailing and then like the wind blowing. As time went on, the sounds became coarser, hoarser, and turned into howling — as if cattle were bellowing in the pen, or a hail cloud was racing over the sky.

The procession was coming.

Thousands of feet tramped the ground, thousands of bodies stirred the air, banners rustled and stout priests

roared in coarse, inhuman voices; their long tresses, tousled by the wind, fluttered over their stiff, embroidered vestments. High above them frowned the darkened face of an inferior painting of the Savior, almost unnoticeable in its richly decorated, heavy and cumbersome frame wrought of metal. And the bells rang out glory to God, and stout priests sang His praises from full bellies.

Esterka did not at first realize where the sounds were coming from. Was it, perhaps, a threatening black cloud overhead and rain falling? Soon, however, she heard the familiar chant and understood. Then, suddenly, rage burst out, a malevolent joy flooded her heart.

“Aha! He is coming!... he is coming,” a grin distorted her lips and the tears even ceased flowing from her eyes. She hurried to meet the procession.

The procession came nearer.

When at last she was fanned by the breath of the human mass and clenched by the voices that were so terrible for her, blind Esterka halted, lifted her hands as if she intended to stop the throng, and began to shout. Words poured out of her throat in an incoherent cry. She shook her arms and stood with open mouth. Violent emotion and wrath deprived her of speech. She shouted out something inarticulate, but she thought she was speaking and ejecting all her pain, her grief and her hatred.

“Listen, you Jewish son!” she shouted words that stuck in her throat. “Are you coming again? You, who took away my children, my Leiba and my Khaim... Are you once more giving your blessing for the shedding of your people’s blood? Listen, give my sons back to me... It’s me, blind Esterka, talking to you... Blind Esterka, who wept her eyes out, the mother of my poor sons... Listen, where are you going to? Stop! There’s been enough bloodshed...”

She shook her fists and shouted words that remained deep in her heart. The tears flowing from her sightless eyes filled the black old mouth with its two stumps of yellow teeth.

Thousands of feet stamped past her, thousands of lungs breathed, the basses roared, and the bells danced like mad — the big, the medium and the small bells.

## PERSONA GRATA

Lazar detested the prison warden whom the inmates had nicknamed Mug. He detested him for everything: for his rude, fleshy visage on which hair refused to grow, for his little cruel eyes, which seemed to look straight past one but in fact saw everything, and for his sadistic tendencies. The rare moments their eyes met imprinted themselves on Lazar's mind as a portend of evil. Lazar was therefore particularly uneasy when he noticed that of late Mug had somehow intentionally been focusing his little eyes on him, which seemed to paw his whole body, hands and feet and his sturdy sloping shoulders. That caused Lazar to withdraw into his shell, button up his prison gown and suppress his anger, and for a long time after this he could still sense the fixed stare in the wrinkles of his face. It came to the point where Mug, crossing the prison yard, would suddenly stop, go up to Lazar, give him a piercing look and move his lips as if he wanted to say something, but remain silent. Measuring him up and down, he would shift his gaze into the distance and, without saying a word, go on his way. The inmates saw this scene, stopped their work, and from under their gray cloth caps glinted the bleary whites of their eyes, inquisitive and derisive.

Once Mug found his tongue:

"Well, brother Lazar, looks like you're having a bad time with us, doesn't it?"

Lazar tucked up the flaps of his gown and tensed as if to fend off an assault. "Why pick on me?" said his whole figure, which instantly seemed to contract and harden. But Mug gave him no chance to speak his mind. Touching his arm above the elbow with two fingers and looking somewhere above his head, he uttered mysteriously:

"Take it easy, brother... things might change for the better..."

Then he marched across the prison yard, his shoulders cautiously bearing his rigid box of a head.

Lazar gave him a side-glance, showing the sallow whites of his eyes and watched him walk away with a wry and malevolent look.

The day after this incident Lazar was called to the office. His interview lasted for a long time, about an hour, and meanwhile the grey gowns in the prison yard exchanged conjectures, cynical remarks and knowing winks.

At last Lazar appeared. He was surrounded on all sides, plied with questions, and pierced with inquisitive stares. He fenced off their enquiries with a lot of banal, insignificant replies, but his eyes harbored something sealed up within him. That was obvious enough. He had brought something with him, some seed that had taken root deep inside.

Outwardly everything was much the same as before, but even here there was a change, because in the hubbub of the prison crowd Lazar would suddenly calm down and retreat into himself. At times of rest he would sit at a distance from the others, prop his yellow face on his yellow hand, narrow his eyes and lapse into reverie. Deep in his heart something moved. Something of long ago, forgotten and unpleasant, covered by the burden of recent events and impressions. He dug into his mind, picking up scattered details, put them together and tried to mould them into a single whole. Just like it had been. Back in the days when things were still fresh in his memory, he thought to hear the cries of the people he had butchered, see the hands of children raised toward him to ward off death and the five corpses in the obscure tavern, who were already unable to stop the robbery, but now his mind was concentrated on quite a different point — on himself. Did he intend to kill? Was it really terrible? Perhaps only when they started to yell to draw someone's attention. How did he cut down his first victim? Was it easier to murder the rest? Did he finish them off right away, or did he torture them first? Did he look into their eyes and faces? His lazy memories, heavy and muddled, stirred sluggishly in his brain. Although he strained to the utmost and urged them on, he failed to recall everything clearly and to form a mental image of his deeds and feelings. Time and again he returned to one and the same detail, but when his tired memory, refusing to respond, revolved in one place like a key in a damaged lock, his thoughts branched off into another direction altogether. How would things be? Difficult or easy? Awful or tolerable? Suddenly he recalled how he had strung up a cat when he was still a little boy. A wretched cat with a ragged tail and ears, harrassed by the dogs...

His recollections were cut short — the slop pail had to be carried out, and he set to work silently, indifferently, but there still was something concealed in his eyes.

The pole pressed on his shoulder, the large pail swung from side to side, making the gray contents lap in feeble waves; someone's back and waxy yellow neck stuck out ahead of him, and suddenly the ragged famished cat resurfaced in his mind, writhing on the string, contorting its tail and paws, its bloodshot eyes popping out of their sockets. What will happen next? Will it go on writhing for a long time yet? How soon will it shut its eyes and drop its limp paws? His mind convulsed in spasms of curiosity just like that cat on the string.

But how would things be now?

He was getting tired. Thoughts tore across his brain like a plow breaking dry ground, and tormented him. To find relief, he was bad-tempered and rude, kicking up rows without any pretext, stunning himself and others with the foul curses he sent ringing through the air. He rejoiced at discerning malice in himself, which he tried to fan, rouse and exacerbate.

"Hey you, the whole lot of you!" he shouted in a squeaky womanish voice. "Riffraff! Scum! You all should be hanged on the same branch if one could be found strong enough to take your rotten weight!"

The grey gowns found these antics highly amusing, and laughter spread across their faces like dampness across the walls.

But this only enraged Lazar all the more and he shouted even louder, making movements like a hangman pulling at the feet of the hanged to hasten his death. At such times he wanted to slash, hang and stab not only those who made fun of him in hate, but also those over there beyond the prison walls. That's no big deal! Two twists of the bird's neck and it's curtains... Yet at the same time the nagging thought kept buzzing away like a gnat in his ear: how would things be?

Calming down a bit, he set back to work, carrying water and wood, sweeping the yard as if nothing had happened. His face took on an introspective look, his lips tightly pressed under his clipped moustache, concealing his secret knowledge. As he moved about he would at times mumble something to himself in a businesslike manner, bending his fingers and calculating:

“One makes twenty-five... for two it's fifty, ten means three hundred minus fifty... and clothes besides...”

Something rustled in his imagination, something jingled so pleasantly that the prison and the gray gowns suddenly disappeared, the hanged cat vanished from his mind's eye, and the death rattle ceased.

He only recalled snatches of the conversation — “Will you cope with it?”... “Rest assured...” — and the round beardless visage of Mug, which now did not seem so loathsome after all.

Lazar's life took a sharp turn one night when he was secretly removed from the prison and put on a train. Instead of the prison gown he wore a yellow shirt, a peak-cap and high-legged boots. It felt a bit strange to see his feet in boots instead of the prison clogs, and the shirt was so light and unusual to the touch that Lazar did not rejoice in the change. But the gendarme sitting opposite him conversed in such an easy-going and well-disposed fashion that Lazar began to get used to it all. He forgot he was still a prisoner. And indeed he could easily have been taken for a coachman or some janitor of a rich household, sitting leisurely in a train, pleasantly conversing with a portly gendarme in blue uniform and a sabre at his side. Well, why not?... No one would know. The gendarme became more and more talkative and candid. At first he told Lazar that they had it “hard” at work, and then he switched over to those who made it “hard.” Lazar agreed to everything. When the gendarme brought out a bottle of vodka and they emptied it, both of them started to shout and to curse, clapping each other's hands and vowing God knows what. His head hummed slightly, and it was so nice and comforting to think that this important gendarme in uniform and with a sabre at his side was squeezing his hand and speaking with him as an equal. They traveled all night and the whole of the next day and arrived at their destination late in the evening. After a long cab ride Lazar found himself once again in a prison. Despite the late hour he was received by the warden. Judging from the way he was looked over, glanced at and whispered about, Lazar concluded that here he was to be no ordinary convict. The brief reception ended, a lock clicked open, and Lazar entered a cell. Someone hastily hung up a lamp and by its light Lazar saw a high cell with one window, rather clean, with a neatly made bed, a table covered with a cloth, and in

the corner an icon; the Savior with his hand raised in blessing.

"Well, sleep now," said the warden curtly in a wavering voice tinged with fright. "If you need anything, call Ivan or Kalenik."

Everyone left, the lock clicked twice, and Lazar remained standing between the clean bed, cloth-covered table and the Savior in the opposite corner. He sat down on the bed, touched the quilt and pillow — everything was fine and soft as he had never had before. Near the table stood a stool, new and gleaming, and in the corner there was a bowl and water — everything a gentleman could require. Were it not for the high grated window and the close-stool Lazar could have thought he was spending the night in some gentleman's home. He scanned the ceiling, lamp and icon, rested his shoulders against the speckled pillow, raised his booted legs onto the bed, and without turning off the light or undressing was asleep in a minute.

In the morning Kalenik brought a tea kettle along with a bun tucked under his arm. He put it on the table, turned to the bed and folded his arms at his belly. Lazar saw a sort, kindly-looking man on whom everything — his mustache, hair and old uniform — dangled limply as if it had been soaking in water for a long time and taken out of it just now. His soggy eyes rested on Lazar, and then wandered across his shoulders, hands and feet, and a smirk of satisfaction crept under his tobacco-stained nose. Lazar guessed that this man must have a stubborn wheezing and rasping cough.

And sure enough, Kalenik coughed in a rasping voice, shook his head in a gesture of friendliness, and sniffed in noisily.

"Oh yeah, a strong fellow you are!" he said quietly with a light sputtering laugh. "Come and have tea. To lie in bed with boots on, though, is against the rules. Well, but that's something for others... you're allowed everything..."

"How do you know I'm allowed?" Lazar asked inquisitively and even got down from the bed.

"I know... 'cause it's an order, that's all..." he said, emitting another light ripple of laughter.

"Because you're a man of the Crown," he added at length with an important air, "in the state's employ, so to speak..."

"You don't say? Well then, what about vodka?"

"You're allowed."

"And can I play cards?"

"As much as you like... With me that is... and with that other one, Ivan... that's in the rules..."

But as it proved not everything was allowed. He was not to open the window, or go further than the threshold. Those were the orders. From the free man which Lazar had felt himself to be during the journey he became a prisoner again. Here, it seemed, it was even worse than where he had come from. In the first prison he at least walked in the yard, saw people, and though the work was hard at times, there was nothing unusual about it. And again that nagging question, which he had been almost forgetting, hit his mind: how would things be?

Lazar washed himself, because the tea was getting cold and the bun looked appetizing. He had not finished the tea when the door opened and something rumbled. A tall lean servant hauled a soft armchair, faded and tattered at the back, through the door. He pushed it across the threshold with a crash and pulled it into a corner, shoving it against the wall. Kalenik came in after him, clenching a slightly fly-blown portrait of the Czar and moving his mouth as if he were chewing something.

"Give me a hand, Ivan!"

Ivan ran up, put the portrait to the wall, while Kalenik, after chewing a while, took a cud of bread out of his mouth, stuck it to the wall and pressed the portrait against it. It was now even cozier in the cell. By all accounts Lazar was being taken good care of.

The dinner he was then served was good, substantial, with vodka, followed by a game of cards. Ivan kept losing all the time, which made him mad; Kalenik was lucky; he had a good hand game after game, and after every happy win his laughter tinkled through the cell, though he was cheating and had to be watched closely.

The days passed. Lazar slept as much as he wanted, ate to his heart's content and played cards, drank his fill of vodka and, lounging in the soft armchair became quite cantankerous. For he was the boss here, and all his wishes had to be carried out. At first when he was alone his old worries continued to trouble him: when would it happen and how would things be? Any minute he expected to be summoned and led away to begin a new job, a new life. Time passed, but no one came for Lazar, life did not change,

and he even got the impression that they had forgotten about him.

But once he was roused in the night. Still drowsy from sleep he did not realize that it was not Kalenik but an unknown gendarme shaking him by the shoulder. Cursing, he refused to get up, while the light of the lamp irritated his eyes. In the end he tumbled out of his bed, taking time getting his boots and yellow shirt on. The gendarme's spurs jingled softly as he silently handed him a coat to put over the shirt, and they left. Dawn was barely breaking and the air was chilly. When they had passed the prison wall and Lazar saw the horses, he guessed what was up and his heart missed a beat.

For a long time they drove through deserted streets, between silent houses with sleepy windows. Then they turned into a field. It grew lighter, and the rye fields, cold and fresh, glimmered in blue. The gendarme yawned and made the sign of the cross over his mouth.

"Yea-ah!" he drawled lazily. "A fine crop of rye that will bel"

The air became more transparent. Far on the horizon a little forest showed black, and nestling in the valley, below the forest, lay a dense fog as white as cotton.

At last they arrived. From afar Lazar made out a pillar. He got out of the britchka, climbed up onto the scaffold, and stared blankly at the rope which was gnarled and a bit twisted.

"Well, get ready!" said the gendarme.

Lazar got down from the scaffold, touched the noose, pushed it slightly, and with the same blank look watched it swing. He seemed to be in a dream. Everything in him was asleep: his malice, brain, blood.

"Roll up your sleeve," said the gendarme curtly.

Lazar listlessly unfastened his cuffs without knowing why he had to do so. The coat hindered him. He took it off and threw it behind his back; then slowly and warily he started rolling his sleeve up above the elbow, eyeing his hand which was black and gnarled with veins just like the rope.

The gendarme drew near him and touched his bared wrist with his fingertips. Presently he took out a watch.

"They'll be coming soon...," he said and lit a cigarette. Some minutes passed in silence.

The morning wind slightly swayed the rope and eddied

round his tanned hands. In the blue damp field a landrail craked, and smoke curled from the gendarme's cigarette.

That same instant he heard the clatter of rifles on one side and people appeared. In the front was a tall priest, the skirts of his surplice flapping as he walked, behind him came the warden and some other people, and farther away were the black figures of soldiers with something white in between. That white blot looked so odd in the black crowd that it involuntarily drew Lazar's eyes. The first thing he saw was hair as fair as flax. A white kerchief had slipped down from it onto the shoulder and wisps of hair gleamed like gold. The hair belonged to a little fragile girl, who was walking along so nimbly and even happily that Lazar turned his eyes from her in search of the one for whose sake these people had come together and put up the gallows.

He looked into every face, but none seemed to be the victim.

"Could it be this child?" he asked himself, feeling inwards stirrings of dissatisfaction at having been duped. Presently the escort came close and made the girl stand under the scaffold. Why didn't she weep? Why didn't she shout? She did nothing of the kind, but simply stood there in silence, looking straight ahead, her golden wisps of hair shining around her forehead. At the word from the warden the priest stepped up and extended the crucifix to her. She pushed it aside in refusal and cried something in a resolute, and clear voice, much like the call of a gull. The gentlemen and gendarmes stood by with pale and guilty faces, while she turned round and ran up the scaffold of her own will. Lazar stood there and looked in a daze on the scene as if he had forgotten what he was supposed to do. He did feel neither any malice nor interest.

"Tie her hands, you blockhead!"

This jolted him back to reality: he bore down upon her, rudely and clumsily. She did not resist, but crossed her wrists, waiting silently for them to be tied, while he, sweating profusely, got the rope into a tangle in his frantic efforts to tie a knot.

"Where's the shroud, you yokel?"

Oh God, he had forgotten all about it.

At long last it was brought — a long white sack.

He was exerting himself and hurrying all he could. His hands trembled, as they brushed against the girl's hair and

then slid down her warm, soft neck. The touch burned him and made his whole body convulse. But still Lazar seemed to be in a daze. Something remained dormant in him, he did not know what. Bleary-eyed and only semiconscious, he threw the noose over her neck, adjusted it and then knocked the board from under her feet. The rope twanged like a string, while the white shape jumped and twirled. It grew long, large, covering the skyline, the people, the entire world like a white wall. Then it suddenly shrank and flashed white against the rising sun. Only then did Lazar see the field and hear the silence, an unusual, deadly silence that cut him to the quick. In that vacant silence the white shape twitched, the landrail cracked dryly, and the doctor's watch glistened in the sun.

The warden approached Lazar. He raised his hand to pat him on the shoulder, but that instant jerked it back without touching him. Pale, he uttered curtly in a strangely choked voice:

“Good boy!...”

He turned his back on him and twirled his mustache. The rifles clattered, people started to shift about, and it was all over...

That day Lazar simply could not drink his fill. Ivan and Kalenik grew tired running to and fro bringing him vodka, but he kept on drinking and talking all the time lest it grow silent in the cell, and hard as he tried he could not recall what she had cried then before her death. He heard the voice, but the words were lost in the haze that had settled over his brain. By evening he was dead drunk and tried to pick a fight, but Ivan and Kalenik ran away, so Lazar collapsed on the bed and fell asleep.

Nightmares came to haunt him in his drunken sleep, but gradually the haze lifted and he heard distinctly the words she had so proudly flung into their faces, although he did not understand them or try to grasp their meaning. He clearly saw her thin wisps of hair like golden threads, little childlike hands, and the gentle neck, warm to the touch, which he could still feel in his fingers and which made his flesh creep. Now he saw all her movements, the look in her eyes, her pale face, the wrinkle on the forehead, the hem of her skirt flapping as she walked, all the minutest details, her body, soft and little like a fluffy yellow chick. He saw how she quivered under the white sack, bowing her head and neck, while the long sharp toes of her boots stuck out

like a swallow tail. And he dreamed that he was inspecting his hands to see whether anything had stuck to them.

After that Lazar was roused frequently in the dead of night. He would get up and go to work listlessly, passionless, disinterestedly. The question "how would things be?" was of no relevance to him now. He did not feel the malice he had tried to rouse in himself back in the other prison. Besides, there was even something pleasant about his job, for he got a chance to see the fields, the rye growing green, the clouds drifting in the sky, the winds stirring the air, and the sun rising.

He had to deal with different people. Some went to their death boldly, proudly, speaking beautiful words straight from the heart. Others, pale as corpses, barely dragged themselves along, fainted and had to be pulled to their feet. Still others ranted and raved and put up resistance. These he dragged by the neck, twisting their hands and wrestling with for a long time till he was drenched with sweat. Men and women, old and young, small and slender like children, gentlemen and common folk like him. Sometimes he did well and the work went smoothly. At other times the noose would slide up the neck and wrench the head aside. Then the white bundle would jerk and writhe and take a long time to die. To cut the agony short, Lazar would hang on to the legs, stretching the body till it cracked in the joints — and death followed. Once the rope snapped and the execution had to be started anew. Another time the rope proved to be too long and after he had knocked the board out from under the feet, the body jerked like mad and snapped off, leaving the severed head in the white shroud, which dangled from the rope like a kite, spilling blood all over the canvas. Then he was berated by the warden and had to wash the white sack himself.

Each "client" who met Lazar in their last hour left him something to remember: a look, a strange tone of voice, color of hair, form of neck, motions and words. All these things stuck to him and led their mysterious lives within him. They were the only vital details left of the dead, which his mind had retained. And strangely enough all this surfaced in his memory only in his dreams and never while he was awake. Mostly he spent his days in boredom, slouching about gloomily, angry, given to outbursts of wanton bad temper. He would make Kalenik and Ivan run about on errands, and threw his boots at them whenever

they were not quick enough in fulfilling his whims. He cursed and drank. The liquor befuddled his mind, breeding chimeras, wild impulses and fury. He hollered at everyone, banged on the door, and was unbearable in general.

One morning as usual Ivan brought him boiled water for tea, but Lazar would not take it: "Bring the samovar!" Ivan argued and explained, but Lazar grabbed the tea kettle and hurled it at Ivan, breaking some plates and scalding Ivan in the process. The senior officer came and started to shout, but Lazar's rage would not subside and he kept pounding the table with his fists and bellowing wildly: "Bring the samovar!" The senior officer disappeared, and the samovar was brought. Sensing his power, Lazar became ever more demanding. Besides vodka, he wanted beer — and every day he had beer. On his demand he was served expensive meals; the whole cell was covered with carpets, and grumblingly and reluctantly as his guards responded to his whims, they still carried them out. This power went to Lazar's head.

"Scum!" he hollered at them. "Now do what I say, 'cause I'm the boss around here!..."

The obedience of his guards and superiors spurred his desire to torment. It seemed that his befuddled brain was incessantly occupied with devising something new, molesting and humiliating.

He would call Kalenik and order him tersely and gruffly: "Cough!"

Kalenik would smile in awkward silence.

"Cough!"

Kalenik shuffled uneasily, twisted his mouth in anger, but started to cough softly.

"Make it louder, you yokel, do you hear?"

"Cough-cough!" Kalenik rasped.

But soon that artificial cough would turn into a real one and fill the cell in an unceasing howl punctuated by wheezing and wailing.

Some minutes later Lazar would summon him again.

"Kalenik, cough!"

In his drunken mind he imagined himself to be a count or some big shot visiting the prison on an inspection tour to set matters right and redress the wrongs suffered by the prisoners. The first thing he would do was stage a "parade" for Ivan and Kalenik. Lounging in his armchair, he threw out his booted legs, his arms akimbo on his yellow shirt, his

grey face with brick-red splotches wrinkled into an angry scowl, and his yellow mustache jutting out comically, making him look like a dog.

"What's your name? Ivan, you say? You lie. Your name is Crook, I know. You won't fool me, I can see right through you, you rascal. Why do you torture people? You think, you pig, that just because someone's a prisoner he isn't a human being any more. Maybe he's better than you, 'cause he's paying with torment for his sins, while you're being paid for them. Now, mind you, if I just get wind of anything, I'll have you... I'll have you... in twenty-four hours..."

"Now, the next one. What's the name? Kalenik? Oh, the hell with it, let it be Kalenik. Well, report... Attention!... Stand to attention, man! Do you know who you're talking to, eh? Do you pilfer? And what about the wormy borshch you feed the prisoners with? And what about mugging them? The prisoners wear shirts as black as soot! You filthy rat... The place is one big mess! I'll show you! Get the warden!..."

When the warden was not summoned, Lazar would pick a fight. The guards went off to complain against him, after some time the warden would come, a bit timidly as if he were suppressing something in himself. He was not cross with Lazar; with a sour, guilty smile on his face, he persuaded Lazar, pleaded with him and made him feel ashamed.

Lazar realized that they cringed, that he was needed, that everything was permitted him like an important personality.

And he went on devising new whims.

At times he would be seized by fear. He was afraid of everything, everything seemed to be one big conspiracy against him, stealing up to him to waylay and attack him.

For some reason he imagined Ivan's eyes spying on him. They would sneak up stealthily, alight on his neck or back, seeking a place to crawl into his body. Lazar would fall silent, tense and then suddenly wheel round, but the eyes would slip away in time, laughing in Ivan's face and recounting what they had espied.

At such moments Lazar would fly into a rage and holler at Ivan:

"Don't you look at me! Take your eyes off me, do you hear or I'll tear them out of your face!..."

But the eyes returned, crawling over his face, neck, chest and, with a soft tickle, they would bore into him. This annoyed Lazar and made him tired. Generally things were bad with him and he was sick of everything, of the walls, the vodka, of Ivan and Kalenik. In the first prison, life seemed to have been easier. It was easier to carry the slop pail, sweep the prison yard, haul water. There he had sunshine, movement, people. Lazar did not think about his new work by day, but at nights he would feel the sensation of a soft neck or warm tresses beneath his fingers. From out of the dark, eyes came flocking around him — brown, grey, blue eyes, all of them desperately screaming of life and death. The beautiful words they uttered burst into bloom like flowers, while the curses languished like dust-covered thistles. Everything surfaced in his mind, everything that had been left him in remembrance, all the memorabilia of death which had stuck to him and led their separate and mysterious life in his mind. And this bred in him apathy and fatigue.

But his work kept tearing him away from his dreams, and he was made to go for new memorabilia, although the old ones had not been forgotten and gave him no peace. Lazar would grumble, laboriously lift his crapulent body, and dress. After that there followed yet another day of boredom, drunken stupor, and bad temper.

Many days and nights passed in this fashion.

The nights, though, were better.

One night he was visited by the man who had left him his big eyes to remember. He sat down on the bed at his feet, and a conversation started between them.

**He:** What did you kill me for?

**Lazar:** How should I know? I was ordered to.

**He:** That's a lie. How can anyone be ordered to kill when he himself doesn't want it. Tell me the truth: you killed for money?

**Lazar:** But I had already knifed five people before that.

**He:** Don't try and get out of it. Why did you kill them?

**Lazar:** They were screaming... I got scared... I was afraid people would come and seize me.

**He:** Well, what happened then?

**Lazar:** I don't know myself how I did it... I didn't want to... I hadn't intended to...

**He:** You see, you didn't want to. Out of fear you took the consequences of sin, for which you accepted punishment

and penitence. You were defending yourself. Well, but what about now? What do you kill people for now? For vodka? For money? What have they done to you?

**Lazar:** Don't look at me like that! Take your eyes off me ...do you hear me!

**He:** No, I'll go on looking at you. I'll stick my eyes to your breast and I'll twist and turn them till they bore into your heart. For you're better than those who seduced you and made you kill... You're ignorant, you're blind, perhaps it was misery that made you take to evil, but they read books, they have plenty...

**Lazar:** Do you think it's easy for me? I'm worn out... in body and soul. And something keeps eating my heart away. Now don't you look at me that way... take your eyes off me... you hear what I say: take your eyes off me...

But he would not take them off: the eyes detached themselves from his face, horrible big eyes screaming of life and death, and they floated through the air to land on Lazar's chest. He felt them turning and turning round in on place, penetrating his breast deeper and deeper.

Lazar awoke with a heavy head. He was weary and the world seemed a miserable place to live in. The cell was so crammed, damp and stuffy, and his body grew drab and limp. He did not even want any vodka, but still he kept on drinking. That day the vodka was bitter, it had a nasty smell and did not go to his head at all. That made Lazar go off in a fit of yelling and bullying, he vented his malice on Ivan and tormented Kalenik. He wanted the cell to burst with shouts, clamor, commotion, to hear the walls split, the windows rattle and everything crash. He smashed the plates to smithereens, pounded away at the door and banged the table with his fists. But he could not dispel the silence. It stared at him with a grin from the high ceiling and from all corners. It got the better of him.

Lazar fell silent, lay down on the bed, and closed his eyes, wondering if the man of the previous night would return. But he did not come. Lazar got up from the bed, trudged wearily around the cell, bumped into the walls, leaned against the cold plaster, fell to thinking about something and twisting his face, said aloud: "Scum!" Then again he trudged back and forth, reeling off his thoughts like cobwebs, and hissed at someone through his teeth: "Scum!"

He clenched his fists.

At night he had a visitor again, though not the one he had expected, but his first victim, the fair-haired girl. She sat down at his feet and asked straight out:

“What did you kill for?”

Lazar did not know. He had nothing to tell her, but wanted to hear her voice, wanted her to explain everything to him. If that’s what he wanted, all right! Then, in a voice that still rang in his ears, she told him that she had left behind an old mother who was now crying her heart out, that she did not want to die, but he killed her only because he was being paid for it. For money. Did he really need that money? Did it bring him peace, happiness, joy, health? Was it worth taking a human life to have a prison cell, vodka and a sin on his conscience in reward? Was he now better off than before? She went on talking, while her hair glimmered over her forehead.

Lazar wanted her to tell him something else which he knew, but which he dared not say himself, and the girl, pale as a wisp of cloud, seemed to have guessed his wish:

“And still you are better than those who made you kill, because it is not the ax that chops, but those who wield it...”

Something moved in Lazar’s heart. Was it joy or compassion? For her? For himself?

Now he only wanted to know what she had cried then before death.

But the girl smiled softly and said reproachfully:

“You should have listened.”

.....

Lazar’s peculiar behavior made Ivan and Kalenik conclude that he had been drinking a bit too much lately. He grew sullen, quiet and engrossed in thought. Pacing up and down the cell he would suddenly extend his hand and for no obvious reason inspect his palms and fingers and then hide them in his pocket. Then he would pace the cell again, look round to see whether he was being spied on, then take out his hand, examine it attentively and hide it. What was he looking for?

This new habit of his was particularly noticeable when he played cards. At times, in the middle of a game, he would throw the cards on the table where they were plainly visible to all, and hid his hands under the table. Whenever he thought Ivan and Kalenik might be casting a look at his

hands, he stopped playing, pulled his hands into his sleeves or hid them behind his back, and chased them out of the cell in a fury.

Now Lazar ate little. Kalenik told Ivan that Lazar was afraid of bread. Once he had spied him reaching for a piece and instantly jerking back his hand. "But it's holy," he said out loud. Ha-hal 'cause it's holy, how do you like that! Ha-ha! they laughed.

For some days now the gendarme had not come for Lazar. But every time he went to bed he thought of him and expected him to come. Who sent the gendarme? The warden? No, he was just like Lazar, no more than an ax in someone else's hands. Who sent him then? What were these people like? Was there one or many? He wanted to see these people, who were worse than him. They who were even ashamed of the sun, because they finished their work before it rose. But where could he find them — who would show them to him? How would he recognize them?... His feeble mind struggled like a fly bating against a window, and collapsed in exhaustion.

But deep inside him something was rising like leavened dough in a mould. His thoughts suffocated him, his lungs gasped for air. He would climb the table and open the window, although this was forbidden. From behind the bars dampness and quiet drifted into the cell, while his eyes greedily took in everything they could. Out there it was free and serene. There were tall black trees, and in between was the blue of the sky, deep as the waters of an azure lake, and in it the stars were swimming like goldfish. A heavy dark cloud shifted drowsily over the earth, shuddering with the occasional mild flash of lightning. Further away on the damp ground red windows glowed and everywhere stillness reigned.

But Lazar knew no calm, because Kalenik would at once appear to close the window lest someone outside should see him.

So that's how it was! They were hiding him, ashamed even of him being seen. Now, who were those people?

\* \* \*

"Lazar, get up!"

These words cut through his dream, crawling like caterpillars over his body. He wanted to brush them away, but

his strength failed him and the caterpillars, ugly, hairy brutes, kept on crawling over him and tickling his shoulder.

“Lazar, get up!”

Lazar opened his eyes — bent over him was the face of the gendarme.

Lazar got up, swinging his legs down from the bed.

He sat for a while, blinking at the light, and then lay down again.

“Well!”

“I won’t go.”

Ha-ha! He won’t go! That’s funny indeed! The gendarme rocked with laughter, and his sabre rattled.

“Come on, Lazar, stop playing the fool. It’s time to go!”

But Lazar did not think of playing the fool at all. Gloomily and obstinately he said again:

“I won’t go.”

The determination in his voice made the gendarme angry.

How do you like that, he won’t go! When everything’s ready! What’s he playing at? Who the hell does he think he is? Some big shot is he, an officer? Why waste words on a filthy hangman! Get up when you’re told!

And Lazar got up, but so quickly that he gendarme jumped aside, seeing an altogether new Lazar with a face contorted in anger, two wolfish eyes, a bared hairy chest and clenched fists. And all this, wheezing and blazing with fire, bore down upon him.

“So you’re better than me, are you? You don’t do the hanging yourself, do you, you bastard?”

His huge body swayed on his bare feet and threw up fury as from the pits of hell.

“Show me your hands? Think they’re clean, eh? So I’m only a hangman, ain’t I? Then why do you cringe to a hangman, you bastards!”

Before the gendarme could come to his senses Lazar grabbed hold of the armchair and brought it down with such a crash that made it split apart on all four sides.

“Now take this... and that!...”

“He’s drunk!” cried the gendarme. “Tie him up immediately.”

That was not so easy to do. Huge and strong, Lazar lunged from side to side like an enraged bear with a pitchfork stuck in his body, smashing everything he could lay his hands on and pulling down the carpets from the walls, ripping, tearing and trampling them under his feet.

“Now take this... and that!...”

It seemed that not just the people but all the objects in his cell roused his fury.

As the guards grappled with him the air filled with dust and the walls echoed with terrible crashes and groans.

They pounced on him, but he struggled and resisted, until eventually they bound him hand and foot and beat him.

The warden came, railing and pleading. How could he behave so? He was being so well-treated. What other prisoner enjoyed such privileges? He shouldn't have swilled so much vodka, it's all because of it...

Lazar lay in the dust amid the debris, helpless in his fetters. He breathed heavily, exhausted by the fight, but inside him stirred a malevolent joy, because today there would be no hanging, and those unknown people who had the authority to kill were dependant on him, the executioner.

\* \* \*

Later on Lazar submitted. He grew quiet and no longer argued when he was roused from sleep at night. He went about his job listlessly like a bored craftsman, but in his eyes there reappeared that look of something concealed within him.

He was mostly silent now, abandoned his wilful ways, and was quiet and obedient. Kalenik and Ivan could not praise him enough.

They even spied less on him, reckoning that since the hangman had been given a good lesson he got a better idea of the power of the authorities, because now he spoke more frequently about his superiors. Well, take the warden or the gendarme, for example, they don't do whatever they want, because there is someone standing above them. Oh yes. And above these stand their superiors. And higher up there is someone who says: let it be this way — and everybody does what he says.

That “he,” distant and obscure, whom neither Ivan nor Kalenik would have much idea about, interested Lazar the most. Now “he” would say: kill — and gallows would go up, people would be brought to them, the gendarme would fetch Lazar, and Lazar would put the noose on the neck. “He” was like a spider, fat and with bulging eyes, lurking on a cobweb and tracking down any buzzing fly. The threads of thought, which had once been so entangled in

the dim and crowded head of the hangman, were now being unraveled and wound into a neat tight ball. The evil seemed to be lurking in one place, from which it had spread out its tentacles on all sides. If only the evil were to be challenged, seized and crushed, its tentacles would droop limply, and the gendarme would stop rousing Lazar at nights.

Now Lazar became quite obsessed with this "he." Who was "he"? What was "he" like? Where could "he" be found? Lazar imagined him to look just like the warden Mug, with a crude hairless visage and little cruel eyes. Lazar would go right up to his snout and say: "So you're the evil, are you?" — and whack! bang! he would hit him in the face. "You're the grief, you're the injustice, are you?" — and again whack! bang!... "So it's you who are spilling blood all around!"

Then he would hang him. But not like the others, oh no — he would hang him without the shroud so that his face could be seen and all the agony in it, so that he would writhe and writhe endlessly and his shoulders twitch and his face grow black and his greedy eyes pop out of their sockets.

He knew how to do it: he had been taught.

And for the first time after all his fatigue and indifference, after his aversion to his trade — for the first time did he feel the joy of murdering.

He felt hatred in his heart and the luxury of anguish.

*Chernihiv*  
*June, 1907*

## INTERMEZZO

*Dedicated to the Kononioka fields*

### DRAMATIS PERSONAE

My fatigue	The cuckoo
Fields in June	Larks
The sun	The iron hand of the city
Three white sheep-dogs	Human misery

The only thing left to be done was the packing... It was one of those innumerable "musts" that fatigued me so much and disturbed my sleep. It does not matter whether the "must" is slight or big, the point is that it demands attention, that I do not control it, but it controls me. You actually become a captive of this multiheaded beast. If one could only be free of it for a time, to forget, to rest. I am tired.

Life incessantly and inexorably assails me, as the wave assails the shore. Not only my own life, but that of other people too. Indeed, how am I to know where my own life ends and other people's begins? I feel that the existence of others enters into my own, as air enters through windows and doors, as the waters of tributaries flow into a river. I cannot avoid other people. I cannot be alone. I must admit that I envy the planets — each has its own orbit and nothing gets in its way; whereas I encounter people everywhere and always.

Yes, you stand in my way and believe you have some right to me. You are ubiquitous. It is you who have clad the earth in stone and iron, it is you who are eternally inhaling a stench through the windows of houses — thousands of black mouths. You plague the sacred peace of the earth with the roar of factories and the thunder of wheels; you contaminate the air with dust and smoke, and groan with pain, with joy and with malice like a beast. I encounter your glance everywhere; your eyes, inquisitive and covetous creep into me, and you yourself lodge in the pupil of my eye in all your diversity of shape and color. I cannot avoid you... I cannot be alone... Not content with walking beside me, you must creep into me. You throw into my heart, as if it were your own repository, your sufferings and your woes, your shattered hopes and your despair, your cruelty and savage instincts, the horror and the filth of your existence. What does it matter to you that you torture me? You wish

to be my master, you want to own me — my hands, my mind, my will and my heart... You want to drain me, to suck all my blood like a vampire, and you will. I do not live the way I want to, but the way you command me to with your innumerable “musts,” your endless “have to’s.”

I am weary.

People have fatigued me. I am tired of being an inn where these creatures constantly gather, shout, bustle and leave litter. If I could open wide the windows, air out the house, throw out together with rubbish those who litter up the place! Let the house be neat and quiet.

Who will give me the joy of privacy?

Death? Sleep?

How I longed for them at times!

But when that splendid brother of Death came and took me, people lay in wait for me even then. They wove their existence with mine into a fantastic net. They endeavored to fill my ears and my heart with the things that fill theirs... Listen, now! Are you carrying your sufferings to me even here? Your vileness? My heart can hold nothing more. It is full to the brim. Let me have peace.

Thus it was during the nights.

During the day I started when I felt the shadows of people behind me. I heard with repugnance the roaring torrents of human life that rushed toward me like wild horses from all streets of the city.

\* \* \*

The train dashed by, full of human din. The city seemed to stretch out its iron hand into the field for me and did not let me go.

I was exasperated by the incertitude that agitated me — would the hand loosen its iron grasp, would it let me go? Would I escape from this tumult and make my way to empty green spaces? Would these spaces close in around me? Would the fingers of the iron hand clutch in vain? Would peace finally reign around me and within me?

When all that happened, so simply and inconspicuously, I did not perceive the quiet; it was muffled by alien voices, be slight unnecessary words, like the splinters and straws carried by spring floods.

...A woman acquaintance of mine suffered from heart trouble for fifteen years... bang! slam! crash!... bang! slam!

crash!... our division was stationed at that time... bang! slam! crash!... Where are you travelling to?... Tickets, please... bang! slam! crash!... bang! slam! crash!...

A kind of green chaos swirled around me, and snatched at all the wheels of the carriage. There was so much sky there that my eye drowned in it, as if it were the sea, and looked for something to catch hold of, but was helpless.

At last we reached home. The white walls of the house returned me to consciousness. As soon as the carriage rolled into the wide green courtyard, the cuckoo began to call. Then I suddenly felt the grand quiet. It filled the whole courtyard, lay concealed in the trees, crouched in the deep blue spaces. It was so quiet that I was embarrassed by the beating of my heart.

\* \* \*

Ten black rooms filled with darkness to the very ceiling. They surround my room. I shut the door for fear the light of the lamp will leak out. Now I am alone. Not a soul around me. It is quiet and solitary, but nevertheless I feel something there, behind my wall. It bothers me. What is it there?

I am aware of the solidity and shape of the furniture immersed in the darkness and the creaking of the floor under its weight. Well, what of it? You may stand there and rest undisturbed. I do not want to think about you. I would rather lie down. I shall put out my light and let myself be merged with the black obscurity. Perhaps I will then be transformed into an inanimate object, incapable of any sensation, into nothingness. It would be very good to become non-existent — a voiceless inviolable peace. There is something, however, behind my wall. I know that if I should go into the dark rooms and strike a match, everything would immediately leap back into place — chairs, couches, windows, and even the cornices. Who knows if my eye might not catch a glimpse of the people — pale, inexpressive like those in a tapestry — who have left their faces in the mirrors, their voices in the chinks and crannies, their shapes in the soft horsehair upholstery of the furniture, and their shadows on the walls? Who knows what goes on in the places a man cannot see?

Now there, what nonsense! You longed for quiet and solitude and you have it. You're shaking your head, are you? You don't believe in the solitude, is that it?

What do I know? Do I know? Can I be sure that the door will not open — just a little, with a slight creaking — and people will not begin to emerge out of the mysterious dark, so profound and infinite, all those people who have stored in my heart, as in a strong box of their own, their hopes, wrath and suffering or the brutal savageness of the beast? All those whom I cannot avoid, who have wearied me... What is there to wonder at if they come once more? There! I see them already. Bah! How many of you there are! You there, have had your blood run out through a little hole drilled by a soldier's bullet and you, bare bones, you were covered with white sacks, swung at the end of ropes, then thrown into badly covered ditches to be dug up by dogs... You look at me reproachfully, and you are right. I once read that they hanged twelve of you at a time, a whole dozen, and I yawned. Another time I reacted to a report about a row of white sacks by eating a ripe plum. I took up a fine juicy plum in my fingers... and felt a pleasant sweet taste in my mouth... You see, I do not even blush; my face is as white as yours, for dread has drained all my blood. There is not a single drop of hot blood in me even for those living corpses among whom you wander like bloody spectres. Begone! I am tired.

People keep coming. One after the other without end. Foe and friend, acquaintance and stranger, and all of them shout into my ear the cry of their lives or their deaths, and all of them leave on my soul the imprints of their feet. I shall shut my ears, lock my soul, and cry "No admittance!"

I open my eyes and through the window I suddenly see a deep sky and the branches of a birch tree. A cuckoo is calling. It strikes a big crystal bell — cuckoo! cuckoo; — and spreads peace among the grasses. I suddenly picture a green courtyard which has already enveloped my room. I jump out of bed and shout "cuckoo! cuckoo!" out of the window to the cuckoo... Good morning!

Ah, what a lot of sky, sun and merry greenery!

I run out into the yard. There I hear the clanking of iron chains and the furious barking of dogs. White sheep-dogs hop on their hind legs like bears, and their shaggy coats pop up and down on them. I come up closer. Well, what is the matter, doggie? Now, now Overko, enough of that!... The dog does not hear and does not see anything. Red eyes, broad head and white furry legs — all are leaping up and down. The fanged fury is endeavoring to leap out of the

deep throat, but cannot manage to do so, merely tosses up a tuft of wool. Well, what is the matter, Overko? Why do your red eyes flame, and why do fear and hatred fuse in their fire? I am not your enemy and am not afraid of you. The worse you can do is to tear off a bit of my body, or let blood out of my calves. Oh, but that is a trifle! If you only knew of what little account that is. Well, shut up, doggie, shut up! Of course I realize it is the chain. You are probably angrier with it than with me. It is because of the chain that your forepaws flail the air, or it constricts your throat, driving back into it your fiery rage. Wait a while. You will soon be free. What will you do to me then? Well now, stand still, do not wriggle while I take off the chain... and now, off you go! Where to, where to? Ha-ha! What a fool of a dog! Eyes shut, head tilted aside, rushing off blindly, senselessly, tearing out grass with its claws, throwing it away from himself, and the shaggy fur of his behind flying after him. Well, and what about me? What? Have you forgotten?

Now he is running around in circles... one more circle... again... there! Ah, noble dog! Freedom is dearer to you than the satisfaction of your rage.

Meanwhile my attention is demanded by Pava, a dignified matron, and her other son, the terrible Trepov. Whereas Overko is a thoroughly sanguine creature, rushing blindly at everything, as if there were always a pink mist before his red eyes, Trepov is grave and decorous. He will tear your throat quite gravely, even thoughtfully, and there will be a great deal of respectability in the strong legs that step on your chest. Even when he is lying quietly, combing out fleas from his pink stomach, his clipped ears are alert, his wide head is thinking, and his tongue hangs gravely from his fanged mouth.

\* \* \*

My days now flow amidst the steppe, amidst a valley covered with green corn. Endless trails, veiled and intimate for the use of the closest friends, bring me to the fields, which roll in green waves to the very horizon. I now possess a world of my own, which is like an oyster containing a pearl — the edges of two shells, one green and the other blue, have shut and enclosed the sun between them like a pearl, and I rove there in search of peace. As I go, I am

closely followed by a flying cloud of tiny midges. I could think of myself as a planet moving in the company of its satellites. I see the black, beating wings of a crow cleaving the blue sky in two, and this makes the sky bluer and the wings blacker.

The sun is in the sky, I am in the fields. There is no one else here. I walk along. My hand strokes the sable-like fur of barley ears, the silk of the wave of corn. The wind fills my ear with scraps of sound, mussed-up noises. The wind is so hot and impatient that it makes the silvery-haired oats bubble. I walk on — the grains are seething. The blue streams of flax flow gently, however. They flow so quietly and serenely between the green banks that I want to get into a boat and sail off. There the barley is leaning over and weaving — weaving its thin hairs into a green veil. I walk on. It is still weaving. The veil is fluttering. The trails meander deep into the rye, the eye cannot perceive them, the foot finds the trail itself. The cornflowers look into the sky. They wanted to look like the sky, and they do. Now, I have come to the wheat. The hard, awnless ears beat against my arms, while the stalks creep under my feet. I go on — it is all wheat and more wheat. When will it end? The wheat pursues the wind like a pack of foxes, and the wavy crests glisten in the sun. I keep walking, alone on the earth as the sun is in the sky, and I feel so fine because no shadow of a third being falls between us. The surf of the sea of corn passes through me and rolls on into the unknown.

I halt at last. I have been stopped by the white foam of buckwheat, fragrant and light, as if whipped up by the wings of bees. A sonorous harp has been laid at my very feet, and all its strings are sounding. I stand there listening.

My ears are full of the fascinating hum of the field, the rustle of silk, the swishing of grain, uninterrupted like the flow of a stream. My eyes are full of sunshine, for each stalk takes some of it and returns the reflected gleam.

Suddenly it is all extinguished and dies out. I am startled. What has happened? What is the cause? A shadow? Can it be a third one? No, it is merely a cloud. A moment of dark sorrow, and in an instant the field is smiling again, to the right and then to the left. The golden field is flapping its wings to the very edge of the blue sky, as if commencing its flight. It is only then that I realize its boundlessness, its

warm, living, invincible force. Oats, wheat, barley all merged into a single mighty wave, drowning everything, capturing all. Youthful vigor quivers and gushes out in each vein of the stalk; hope stirs in the sap and so does the great yearning that is called fecundity. Only now do I see the village — a miserable heap of thatched roofs. It could hardly be seen, being enveloped and throttled by the green hands that reached out to the very houses. The village was entangled in the fields as a fly in a cobweb. What resistance could those houses offer to that force? None at all! The green waves might pour over and swallow them. What does a man signify to those waves? Nothing at all! He went out into the field — a tiny white blotch — and was drowned in it. Does the man shout? or sing? or make a movement? The mute boundlessness of the spaces swallows everything. And again there is nothing at all. Even the traces of man have been effaced and obliterated — the field has hidden the trails and paths. It merely rolls and rolls in green waves to the very horizon. It is ruled over only by a rhythmical, subdued sound, calm, self-confident, like the vital essence of eternity. It is like the black sails of the windmills above the field that turn round and round incessantly in the air, as if saying: so will it be through the ages... so will it be through the ages... *in saecula saeculorum... in saecula saeculorum.*

\* \* \*

I returned home late. I arrived refreshed by the wind of the fields, as fresh as a wild flower. I brought the fragrance of the fields in the folds of my clothing like Esau of the Old Testament. Tranquil and solitary, I sat on the veranda of the empty house and watched the night being built up. It erected light columns, wove shadows into a wattle, built and raised up flimsy, shaky walls, and when all became strong and dark, crowned it with a starry dome.

Now I can sleep tranquilly, for the strong walls of night stand between me and the entire world. Good night, fields. Good night, cuckoo. I know that tomorrow at sunrise the contralto tones of your "cuckoo, cuckoo!" will wing into my room. Your greeting will immediately put me in a good mood, my dearest friend.

Trepov! Overko! Pava! Four fingers in my mouth and a fierce steppe whistle. They come running. Like three white bears. Perhaps they'll rend me to pieces, or perhaps they'll accept an invitation to go out into the fields. Ho, Ho! Overko is always up to some trick. He leaps about like a foolish calf, and looks askance with a red eye. Trepov carries his mane proudly, and his legs stand firmly like white pillars. His clipped ears are shorn. Pava walks with dignity, twisting her behind in melancholy fashion and loiters. I follow them and I can see the slight swaying of all three winged backbones, soft, wooly and beastly strong.

They seem rather displeased with the sun, which is over-hot today and makes their coats so bright. I, however, find the sun very friendly and walk straight toward it, face to face. God forbid that I should turn my back to it. That would be ingratitude. I am very happy to meet the sun here, in the open spaces, where nobody veils its face, and I say to it: Sun, I am grateful to you. You sow golden seed in my soul, and something will surely grow from your seed? Bright light, perhaps?

You are dear to me. I drink you, Sun; I drink your warm, wholesome beverage, I drink like an infant sucking milk from its mother's breasts, which are also so warm and dear. Even when you burn, I willingly imbibe the fiery drink and become intoxicated with it.

I love you, for... listen:

From the obscurity of the "unknown" I appeared in the world, and my first breath and my first movement were made in the obscurity of the maternal womb. And this darkness still dominates me, for throughout the night — half of my life — it stands between you and me. The servants of darkness — clouds, mountains, dungeons — hide you from me, and all three of us know full well that the hour will inevitably strike when I shall dissolve in this obscurity for all time, like salt in water. You are only a guest in my life, O Sun, a welcome guest, and when you depart I try to detain you. I catch the last rays from behind the clouds, I see you off in fire, in lamps, in fireworks. I gather you from flowers, from the laughter of children, from the eyes of my beloved. When you are extinguished and leave me, I re-create your image, I call it an "ideal" and secrete it away in my heart. And this ideal gives me light.

So, look at me, O Sun, and tan my soul just as you tan my body, that it should be impervious to the sting of mosquitoes... (I have suddenly become aware that I am addressing the sun as if it were a living being. Does it mean that I already feel the need of human society?)

We walk in the field. Three white sheep-dogs and I. A low murmur floats before us, the breath of young wheat ears gathers into a blue vapor. Somewhere on the side a quail is softly cackling, and in the rye a cricket is strumming on its silver string. The air is shimmering with the heat, and distant poplars dance in the silvery loom. All is broad, beautiful and tranquil.

The dogs are oppressed by the heat. They have lain down on a furrow like three piles of wool; their tongues hang out of their mouths, and their sides heave with brief wheezes. I sit down near them. All of us are doing nothing except breathing. It is quiet.

Has time stopped, or is it flying? Is it time to go, perhaps?

All of us get up languidly, we move our legs lazily, carrying home our tranquillity with care. We walk along a fallow field. Our faces sense the warmth of the mellow, plowed up loam, full of peace and hope. I greet the field. Rest quietly under the sun, O earth, you are as weary as I am. I too have let my soul lie fallow.

\* \* \*

Never before have I felt my ties with the earth so distinctly as here. In cities the earth is clad in stone and iron — it is inaccessible. Here I am close to it. In the cool mornings I am the first to waken the still sleepy water of the well. When the empty pail strikes its bottom against the water's breast, the water moans hollowly in a drowsy voice and lazily pours into the pail. Afterwards it trembles, gray in the sunlight. I drink the fresh cold water, which is still full of sleep, and splash it on my face.

After that there is milk. The white fragrant drink foams in the glass and, on putting the glass to my lips, I know that I am pouring into me vetch, soft as an infant's curls, which only the day before bore clusters of violet flowers. I am drinking an extract of meadow.

Or that brown bread which smells so fine and homely. It is as close to me as a child that has grown up under my

eyes. There is its source, in a field of grain that runs along with arched back like a shaggy beast. At the edge of the field stand windmills ready to snap up the grain and grind it into white flour with their teeth. I see all that and am aware of my simple, direct ties with the earth.

I feel rich here though I possess nothing, for beyond all political programs and parties the earth belongs to me. It is mine. All of it — grand and luxuriant as it has been created — all of it is contained in me. I create it anew, a second time, and I feel that this gives me even more right to it.

\* \* \*

When you lie in the field with your face toward the sky and listen to its multivoiced serenity, you notice that there is something in it which is more heavenly than earthy.

Slight, diffuse sounds fall from the sky, as if someone were drilling metal up above. The fields murmur all around and disturb me. I drive away the voices of the field, but then the voices from the sky pour down on me in showers. I recognize the sounds now as the notes of the lark. The larks, invisible, drop their drill-like song from the sky to the field. It is as ringing — metallic and capricious — and the ear endeavors to catch its modulations, but fails to do so. The birds may be singing or laughing or they may be weeping bitterly.

Would it not be better to sit down quietly and shut my eyes? That is what I shall do. I sit down. It is dark around me. There is nothing but the sparkling of sharp, piercing sounds, and laughter like small shot spilling onto a sheet of metal. I try to discern the tune and commit it to memory, but I cannot. There, now! I think I have it... Tyu, tyu, ti-i-i... No, it is not that at all. Triyu, tih, tih... No, nothing like it.

I wonder how they do it. Do they peck at the gold of the sun? Do they play on its rays, plucking them like strings? Do they sift their song through a fine sieve and sow the fields with it?

I open my eyes. Now I am certain that this sowing has produced the silver thread of the oats, the long-bearded barley that waves and glitters like a sword, and the flowing stream of wheat.

Sounds keep pouring down from above — the swinging of bells, the chipping of silver plates, the drilling of steel,

weeping, wailing and sifting of laughter through a fine sieve. Now a single vivid sound has broken loose and fallen among the fields like a red cockle.

I am incapable of listening further. There is something venomous in this song. It awakens greed. The more you listen, the more you want to hear. The more you endeavor to catch the tune, the more it evades you.

I now run to the field and listen for hours to the singing of choirs and the music of orchestras in the sky.

I wake up at night, sit up in bed, and listen intently to something which bores through my brain, lacerates my heart, and trills at my ear with an elusive tune.

Tyu, tyu, ti-i-i... No, it is not that at all.

I wonder how they do it.

I caught a glimpse of it at last.

A little gray bird, like a lump of earth, hung low over the field. It hovered fluttering its wings tensely and frequently, and strenuously drew up an invisible string from the earth to the sky. The string quivered and sounded. Having done that, the bird dropped slowly down, drawing another string from the sky to the earth. It joined sky to earth with a resonant harp and played a symphony of the fields on the strings.

It was wonderful.

\* \* \*

So passed the days of my intermezzo, amidst isolation, serenity and purity. I was blessed between the golden sun and the green earth. Blessed was the peace of my soul. A new and clean leaf peeped out from under the old page of life. Would I wish to know what was to be written there? Would I cease to tremble before the shadow of people, to be terrified by the thought that human woe is lurking somewhere and waiting to pounce on me?

If this miracle should come true, the credit is due to you, green fields with your silken rustling and to you, cuckoo. The mournful call of the cuckoo flowed like the tears of a weeping birch and washed away my weariness.

\* \* \*

We met on the field and stood for a moment in silence — the man and I. He was an ordinary peasant. I do not know what he saw in me, but in him I suddenly saw a cluster

of black thatch roofs, veiled by the fields, girls in clouds of dust returning from work for strangers — dirty, plain, with sagging breasts and emaciated backs... pale women in black, worn skirts, bending like shadows over hemp... diseased children among starving curse... Everything I used to look at and did not perceive before. He was the conductor's baton for me, suddenly calling forth a storm of sounds from dead silence.

I did not flee; on the contrary, we even engaged in a conversation like old acquaintances.

He spoke of things that filled me with horror so simply and calmly, like the lark pouring down songs on the field, and I stood and listened, and something trembled in me.

Oh human misery, you have caught me after all! And I am not evading you. The lax strings have become tense, and the woe of others can play them.

Talk on, talk on...

What is there to talk about? He owns only a drop in this green sea. People whom fever has visited and strangled some of their children have an easier time of it. God pities some... He has five mouths to feed, like windmills that demand food for the millstones.

"The fever did not take away five hungry children for some reason."

Talk on, talk on...

People wanted to take the land with their bare hands, and what have they now? Some are biting the damp earth, others are digging it in Siberia... He got off easy — he cracked lice in prison for a year, and now the police officer punches his face once a week.

"They punch a man's face once a week."

Talk on, talk on...

When Sunday comes, people go to church, while he has to "report" to the police officer. And still, the policeman treats you better than your own people. You are afraid to utter a word. Here is one who used to be your friend and shared your views, and now he may betray you secretly. You tear a word out of your very heart, and he throws it to the dogs...

"Your best friend is ready to sell you out."

Talk on, talk on...

You walk among people as among wolves. You are on guard all the time. Ears are alert everywhere. Hands are ready to grab everywhere. The poor man pulls the shirt

off the beggar's back, neighbor robs neighbor, father robs son.

"Living among people is living among wolves."

Talk on, talk on...

People are devoured by disease, misery and vodka, and in their ignorance they devour one another. It is a wonder that the sun still shines on us, and does not go out. How can one live?

Talk on, talk on. Scorch the celestial vault with your wrath. Cover the heavens with the clouds of your misery and bring on thunder and lightning. Air out heaven and earth. Extinguish the sun and light a new one in the sky. Talk on, talk on...

\* \* \*

The city once more reached out its iron hand into the green fields to grasp me. I let myself be seized submissively, and while the iron shook and clanked, I breathed in once more and for the last time the peace of the plain, the blue somnolence of distant spaces. Farewell, fields! Let your voice roll on the sun-gilded crests. It may benefit someone as it has benefited me. And you, cuckoo, on top of the birch tree. You too have tuned the strings of my soul. They were loosened, frayed by rude fingers, but they are stretched taut once more. Do you hear? There, they have thrummed now... Farewell! I am going among people. My soul is ready, its strings are tensed and tuned. It is playing already.

*Chernihiv*  
*September, 1908*

## THE DREAM

It was the same every day. His legs, which felt as if they were not obedient to his will, knew the accustomed roads themselves, and his eyes, which felt superfluous, perceived with indifference the boringly familiar surroundings. The small-town houses floated before him and vanished without a trace — and always the very same people — like worn-out furniture in a room, amidst which you can move for years without even noticing it. The boulevard in the middle of the town with its row of bare poplars showing white against the autumn sky like the backbones of fish and the lane he walked along every day were so familiar that he knew every hollow and bump in the road, for he had tripped over them so often. Even the figure that was coming toward him was the familiar one of a treasury department official. A black overcoat went swaying by, buttoned up from head to foot, there was a flash of dyed whiskers and a hat was lazily raised above a pale face.

Formerly they used to talk when they met, but they did so no longer. And why should they? Anton knew beforehand what he would hear. A colorless voice would gurgle in the buttoned-up chest, and a story about a slam in whist at the club or an announcement of an attack of intestinal catarrh would be mumbled thickly through the dyed whiskers.

The figure had passed by quite some time ago, and Anton noticed that his body was swaying just like that of the treasury official.

The lane was again deserted. The recently planted trees were completely smashed, and hard, thorny, stripped poles loomed up to the sky with shreds of bark hanging on to them. Dirty rivulets were flowing from benches on which someone had thrown piles of earth. A suspicious smell arose from the heaps of red-brown leaves between the trees. The autumnal sky was dull above the boulevard, and uttering coarse, grating cries, crows covered with the network of their wings all that gray, slimy and squalid scene.

Anton came to the end of the boulevard and turned back. Once more before his eyes lay the lonely lane he had just walked along. Here he noticed that he was persistently and

without success trying to find the answer to an importunate question — what did the dream predict that his wife saw the night before?

His wife had sat with her bare legs, white like stiff lard, hanging down from the bed, and told with relish in a voice slightly hoarse from sleep that she had dreamed she was milking a cow. She tugged at the teats, but what appeared in the milkpail was not milk but pure water. What could it mean? Pure water...

He had not known the answer in the morning, had not given it a thought all day, and now he was trying to solve this inane problem with such persistence and stubbornness, as if grappling with a vital question. What did pure water indicate?

This question held him amidst the trees of the boulevard, white against the gray sky like a row of fish bones, in the dirty trough of the lane. It seemed to him that if he were to get away, the question might remain behind, buried under the cawing of the crows.

Anton left the boulevard and turned into the town square with the puddle in its very center. He did not need to look at the town; he could look into the puddle and see the town — the ponderous white church crowned with a green dome, the brick building of the town hall and the yellow walls of the courthouse. All this was contained in one puddle.

There was a calf on the pavement. Three figures, who seemed to bear one and the same face, wearing blue "student-style" trousers, were driving the calf into the puddle. The calf did not want to go there, and lifted its tail, its frightened eyes bulging. When the men succeeded at last, and four thin legs shattered into splashes the church, town hall and court-house, and sank into the mud, silly offensive laughter solidified in the gray drizzle and fell heavily into the stagnant water of the puddle.

Then the men held a contest to see who could spit across the puddle.

Anton did not linger.

Disquietude lay upon his heart. It had begun at home and ended here, in the dull boredom of the town, like a long, rusty chain. There was peace at home, day followed day. Just as he could see the whole town in the puddle, so he could discern his entire life in a single day. In the morning, still lying in bed, he listened to his wife's dreams — prosaic,

as tedious as reality — then quickly drank tea at a table soiled with crumbs, the rings left by wet glasses and dirty dishes that had not been cleared after last night's supper,— and rushed to his work at school. Then he had dinner, always at the same hour, always preceded by rapturous exclamations, such as "and today we have green borshch," and grumblings about the cooks's faults. After dinner his wife took a nap, while he walked into town in the hope of meeting with something new, but all in vain, and returned home in the evening bearing with him the same tedium he had gone out with.

The women neighbors would occasionally visit his wife in the evening and play cards innocently, mostly for fun. He did not play cards and would go into his room, a stranger to all; he would smoke and amidst the clouds of smoke write something not intended for anyone else's eyes, but only for himself, to fulfill a need.

Something new happened now and then — firewood was brought and had to be taken in, or the child fell ill. But it all came to an end, and his life flowed on serenely, in the old rut.

Anton wandered aimlessly through the quiet, deserted streets of the town. A gloomy, oppressive dreariness settled on his heart, but it often happened that something sprouted underneath it, and resolutely strove to reach the surface — something young, fresh, not yet trampled underfoot, the thirst after something new and beautiful.

On the way he passed girls, provincial flappers with soft and lustrous eyes, with fresh faces, elastic body movements. Something remained in the air after them, as after a thunderstorm in spring, something stirring and refreshing. He yearned for some powerful and beautiful experience, like a storm at sea, the breath of spring, a new tale of life, to sing the unsung song lying dormant in his breast. He would find new words, not such as rustled underfoot like autumn leaves, but full-blooded, rich and sonorous.

But it all vanished in the autumnal drizzle, and he walked on, past wet fences behind which bare branches nodded irksomely.

Dusk gathered. Anton languidly passed street after street. He watched the trees being slowly submerged in the blue-gray mist and outlined against the sky like dark veins in mother-of-pearl. At the crossings there was a milky haze, beyond which one sensed something remote and infinite.

The fine drizzle left his face delicately cold. Lights were already burning. The pavements glittered and caught the evening shadows of the trees. Drops fell from thatch roofs. Drops flowed more and more frequently from the roofs, from the rain pipes, from the walls. They played, sang, rang, varied their rhythm, intensity and voice. The street soon turned into a symphony of drops. Lamplighters inconspicuously appeared out of the mist, carrying light with them. Through the peaceful streets in the evening haze, red lights dispersed in all directions, gently waving above the black legs of the lamplighters. The music of the drops became animated, sad and merry, lazy and lively, toneless and resonant. In the distance windows softly glimmered, and an invisible hand silently drew together the halves of shutters, like lids closing over eyes that are falling asleep.

The need for beauty in Anton's soul called forth the need to seek it everywhere, but reality yielded very little. True, he had once seen faraway lands, where sun and sea competed in their endeavors to display before him all their marvels, but that had been long ago, and the ordinary life had utterly buried those memories in its ashes. It was only in dreams that they sometimes revived for a moment, later evoking acute uneasiness. He loved dreams. When you lie down to sleep, you sail away into the sea of night, a black, unknown sea. What adventures are waiting for you there, what will you see there, what will you experience up to the time when the dark waves of night throw you out onto the clear shores of day?

It was time to return home. Anton already saw the scene he would find there: all the rooms plunged in darkness, the dining-room alone lit up. The samovar is boiling, the children are having tea with milk, while his wife is crocheting. Wafted toward him, as from a putrescent swamp in summer, comes the familiar warmth of the dining-room, laden with the odors of tea and milk, the heated body of a woman, and the cat which sprawled permanently on the couch. These were the odors of a domestic abode, sated with the tranquillity which was so much to the taste of his wife, and which so exasperated Anton.

And this was exactly what he saw.

"It's good you've come."

Marta greeted him with business-like calm. She was stifled with constant cares. She had loosened her light blouse, revealing a wide neck and bare arms.

“The glazier came. It’s time to glaze the windows, and I don’t know...”

She poured out tea for Anton and pushed a bun toward him.

How many cares there were!

It was absolutely necessary to buy a barrel for dill pickles. But perhaps it would be better to have one made to order. She wanted his advice. It would cost more, but would last longer.

He discussed these questions with her thoroughly, pointing out that the barrel should be soaked in water, so that the pickles would not smell, that less sauerkraut should be put up this year, since they did not eat much of it, that more cotton wool should be stuffed into the counterpane...

Marta was flushed and languid with the heat, and radiated warmth through her open neck and wide sleeves.

She even followed him to his room, and when he bent down to remove from some chairs her skirts, which still retained the shape and warmth of her body, she mechanically muttered her eternal “ah, excuse me” and without embarrassment took her clothes from her husbands’ hands.

She had not finished yet. She wanted some detailed advice about the material and fashion of the children’s coats, about how much beetroot they should stock, about a thousand household trifles. He listened inattentively, watching his wife’s chin softly quivering with each word, and thought: Did we anticipate, that after twelve years of marriage we would find no other subjects to talk about, that words would fall between us like heavy fragments of ruins on green grass?

It was quiet all around, the lamp burned evenly, and cigarette smoke floated in the milky light.

His wife was talking meanwhile, more to herself than to him, for it was her conviction that her husband was resourceless and impractical, that there was very little he was capable of.

All in all, everything was quiet and peaceful as always. The dead calm of the puddle could not be disturbed by the mightiest wave, and this so irritated Anton that he wanted to scream, to hurl something, or to smash a window-pane so as to let fresh air into the room with a crash and din.

One morning Anton awoke feeling altogether different, all introspective. That day he could not tell whether his wife had told him her dream, whether her calves flashed

white as always, while her feet lazily sought their slippers. That day none of these details reached his consciousness. There was something youthful, exciting and new in his movements, in his gait.

He left most of his tea undrunk, puffed on a cigarette that had long since gone out, and stared at everything with unseeing eyes. He darted restlessly about the room.

He was late for dinner, but walked in with a light and quick step, with a youthful tilt to his shoulders, and was absent-minded.

Marta noticed the change.

"You're so strange today."

Anton's appearance worried her.

"What's happened?"

She had to repeat her question, but he hastily took shelter behind a muttered "nothing," which it was hard to believe. The green borshch produced no impression on him, he ate little and answered irrelevantly to questions.

"What are you saying? Where are you? Wake up!"

Then he took himself in hand, tried to be extremely attentive, considered his words carefully before speaking, but the vacant eye turned within himself betrayed that he was concealing and repressing something.

Marta's curiosity rose when Anton, instead of going into the dining-room on returning from his walk, went straight into his room. She heard measured treads which seemed to beat time to his thoughts, the frequent rubbing of a match on the box, while the shut door lured her more than an open entrance would. Finally she opened the door of his room.

"May I come in?"

He nodded.

"What's the matter, Anton?"

Anton hesitated. He did not want to tell her, but at the same time longed to have his wife question him and force the confession that strove to escape from his overfraught breast.

"Nothing."

But this word was now pronounced more lightly, fragiley, emptily. Marta felt that it would not be hard to break down his resistance.

"Well, tell me what the matter is."

Anton stopped short, glanced at his wife, and after a moment's hesitation he broke out with "I had a dream."

Marta sighed with relief — so, it was only a dream.

She was even disappointed. However, she settled down comfortably in an armchair and assumed the expression of an eager kitten, which so became her many years ago.

"An interesting dream? Well, tell me."

She liked dreams.

But he was silent immediately. Reluctance overpowered him. Would she understand? There was no difference for him between reality and dreams. What difference was there when you see, laugh and suffer, just as in reality? Does not reality vanish as completely as a dream? Is not life a transient dream, and is not a dream life?

Anton paced up and down the room and left that everything he had experienced during the night was stirring within him, ready to flow over. At last he halted and said mysteriously:

"I was there again, in the far-away warm land..."

His wife opened round and vacant eyes, and he had to remind her of the land that had once flitted by like a fairy-tale in his life.

"You see, I was standing early in the morning on an island in the sea — on a high, beautiful and proud island. The old land was lost beyond the sea in a blue mist. It seemed to me that in its youthful pride the island had detached itself from the land and sailed into the world to create its own life, its own beauty. The sea was so smooth and blue, like a tautly stretched screen on which the sky is projected. How much blue there was! A whole sea in the sky and a whole sky in the sea. Because of the blue spaces my soul became blue, warm, spacious. I was drunk with the smell of wild wormwood which covered the cliffs and filled the air with its breath. Its silvery grayness gleamed delicately, as if it were day, even when it was lit by moonlight. It hung over the precipice of the cliffs and shook its beard over the sea like a faun with wildly dishevelled wool.

"Whitish paths appeared on the calm sea. I was astonished and thought, 'For whom are they? Who will ride over them? They are painted into the blue canvas of the sea like ancient hieroglyphics, but who will read this mysterious writing?' I felt like a song, like a chord of sadness that merged with the song of the sea, the sun and the cliffs..

"Suddenly I heard a voice behind me, clear and harmonious, as if engendered by the warmth of the blue.

"'Could you tell me what that strange writing means?'

"I looked round.

“A woman with a pale face framed in golden hair stood on the cliff. She stretched out her arm toward the sea, and the wormwood embroidered silvery patterns on her black dress. In her other hand poppies glowed red.

“One and the same question agitated us, and I replied, ‘It is the record of happiness.’

“She looked at me.

“‘It may be. A light breeze will blow and wipe out the record of happiness before it can be read.’

“And she conveyed to me her crown of golden hair, the heavy silver of wormwood on her dress, a bunch of poppies and something else — her eyes, two lakes of sea water.”

“Oh-ho!” laughed Marta.

“Don’t interrupt. We sat down like old acquaintances on a warm stone bench. I did not look at her but saw the fine hairs quivering in the light breath of air over her brow, like tongues of flame, and a warm blue shimmered in the lake of her eye.

“We gazed in silence at the sea. White sails now swooped into the sea like a swarm of moths. God knows where a boat came from, moved by the paws of oars over the waves like an ant over a table-cloth, and suddenly a white sail unfurled like a flower from a bud. The boat hove aside and rocked in the blue field.

“A warm breeze puffed in our faces once or twice. The wind was rising and the paths gradually vanished. The sea began to glow at the shore.

“‘Don’t you think,’ said my companion, ‘that the sea is now like a blue bird of happiness? It has hidden its head in a blue haze and has spread its peacock’s tail to the very cliffs, where every eye burns with a blue-green fire. There, look at it!’

“We leaned forward to look over the precipice, and when our eyes passed over the chaos of demolished rocks and wild plants to the sea shore, we perceived that it quivered softly in a pattern of brilliant gleams, as if caught in a net of blue, green and rose-colored strings, and through this net we glimpsed the mosaic design of the sea bottom — the violet patches of dense seaweed, the pale blue spots of underwater sands, the old-bronze and dark-blue enamel which blended into a single fiery melt.

“‘Haven’t you noticed,’ said I, gazing on the sea and pointing to the white, sunlight-flooded country houses, ‘that we are floating. This island is like an octopus which has

sunk its rough tentacles into the sea, has adhered to it in an attempt to stop, but fails to do so. It floats. It floats on and on, to an unknown destination, in warmth and sunlight or in blue fog. It has opened its maw in a wide semicircle, baring rows of strong white teeth, big as houses, in its laughter.' ”

Anton wiped his brow and continued in a lower voice.

“I don't know whether we conversed aloud or in silence, but we sailed through wide spaces, side by side, shoulder to shoulder, and the entire mass of sea air, the entire smell of salt, wormwood and sun passed through us. We were clean, strong like ships' hawsers, and positively shone.

“To the sea! To the beach! Quick!”

“She cried out as if she had power over me, and clapped her hands so that the red petals of the wild poppies rained down on her skirt. I felt the cool touch of one petal on my hand.

“We descended.

“Now the rocks rose before us — warm, even hot — as if living blood flowed in their stony veins. The gold of furze glittered here and there amidst the mosaic pattern of furrows and fractures; the silver of the wormwood glistened, and myrtle proudly lifted up its nuptial finery. Once more rocks rose steeply underfoot, mighty naked mounds, on which the eyes rested from colors. But then how glad we were to come upon a pretty blue flower which had snuggled close to the rock, as if it had sat down to rest for a minute. What did it live on? It must have drunk the blue mist of the sea in the morning. I did not know the name of the flower, and I liked it the more because of that.

“Really, doesn't it look like a nest of amethysts on the gray rock?”

“It really did look like a nest of amethysts.

“On the right a stream of blood-red poppies flowed alongside of us, while on the left the sea smiled at each turn of the path. The faraway cliffs, gashed by fissures, were softened by their adornment of greenery, and looked like old velvet slightly worn in places.

“It became sultry. The rocks, the road, the dust underfoot were scorching, the air and sea were torrid. We also glowed with the heat.

“Lizards crossed our path now and then. The parched rocks seemed to tremble under the constant tortuous motions of the animals. A spotted back or a pointed spiny

tail would flash by and vanish. Then it would appear again from somewhere, flattened by terror, on crooked legs. It would stop, lift its reptilian head and warily stare around with its circular, underlined eye. You could see its heart beat under the thin skin of its side. But let a shadow fall on it, or a rustle be heard, and the lizard disappeared into some imperceptible crevice, as if it had crept straight into the very rock.

"I don't remember which of us said that the lizard was the soul of the rock, a creature eternally scampering about in the heavy, immovable mass.

"Finally, the sea gasped and so did we. It looked like the beginning of a sirocco.

"'There's the shore!' exclaimed my companion, sighing softly as she glimpsed the gray sand. While she was running toward it. I admired the cloud of golden hair glowing against the sea.

"The sea brought in a wave and, rolling up to the shore, flung it on the sand with a gesture of habit as if dealing out cards.

"People were bathing on Piccola Marina beach. We passed by sunny laughter, the splashing of bodies and their green phosphorescence in the water, and found a deserted nook. The sea was blinding. It blossomed forth in silvery flowers. And though their life was short, a mere instant, during that instant hundreds of new blooms sprang up instead of the blighted blossom. It would flare up blindingly, like a silver star, and be quenched, while new ones appeared on the blue.

"From our nook we saw the island from the sea to the very summits. Waves broke against the steep cliffs of Monte Solaro, which bordered on the sea. The island hissed like a heated stone thrown into the water, and the water was boiling around it.

"We sat silent, relaxed in the blue, and listened to the sea. Finally, I asked:

"'What are you thinking about now?'

"She caressed me with her eyes, in which I saw the whole sea and the whole sky, and answered softly:

"'I'm looking south, at the boundless sea. The sirocco brings me from Africa the heat and fragrance of Egypt, and I dream of a land of white sands and black men, of cacti, palms and pyramids. A wave rolls here from Africa and kisses the cliff in a greeting from a faraway brother. It may

be that the wave which has washed the feet of an Arab is now rippling about my feet as a symbol of solidarity.' ”

“How beautiful!” exclaimed Marta, and broke off the narrative.

Anton stopped short and seemed to see his wife for the first time. She was there.

The light from the lamp, the wondering eyes of his wife that looked as if they were seeing something extraordinary, the loosened button on her blouse, the streak of tobacco smoke floating across the bookcase and the dark cold window-panes on which the rain was drumming its tedious melodies...

Anton shrugged his shoulders impatiently, as if throwing something off them by this gesture. He rushed up and down the room and resumed:

“Well, we parted. I didn't even know whether for a time or for ever.

“It was dinner-time. When I entered the dining-room of my hotel, the first ring of the gong floated solidly over the rows of snow-white tables, which were still unoccupied at the time. I sat down. The sea was enclosed between the pillars of the colonnade which turned into the dining-room, giving an impression of immense marine paintings within white frames. In the prospect a yacht unfurled its sails like a tree unfolding its blossoms. The sun set on Castlogne, which nestled on the right, curling the hill with rows of olive trees and girdling it several times in a black sash. There was no one as yet in the dining-room, and yet I saw a familiar congealed picture — a black dinner-jacket over white trousers silently and methodically carving rare roast, and at his side a lady in white, her eyes glued to two halves of a red Baedeker. Voices hum, dishes clatter, laughter rings out, wine gurgles, the sea plays gaily, while the black dinner-jacket over white trousers painstakingly carves the rare roast like a machine, and the British lady in white is absorbed in reading the red guidebook.

“The first to appear in the dining-room were the Germans. Their heels stamped by the tables. Ladies and gentlemen marched in a file like geese. They occupied a separate table, and at once glasses began to clink. They fenced in the table with a wall of broad backs, hedged in the table with a ring of red cheeks, and mixed into the rattle of dishes their coarse laughter and their language.

“Ja, ja... ja, ja... rapped out above the table, while beneath

it came the shuffling of feet and the shifting of legs with thick calves in coarse woolen stockings and dusty slippers. Their ladies, plain and freckled, shrugged bony shoulders in badly fitting blouses and exclaimed mechanically, like dolls that talk when squeezed in the proper place:

“‘Ach!... Wunderschön!’

“‘Ja — ja... ja-ja,’ barked the men.

“‘Kolossa-a-all sang the ladies, and piled huge portions of food on their plates.

“A gloomy Russian was dining at a separate table looking fearfully about him like a hunted wolf.

“Waiters, clad in black, moved about quietly with deferential faces, the table silver glistened, grapevines twined around the columns, palms murmured behind us, and the sea before us.

“‘Ach, wunderschön!’

“‘Kolossal!’

“Then suddenly, a crown of golden hair floated against the background of blue sea. Seacolored eyes were fixed on me, and the white face smiled a greeting. She was a little late.”

“What! She’s there again?” cried Marta.

She was, however, immediately vexed with herself for having interrupted.

“Excuse me, please, I’ll be silent,” she said.

Marta blushed. A distrustful look gleamed in her eye. She automatically took up her sewing, bent over it, and nervously began stitching.

Her interruption, however, had no effect on Anton, whose mind was far away.

“The wonderful thing is that we talked even when we were silent, that our thoughts responded the way some strings sound when another string is pulled. When I looked at the clouds above the sea, she saw at once that their shadows were bathing in the blue water. When I saw a mist on the cliff, I knew she was replying, ‘The sky is kissing it.’ What is still more wonderful is that when we were conversing in this way, a vast silence reigned, and we seemed to be alone in the world. And here I saw for the first time that her lips were red...”

Marta laid aside her sewing. She sat erect, seeming to have grown in height all of a sudden, her eyes set in a rigid frame of eyelids.

“You should have married a blonde.”

“You think so?” said Anton absentmindedly, exhaling another cloud of smoke from his lungs.

He could not cease talking. He told how, in the heat of day when the cliffs were white under the hot sun and the lungs drank in the sultry air as hot as volcanic lava, they wandered through the deserted streets of the town, through the groves of wild olive-trees, gray, with bent trunks and stringy arms of branches, looking like slaves turned to stone on earth stained red with poppies. The torrid wind danced a tarantella on the cliffs, while cicadas in the gray olive trees beat time on their castanets. They walked between walls of rough, gray stone embroidered with pale fronds of ferns. Projecting above was another wall overgrown with prickly pear, and the round leaves overlay one another like the stones in the rough masonry. The prickly pears — an intricate, disorderly, panicky mass of spiny leaves — produced a wild impression. The plants crept one over another — these crabs of the vegetable kingdom — and their spines bristled, like hairs standing on end because of deadly terror. Somewhere a donkey was braying, and his cries, groping through the prickly pears, were as piercing as the plants. They sometimes stopped to let women carrying water pass up the steps. The water splashed in urns that seemed firmly fixed on the women’s heads. They let pass a file of immovable, stony faces, necks with wire-like sinews, breaths as short as those of hounds on the hunt, and feet, baked until they resembled dried figs, that clung tenaciously to the stone steps. They went on, across pebbles that scattered under their soles, over carpets of furze, golden and fragrant, above which a black carob-tree shed the green tears of its pods. Suddenly they stood still, blinded by the sea. It had emerged unexpectedly, instantly, and charmed their souls with its joyous light, its blue haze with Vesuvius floating in its midst like an enormous jellyfish. Further on they again came to blue-gray wormwood, the shark-like jaws of century plants, stones and furze bushes, which the sun used as a brush, leaving on it strands of golden hair.

The scenes he described stood before Anton’s eyes. He dazzled and fascinated Marta with the beauty of his words and the brilliance of his imagination. He led her away and she followed him like a shadow, a sumbissive and unwanted third preson, wondering at the force that robbed her of the strength to resist. As in an enchanted dream she followed

him along the narrow lanes filled with stagnant heat that cut through the vineyards and citrus groves, now white in the sunlight, now gray in the shade. Swift waters seemed to have flowed down from the hills at one time and left behind a parched stony bed, at the bottom of which silently flashed the sinuous movements of the lizard — gray like the soul of the stone. Then an obstacle appeared. The lane was blocked from wall to wall by a bundle of prickly hay borne on a woman's head. A chin, the tip of a straight nose, the gleam of a black eyes darted by — and the bed of the dead stream was once more deserted. The soft tread of the peasant woman died out in the stifling heat, and again the only movement was the noiseless darting of the pointed snakelike tail of the lizard over the mottled pattern of the wall. Behind the walls grapevines exhaled coolness, and large yellow lemons hung from boughs like the nipples of women.

“We walked uphill amidst huge fragments of rock, into a petrified tragedy of giants. Something horrible must have occurred here when the earth was younger and more beautiful. The eternal immobility was shattered, the masses of rock grated against one another, the world broke up, and the raging cliffs tore away from the maternal bosom the undutiful children. Since then the marred cliffs have stood with a frozen expression of superhuman horror, gazing on the huge rock fragments with a vacant eye, screaming with an eternally open mouth, the mute cry of a dead mask.

“We climbed higher, to the very summit. Ah, what did we find there?! There the wind blows softly from the valleys, laden with the fragrance of furze and wormwood, young bushes grow like fresh girls; there the sun roams among the rocks, quickly replacing the gloom of shadows by the gaiety of light; there you see lights playing on the sea, hear the sea sounding in the depths, and farther on spreading the silken hems of its cloak to the very sky.

“I sat on the grass, she lay on a warm rock and was hot herself, as if she had absorbed all the warmth of her stony couch. Then, while the breeze played with the gold of her hair and I, looking into her eyes, saw the sky and sea together, this woman told me the story of her life.

“She was from the Caucasus, I think. At least, I understood that she had fought against the troops there during the revolution. She spent nights in the mountains, went on exhausting marches, as indefatigable as the best of the

young men, indifferent to death. She crossed the swift Kura River at night on leather vine skins filled with air to deliver cartridges to her people. She had even been wounded by a Cossack. She unbuttoned her sleeve and showed me the scar, and I kneeled down before her and bowed.

“We were alone in this vast space under a clear, high sky, and the island floated with us on the sea like a cloud in the blue heaven. I was clean and fresh, you understand. I was young, I did not feel my years or my body, nor the sweat of drudgery. I could have flown... Do you know what it is to be young and pure? You haven’t forgotten, have you?”

Anton’s voice grew stronger and louder, and he did not realize that he had begun to shout.

Marta sat looking faded and guilty. She hugged her knees, bowed her head low, and her face was lost in the mournful shadows of her hair.

The woman’s posture caught his eyes at last. He lowered his voice and calmed down.

He was not even certain he had seen in his dream all he told about. He merely felt the need to create, to drink greedily from the spring that he, like Moses, had caused to flow from the rock.

He told her about the course of the evenings in a low voice, with a dreamy mist over his eyes. The summits of the cliffs were still white in the sunlight, but their shadows were already painting violet silhouettes on the sea, indented like the merlons of battlements. The evening sun forged a silver pedestal for the lonely cliffs in the sea — light, transparent, as if melting in the heat. When evening finally cast a purple or rose-colored cloak over the cliffs, they — Anton and the woman — turned to the piazza to watch the sunset. Ischia was already golden like a ripe fruit. Monte Michele was clad in red basalts, while Vesuvius seemed to thrust into the sea a two-colored banner — blue and pink. Naples, Pozzuoli, Procida and the islands were softly gray against a golden sky. The sun sank lower and lower. Ischia was awaiting the moment, and loomed black in the golden mist like the face of a Moorish woman under a yellow veil. A blood-red hand reached out toward the land for the last time, and the trees turned rosy with almond blossoms, while the grapevines threateningly raised high waves in the green sea. The crimson rim of the sun was already crossing the mountain.

Then Ischia cast off her veil and, black and hungry, gulped down the sun, as is the daily custom of this eternal devourer of the sun. This was the end! The earth donned a dull garment, the orchards shed their blossoms, and Ischia serenely digested her supper.

The island was gray and dark after sunset — all colors faded as in a water-color that has become wet. The peaceful twilight seemed to have embroidered the island on a steel sea with faded silk. The island spread over the sea like an old tapestry.

When the shadows gradually grew denser, the calm bay hung a precious necklace around its throat — the lights of Naples — and the catholic chapels in their gray walls were warmly lit in the quiet night.

It was late now. The sleepy cook had thrust her head into the doorway for the third time, and had tearfully complained about the supper growing cold.

Marta rose, and shamming calmness and indifference, said carelessly as she went:

“Let’s have supper.”

The lamp in the dining-room was turned down. The roast meat was vaguely outlined on the cold plates. The children were already asleep.

They ate in silence. Marta automatically handed her husband some roast meat, choosing the best piece. He ate it quickly, albeit reluctantly, as if the rain whipping the cold windows was hurrying him on.

It was also quiet in the bedroom when they lay down. He asked her a question, but so languidly and superfluously, that he even failed to notice that she did not reply. Marta pretended to sleep, and he turned over the leaves of a book, screening his face with it, although it could be seen that he was not reading.

Marta felt ice in her heart. This man, whom she had considered the closest person in the world to her, had today removed himself far away. The few steps that separated their beds now stretched out to a cold, infinite distance. She wanted to look at his face, read something new there, but could not do so. The book cover hid his face, and his fingers, pink in the candle light, nervously turned the pages, but he didn’t look at her.

Marta lay still. She waited. Perhaps he would glance at her, say something, thaw out the ice. But it was all in vain. Soon she heard the rustling of the pages stop, the hand

unbent and dropped the book on the bed. Anton had fallen asleep without putting out the light.

Then she got up, and holding her breath, went quietly up to his bed. She placed the book on the table, wanted to put out the light, but did not. Almost nude, in her night-gown, which as mischief would have it, kept slipping off her shoulders, she trembled at the thought of waking him, of being seen by him, while keen curiosity riveted her gaze on this man who had become a stranger. The dream had already stamped deep lines on his face. Was he asleep? What did he see in his dream? What did his soul, freed of everyday cares, say to him? She did not know. She felt so alien, so very lonely, as if she had suddenly been cut off from the entire world. She turned her eyes away from her husband, and looked over her body from her breasts to her toes. "Am I old?" But she immediately thought sadly, "It's not the body that matters." She felt like weeping. Anton had thrust a bare leg out from under the blanket, and Marta solicitously tried to tuck it in. "I'm bothering about the body now too," she smiled to herself contemptuously and extinguished the candle.

But her thoughts gave her no peace in bed either. That eternal care for the body! Every day, year in, year out, her sole concern was the welfare of his body — to provide him with food, comfort, clothing, to keep him in good health. She never grudged him time or labor. It was her duty, so natural a duty that it was not even burdensome. Life had hitherto been tranquil, peaceful; she had had no cause for complaint. They did not quarrel, they were respected, they even had no debts! She was proud that her husband did not play cards, and boasted about it to everyone.

Today, however, he had demolished it all, sown anxiety, raised before her an incomprehensible question that absolutely had to be answered. Anton had seemed to her simple and intelligible. Everything about him had been lucid, familiar, fitted into a frame, and there... She felt that Anton had wronged her, cheated her. He had kept from her a treasure, something precious to which she also had a right. For years they had shared only their bodies, yielding them to each other for coarse pleasures, for the joys of solicitude, for trivial cares that numb the soul. Was that her fault? Was that the curse of life?

The words she had heard that day, the beauty that only a noble soul is capable of feeling, awakened in Marta some-

thing which had been familiar long ago. "Do you know what it is to be young and pure? You haven't forgotten, have you?" Yes, she remembered, although she had come close to forgetting it. When they had wedded, and during the beginning of their married life, they had other words, but life had slowly effaced and scattered them, so that Anton, who had by some miracle retained them, now seemed enigmatic and mysterious to Marta.

Anton tossed on his bed. Marta lifted her head from the pillow and listened. An acute curiosity drew her attention to this man, who, it seemed to her, was even breathing differently today than formerly. Night kept her from seeing Anton, but that only made her imagination more vivid. Marta still saw him dashing about the room with a face that had suddenly become younger. She wished the day would come sooner; uncertain as to what it would bring, and she was attracted by this very uncertainty.

In the morning Anton saw Marta only for an instant when he was leaving the house. There was a provocative and arch gleam in the dry, challenging eye that gazed at him, but he did not take up the challenge.

It was a gray, miserable frowning day. It was drizzling lazily, stolidly, leaving no hope that the sky would clear.

When Anton was returning home for dinner, he unexpectedly met Marta. She was coming toward him, dressed in her new, blue suit, which became her so. Fine drops quivered on the feather of her hat. She looked fresh and lighter today.

"Where are you going?" asked Anton in surprise.

"I had some shopping to do."

She blushed. She had nothing in her hands.

She had, evidently, gone out to meet him, for she turned round and went back with him.

They were silent at first, but then she cautiously called his attention to the fact that everything was wet with the rain. Water was flowing from the pavements, from the streets and houses, from the shining metal roofs, from the wet horses and people; water was flowing from the horse cabs, trees and shop windows. It looked as if the rain wanted to wash all colors and patterns from the earth, didn't it?

A fair-haired lady was running in their direction under a wide-brimmed hat. She had hardly trotted by on rubber

heels, when Marta's cheeks were covered by a deep flush. She exclaimed, as if talking to herself:

"I can't stand blondes."

They went on, sometimes in silence, sometimes talking. Anton noticed several times that his wife was catching his glance, and then intently staring at the people he had looked at.

Dinner was ready. The table was festively white, and fresh roses flushed in a tall crystal vase. This was a surprise — the freshly laundered table-cloth and, especially, the flowers in late autumn. Anton was not accustomed to such things.

He looked astounded at his wife, who deliberately lowered her eyes to avoid answering, and ran to the kitchen.

Evening came. Anton looked forward to Marta's coming to his room, and did not look forward to it. His desires were contradictory. He wanted to tell, and also wanted to keep his experience to himself, as something precious which he alone understood and valued.

But Marta came. She was happy, a bit nervous, and her eyes sparkled.

"Well, here I am."

She sat down, erect and uncomfortable, on a chair and looked at her husband.

"I've come to hear the end of your dream."

He hesitated, and then she said challengingly:

"You haven't even told me the name of your blonde."

"My blonde?"

"Ha-ha! Your blonde."

"I don't know it myself. I didn't ask."

"No, I can't believe that. You two were always together."

"What of it? I wasn't curious about names. When we met, our eyes drank in the brilliance of sun and sea together — and that was enough for us. Together we drank the beauty of the green cup, where ripens the juice of grapes, lemons and oranges. This united us... What more can I tell you?"

He was silent for a minute and then resumed.

"Usually we met in the morning, took a boat, and sailed in the sea. The sky was bluer because of the sea, and the sea was bluer because of the sky. They seemed to compete with each other. Sails fluttered in the distance like the wings of doves in the sky. We sailed past gray rocks surrounded by rows of colored shellfish. The sea swelled. And soon as it was deflected from the rocks, it opened up

its red gums, but immediately it closed again its fresh, wholesome mouth with a soft, loving movement like a kiss.

"From the sea we were better able to see the islands. The sun turned ordinary stone into marble and compelled it to nourish the plants. It seemed to quake in the strain of creative force, and only at times — when the shadows of clouds passed over it — did the orgy of sun, brilliance and colors abate, and a brief moment of rest set in.

"It was here that we began to comprehend the eternal raids of the sea on the island. Whatever its mood, the sea endlessly dashed against the rock, constantly gnawed at it. The sea raked up stones underfoot and covered them with water. We sailed over them. Like tamed beasts they lay at the bottom — smooth and helpless, and meekly let themselves be clad in the reddish wool of seaweeds. Gnawed into pebbles, the stones lay gray on the shore, and where the sea had ground them into white sand, it played over them with the blue fire of victory. Even the high cliffs proudly overhanging the sea had to yield — the sea had scraped out high and deep grottos in them. More than grottos, vast temples for the cult of the fairy-tale. We sailed into them. We lay down on the bottom of the boat, and in a moment found ourselves in fairyland. There were wonders we could not believe at first. The waters glowed like sapphires and emeralds, the foam was rose-colored, the vaults shone in mystic green and blue, the water coated the boat, the oars and our hands with silver. The rainbow shone, precious stones glittered, brilliants played in the light, and varicolored seashells embellished the underwater rocks.

"The sea rose near the blue grotto, and from time to time poured into it the silver of its waves. Our guide took hold of the chain in order to steer the boat; we climbed up the crest of the wave, and the sea suddenly spat out the boat into a narrow opening. The boat flew through spray and foam, its sides grating against the rocks, and ended rocking quietly like a calmed-down swan. The first thing I noticed on rising in the boat was the whiteness of my companion's teeth. It was the gaiety of the blue that revealed it. My teeth were probably also shining. It was certainly so. I am unable to describe the blue grotto. If you could create a massive vault of cast silver, dissolve in some liquid a precious turquoise so that it would sparkle and cast a blue tint on the walls, if you could gather all the blue of the sky and sea and color the air of a cave with it, you

would have a faint likeness of that grotto. And how he body shone in that water. It glowed with a blue flame. We swayed in the boat as if sailing in the sky, scooped up water in our palms and poured out a shower of colored beads. The silvery wave constantly cast new boats into the grotto, and we saw people rising in these boats and revealing their teeth in a broad smile at the gaiety of the blue.

"We would go fishing in the sea for a change. We cast the fishing-lines into the deep, and when the fishes nibbled, the line would flutter in our fingers like a living thing. We would pull out into the sun brightly colored fish, more like exotic flowers than fish. There were tricolored, red and royal fish, and we took splendid bouquets out of the sea.

We returned tanned by the sun, weatherbeaten and salty with sea water.

But it happened that my companion did not appear at all. Then..."

Anton broke off. He rose from the chair and walked about the room with heavy, emphatic strides, strampling into the ground hidden memories.

"Then what?" asked Marta, pouncing on the word he had dropped.

Their glances crossed for a moment, like flint and steel, in spiteful strife.

"Then," replied Anton, straining each word through his teeth, "I roamed about by myself, mute as a fiddle with snapped strings, dumb as a man who has lost his voice. I called her that we should read the book of beauty together, for without her it was closed to me. I looked and saw nothing. I called her but she did not come..."

It seemed to Marta that Anton sighed.

"Moonlit nights brought us together again. I was sitting on a rock. The moon had not yet risen. A chorus of crickets chirped softly in the dry grass, and the note of one of them rang out above the others, as if a silver string, stretching endlessly between earth and sky, was quivering and re-sounding over the still sea.

"Are you sad?" I heard a familiar voice from behind the projection of rock, and only then did I see her.

"I also am sad. You and I are lonely people, and so is our island, I think!"

"She sat down beside me and pointed to the sea.

"You see, it keeps on floating. Eternally solitary in the boundless sea, while the waves splash against its sides.

There is no road away from it, unless the moon builds a golden bridge at night to join the island with far-away and unknown places. But that bridge is so light, trembles so much, is so shaky that only a dream will dare to step on it and travel with a light, noiseless tread to remote lands.'

"I heard her voice and was no longer the dead wood of the violin. She was already drawing the bow of her imagination across the taut strings. My voice again resounded in my chest, and my eyes regained their sight. I saw the moon rise and the sea spread out a golden carpet under her feet, while the palms, waving hundreds of fans, greeted her with a hosanna. I immediately felt a warm wave of air woven of light, the smell of the sea and wild grasses, softly wafted through the olive-trees, caressing our faces with the fragrance of the surf. I saw the furrows of Monte Solare that never make it look old — the wild rocks that were scattered over the amphitheater slopes as in an ancient theater, watching the sage of the sea, where the moon acts out its eternal mystery play."

Anton was thoughtful for a while. He was evidently endeavoring to recall something; he was straining his memory and was helplessly silent.

"There is a gap in my dream here," he began with a guilty look, "a black chasm. I don't remember what happened. I seem to have vanished suddenly, erased from the earth, and the island, the sea and my companion disappeared together with me. All fell into the chasm.

"I don't remember now how I came to be in the boat. Not I, but we. We were both there. The moon hung over the sea. The distant rocks drew near. Purple wrinkles lined their faces, and a warm maternal solicitude was apparent in the cliffs bending over the sea. Kindness united shore and sea, serenity and sadness. While the moon rose and became pale, the cliffs gradually rose and became pale too. Sharp spires loomed up, separate rocks grew distinct, turned into white marble and were ornamented with carvings. Then the island rose before us out of the sea like the Cathedral of Milan, and the moon paved the way to it with gold.

"Our oars splashed quietly in the sea, and flames flitted from under them — small and green like fireflies on St. Peter's Eve. We deliberately steered the boat into the shadows, for the lights were brighter there. The oars seemed to heave hidden treasures out of the sea. My companion unbuttoned her sleeve, rolled it up to her shoulder, and

thrust into the water her hand, which was blue in the moonlight.

“‘Look,’ she cried, and poured out of her hand merry lights that were immediately extinguished.

“‘Now we are like gods,’ she said, laughing. ‘Cry out: Let there be light!’”

“‘Let there be light!’ I repeated after her.

“We leaned over the edge of the boat so close together that we felt the tickling of hairs on our cheeks and the warmth of each other’s face. We saw green sparks — one, two, ten — float up from the mysterious depths and leap through our fingers.

“Then I took my hands out of the water, took to the oars and rowed on, raising up a shower of sparks.

“Now and then our boat would come upon a fishing boat. The fisherman’s lantern cast a red light on the sea, on the tackle, ropes, the sides of the barge and the kind, weather-beaten face.

“‘Lucky catch!’ she cried, nodding to the fisherman.

“‘Good luck to you, madonna!’ responded a deep voice and a black hat cut through the light with a grand gesture.

“We rowed into the grottos. The darkness there was black; the least movement in this black obscurity, however, aroused a conflagration — showers of sparks — turning the water into a starlit night.

“In the ‘grotto of the saints’ a mystic, inscrutable terror enveloped us. Only in the daytime had we seen the sea vault where the stones looked like sleepy men. Now the men of stone were still drowsing there quietly. A woman also slept, lying on her back, covered with a blanket, and a moonbeam strayed over the cover on her knees. A white old man was dozing deeply, his sorrowful brow inclined and resting on his palms. Rising up along the vaults of the gothic cathedral, shimmered the lights of invisible lamps, lights which swung to and fro on the walls, as from lamps swaying in the wind. Through the green moonlit water we could see a nude woman with a child in her lap, the light creeping over her round hips. Green stars were constantly floating up from the black, secret nooks of the grotto and dying out quietly.

“Then we rowed out into the sea. The lights of the fishing boats could be seen far out. The sea rocked us lightly, and we sat shoulder to shoulder and rocked as one. When I looked at her, I saw her lips, so red that even the night...”

Marta interrupted him. She stood up, pale and stern.

"You kissed her?"

There was a horror-stricken certainty in her question.

She looked at him as if she wanted to drink the secret poison from his eyes, and her hand leaned heavily on the table.

Anton also sprang up. A hot, violent wave surged through his brain — cruel and sharp, like a dagger arousing in him the desire to hurt.

"Yes, I kissed her!" he shouted in a frenzy. "I kissed her, do you hear? I kissed the lips that spoke to my heart, that knew the language of my soul. Didn't I have the right to do it? Didn't those lips deserve it? You wanted me to become as mute as a stone, like you... No, I'm still alive — alive, do you hear? I kissed her!"

He felt that he was wounding her, and cruel-satisfaction titilated his being.

Marta covered her face with her hands. She sank into the armchair weeping loudly, while he looked at her shoulders, which shook with her sobbing, and felt relieved.

Then he suddenly came to himself and rushed to his wife.

"Why, Marta dear, Marta! Don't... Why, what is it? It's only a dream..."

But Marta recoiled from him and stamped her foot angrily.

"Go away. Don't you dare touch me."

"Oh, that'll do, Marta," Anton implored her and tried to draw her hands away from her face. "Don't you understand that it's nothing but a dream, none of it happened."

But Marta only sobbed the louder. She would not listen to him.

"You kissed her."

He went down on his knees, endeavoring to calm his wife, to remove her hands from her face. He was quite vexed with himself.

"Don't be a child, Marta. Don't you see that you're talking nonsense. No one can be blamed for his dreams."

She seemed to quiet down, wiped her eyes with a handkerchief and, pushing aside Anton's hands, rose from the armchair.

"I know it was a dream," she said coldly, "but you're capable of doing what you dreamed about."

She made to leave the room.

Anton barred the way. No, he would not let her go. Since things had come to this pass, they had to talk frankly. Perhaps, he was himself in his dream; perhaps, he was capable of such an act, but this was her fault.

Her fault? Ha-ha!

Hers. She had failed to show respect to life, to protect its beauty. She had heaped on him daily only the trifles, the inessentials, the burdens of life, till she had turned him into a rubbish heap. Poetry cannot dwell in a garbage pile, and life without poetry is evil.

Marta burned with rage.

What about him? Had not he shut himself away from her? Had he not secreted the living water of his soul, like a miser who is afraid to let anyone look at his treasure? Why is she alone to blame?

No, he was different at first, but a flower cannot grow on unwatered soil. It withers. He knows it is hard to live without prose. Let there be foam on top, but underneath there must be unadulterated wine, and if water is constantly poured into it, the wine becomes tasteless.

It was autumn weather out-of-doors, and in the stuffy and smoky room, which alone was alive in the somnolent kingdom of children's beds, a battle raged between discontented souls.

They reminded each other of their slightest faults, sins against the Holy Ghost, reproached each other for indifference, for their loneliness, for having sunk into the swamp of life.

"You're overgrown with this humdrum existence like a crust," shouted Anton.

"You've been just a boarder in this home."

They felt stifled. Anton unbuttoned his coat. Dishevelled, he darted about the room, as if he wanted to push over the walls, and his long hair trailed after him as he ran.

Marta was red-faced and perspiring; she wiped her neck with a handkerchief and her eyes blazed.

"You're like Circe, you want to change me into a swine."

"Go, ahead, kiss anyone you want to... it's all the same to me."

They quarrelled.

There was often discord between them now. Savage, passionate quarrels cut like torrents through their life, which had hitherto been so serene, monotonously "happy," as Marta had thought not so long ago. But as soon as the storm passed, her heart, washed by tears, bloomed and was rejuvenated. How happy she was when, between two quarrels, she and Anton succeeded in understanding each other!

Marta was jealous — persistently, covertly, intensely jealous of everybody and everything. She was jealous of the women they saw in the street, of the scenery, of the evenings when he shut himself up in his room, of his thoughts and dreams. She wanted to have him all to herself — unshared and entire. She was not sure of him. Some peril constantly kept her in anxiety, made her somewhat of a stranger to her husband. Anton no longer saw nude female legs in the morning, no longer listened to dull and prosaic dreams, no longer tidied away skirts in all the rooms. Something youthful and girlish, some ferment of long ago awakened in Marta. It disturbed her peace, which had been so desirable not long before. But the fact that she felt the necessity to regain what had been gained long ago held a new enticement, an echo of spring. She did not know how long her strength would last, whether the storm would ever end, but now red roses more often adorned their table.

*Chernihiv*  
*May, 1911*

## THE BIRTHDAY PRESENT

Police-officer Karpo Petrovich Zaichik returned home from the station. He was hungry and peevish. He shuffled his feet and slammed doors. The invective of the marketplace and the tumult of the police-station were still ringing in his ears, making his lips and square face move angrily and his fist turn bloody red, which was all the heavier because of his thick ring. He went into the parlor, clicked his heels in their patent leather boots in military fashion, and flung his cap irritably on the window-sill. This, however, caused his wife's toothless comb to leap up and a light, loose tuft or dirty hair settled on his sleeve.

"Bah, brothel habits!"

The dry, hot, dusty day had already come to an end. Two dull white empty plates stood on the table, and a turned-over spoon caught the red gleam of the setting sun.

"Susana!"

"I'm bringing it," responded a low, hoarse voice from somewhere.

Karpo Petrovich sat down at the table and unbuttoned his tunic. He felt stifled. The cloth collar was chafing his neck, and the light jacket was still being laundered... They were laundering it!

With an effort he suppressed an outburst of profanity.

He broke off bits of bread impatiently and chewed them, snorting.

His patent leather boots kept creaking under the table.

Susana appeared in the doorway. Her soft and doughy white face enveloped in the vapors of the steaming food, she floated from the threshold to the table like a summer cloud in her muslins adorned with a pattern of absurdly large flowers.

"I had to warm it up. Everything was cold."

"Must you scatter hanks of hair all over the place?"

Susana opened her eyes wide.

"Where?"

Karpo Petrovich pointed with his thumb to the window behind him, his eyes bulged and his fist reddened in anger.

"Brothel habits!"

"Hush," his wife silenced him, "Dorya is there."

Karpo Petrovich cast a sidelong glance at the chink in the door through which light penetrated, and was only now aware of the sonorous boyish voice repeating in constant singsong:

“Seven times eight is fifty-six... seven times eight is fifty-six.”

This calmed him down at once. He bent over his plate and began slowly sipping the broth, casting an eye over the parlor from time to time.

A lamp glimmered dimly under the icons in a corner, a new *gymnasium*\* student overcoat hung from the clothes rack, the buttons reflecting sharp red gleams.

It was not Sunday tomorrow, was it? Oh my! How could he have forgotten? Why, tomorrow was Dorya’s birthday.

Susana was picking up hair from the floor, her bulging backside covered with a pattern of big flowers.

Brothel habits! He had to remind her of it! Well, she had been in a brothel, but later they were legally married. Was she not a faithful wife? It is true that once... But if it had not been for her, if she had not gone that night to the police chief, he would still be nothing but a clerk... Now he is an officer. Dorya is studying at the *gymnasium*, and even the paymaster’s wife calls on them.

Susana’s throat was flushed, and only the furrows of her neck were chalky white. She strode angrily out of the room.

Karpo Petrovich chewed his food, and lost in thought softly tapped on the table with his finger tips.

“Dorya!”

Dorya stood in the doorway, gray and awkward in his long school trousers that reached to the floor, and his father looked at his legs, unbending and coarse like an elephant’s.

“Did you recite today?”

“I got an excellent mark in geography.”

“You are not fibbing, are you?”

Dorya sniffed at the insult, blowing upward a blond forelock.

“Honest to God, I saw it put down... The Buck got a bad mark.”

“What do you mean by ‘the buck?’ ”

\* Secondary school designed to prepare students for university

"Aw, that's one of the fellows — Dorka Sosnovsky."

"The deputy governor's son?"

"We gave him a good licking today... His nose even bled."

Karpo Petrovich felt cold under his officer's coat — that familiar and unpleasant sensation that was always called forth by encounters with higher officials.

"Dorka," he shouted sternly, "let it happen once more and you'll get it! Oh, my, oh, Lord! The deputy governor's son!"

He shook his uplifted finger in its heavy ring.

Susana brought in a lamp and shoved a plate of food before her husband, who did not look at her, being still constrained by amazement and horror.

A spot of grease on the new coat showed up black under the light.

"Eat your dinner, it's getting cold," Susana reminded him.

He began eating greedily, and untidily spattered gravy on the table-cloth, chewed noisily, and a smile played over his shiny, red lips. He was gratified. The fact that his boy bore the same name as the deputy governor's son, that they attended the same school, and that his Dorya had dared to beat the young gentleman filled him with joyous wonder. And take himself, Karpo Petrovich. He wore white shoulder straps and a sword, just like an officer. People were afraid of him, because he could make a lot of trouble for them. At the same time he had to stand at attention and salute that snot-nosed kid just because he was the son of his chief. How happy he had been when he once helped the young gentleman into a horse cab! And here was his Dorya — ha-ha!

Meanwhile Susana was surreptitiously covering up something in the corner of the couch, looking anxiously at the door behind which Dorya was mumbling his lessons.

"What are you laughing at?"

He told her in a whisper what he had heard from Dorya, and they both laughed to themselves a long time.

"Ha-ha!"

"Hee-hee!"

"Our Dorya is ten years old tomorrow," said Susana dreamily, her bad teeth bared in a grin, and lifted up the corner of a cushion behind which something shone.

"Show me what you have there, Suzya."

Karpo Petrovich rose from the table, swayed on his shiny patent leather boots, and went up to the couch.

“S-s-sh!” Susana hissed silently and, shaking her heavy breasts, covered the cushion with her soft body, which was like dough swelling out of a vat.

“I’ll show you later. What will you give him?” Karpo Petrovich snapped his fingers. Oh, my! His low brow, which ran into a thicket of hair like a shallow pool into rushes, was covered with wrinkles. He opened his mouth and thought awhile.

“I...”

But Susana apprehensively waved him to silence. Dorya might hear him. Dorya was in their way. They wanted him to go to bed as soon as possible.

From behind the door came the rustling of pages being turned over, the thump of a book flung on the table and angry mutterings.

“What’s the matter, Dorya?”

The boy stood in the doorway, spots of ink on his forehead and fingers, and complained morosely:

“I can’t solve the problem.”

“Oh, my! What a misfortune! Let me have a look at that problem, let’s see that terror.”

Karpo Petrovich rubbed his hands like a good-natured bear before a hive of honey.

He held the book at arm’s length and read as if it was an official report.

“Three merchants had to divide a sum of money... Just imagine three merchants — for instance, our Srul, Itsko and Pinka. That doesn’t seem to be hard... The second got twice as much money as the first. Yes, as the first... and the third got as much as the other two together... That means Pinka got as much as Srul and Itsko. Well, do you get it? It’s very simple.”

But Karpo Petrovich himself did not believe it was so very simple. He became confused, shouted at Dorya, pressed a thick finger on the textbook, as if he wanted to throttle the three merchants, and finally got into such a sweat that Dorya was disgusted at the sight of the profuse beads of perspiration on his father’s brow.

“An idiotic problem! What do they teach you there?”

He hurled aside the book in a rage, and got up angry and extremely embarrassed.

“How they torture the poor children!” exclaimed Susana with vehement indignation. She was also moist with tension under the cloud of luxuriant muslins.

But Dorya suddenly blinked, tapped his forehead with his pencil, and in two minutes was satisfied with the merchants.

"What a rithmatik you are!" Susana attacked her husband. "Couldn't divide a few roubles!"

Her happy eye embraced the gray figure of her son, who looked a stranger in his long trousers that reached the floor.

"Rithmatik! You ought to keep quiet if you can't pronounce the word," Karpo Petrovich growled angrily. "I have my own problems. I'd like to see you on the round just once."

In his confusion he even forgot to click his heels in military fashion. He took out of his pocket a heavy cigarette case of the kind army officers carry, weighed it in his hand, and lit a cigarette.

The greenish light of the table lamp blended softly with the rosy shimmer from the lamp under the icons in the corner; the new buttons on the school overcoat glowed like semi-precious stones, while the blue cigarette smoke floated lightly in the warm comfort of the room. Dorya resumed his mumbling behind the door.

Karpo Petrovich took the overcoat from the rack and squeezed the cloth in his hand.

"It looks like good cloth and not badly made."

He patted the coat lovingly and hung it up again.

"Ah, how funny Dorya is! He dressed in the morning, put on his cap, and went up to my bedroom. I was still in my night-gown, I'd just got up, and I cried out in a fright, thinking it was a stranger. We laughed for a long time afterwards."

"How much did Shmul charge for the cap?"

"I paid him a rouble and twenty kopecks. He swore that he was thirty kopecks out of pocket."

"Ah, the son of a bitch. You shouldn't have given him more than a rouble. Where is the cap?"

She handed him the cap, taking it down carefully from the wall where the icons hung, and he admired for a long time the new silver leaves, an esoteric and mysterious symbol of scholarly wisdom.

Then their eyes met and brightened up; they understood each other without words.

"Ha-ha! How quick the scoundrel solved the problem!"

"Hee-hee! An excellent mark in geography!"

They were even more pleased that the deputy governor's son had received a bad mark.

Dorya came in to say good-night and they were alone. Karpo Petrovich turned to his wife impatiently.

"Show me what you bought."

But Susana had already taken the present out from under the cushion. She sat down on the floor amidst the white billows of her dress, and the dry rasp of a spring being wound up came from under her heavy breasts.

He also sat down with a creaking of boots near his wife, and was almost stifled by the heavy smell of her face powder. Finally a tin steamboat slipped from her hand and sailed across the floor, plunging at the bows, as if carried on waves, and filling the room with the sharp tinkling of metal.

"What do you think, Karpo, will Dorik be glad?"

Karpo Petrovich did not answer. He watched the steamboat in silence, and when it stopped, halted by the leg of a chair, he released it and let it go on. Then he wound it up again.

"Get your tail out of the way," he growled impatiently at his wife when the toy knocked up against her skirt. "Taking up the whole room!"

He even crawled on the floor after the toy.

Susana sat on the floor, baring her bad teeth in a happy smile, her face in the shadow of a wide ring of hair, two-thirds of it false.

The steamboat rattled on. Karpo Petrovich finally stood up. He glanced from the toy to his wife and snorted contemptuously.

"Eh, a hell of a thing!"

"What do you mean, a hell of a thing?" asked Susana astonished.

"Really... it doesn't suit him to play with toys."

"A lot you know outside your round! You should see Dorya dressing his dolls even now. You with your 'hell of a thing'!"

Susana was depressed with dissatisfaction and drooped like a pricked balloon.

"I'd like to know what you've thought of."

Karpo Petrovich suddenly brightened up. His face was lit by a kind smile, and his eyes gleamed warmly.

"I shan't give him a toy... I've thought up something special."

He solemnly lifted his finger with the heavy ring.

"I've thought up something that — oh, my! — he'll remember all his life. Even the deputy governor's son won't be able to see what I'll show Dorya. Let..."

"Don't keep me on pins and needles."

"Let him have something to remember his day by when he's old. He'll tell his grandchildren... 'There,' he'll say, 'I was still a boy, when my deceased father...'"

"Karlo, why don't you tell me at once?"

Susana burst with impatience.

Karlo came up close to her, stretched out his red neck, and for some reason lowered his voice to a whisper.

"I'll take him to see a hanging tomorrow."

"Oh, oh!" exclaimed Susana, frightened, "how can you take a child..."

"A child, a child," Karlo Petrovich mocked.

Just because he is a child. Of course, he will find it interesting. A child will be even more impressed. A child ought to be exposed to impressions, so as to remember all his life. What did she want to do? Pat him on the head and have him hang on to her skirt?

He had begun to shout, and with his shouts he drove his plan into Susana's soft body.

"You've got to educate him!"

"A — a — ah!" she sighed and stared at her husband. "Maybe, he really ought to see it. But really, let him... Maybe, there won't be another chance. How many children there are — the paymaster's wife's, the police chief's — who won't see it! Only Dorya will..."

She became accustomed to the idea. Just think — to see a man being hanged. She would like to see it herself. Ah, Dorka is a lucky boy!

She forgot about Dorya and all her thoughts turned on herself. She felt neglected. She had lived to see the age of thirty and had never seen anything like it. Did Karlo ever think about her? Sit in the kitchen all your life, with your hands in dishwater, and never any pleasure or entertainment...

"Who are they hanging?" she asked, her eyes gleaming. Karlo Petrovich hesitated a moment, and finally gave in.

"Well, all right. You know, Suzya, I have no right to talk about it. I'll tell you but, see here, keep mum, not a word to anyone. We're hanging the woman who threw a bomb at the governor."

"Oh, oh! You've seen her? Is she young, pretty? That would be interesting... Karpo, dear, I could stand way off at the side..."

Karpo Petrovich threw up his hands in alarm.

"Oh, goodness! That would be too much. I'll have trouble enough with Dorka."

Susana pouted. It was always like that. Nobody cared for her. Her discontent quickly evaporated, however, in her solicitude for Dorka. She and her husband took a long time to settle such questions as when to wake up the boy, what clothes he should wear, whether he should go to the *gymnasium*. It might be better to let him take a holiday.

"Of course," said Karpo Petrovich gaily. "Let him have a good time."

He was in a fine mood. He whistled the waltz which was now played daily at the circus and clicked his heels like a regimental officer.

"Yakim is the executioner, I suppose," said Susana, as if speaking to herself.

"Yakim."

"Who would have thought it. He brought up our boy. Dorya loves him so."

"He's taken to drink, the bastard."

She became more and more enthusiastic over her husband's plan. He had really thought up something fine.

The green lamp shone warmly in the room, like a kind heart in the bosom. The steamboat drowsed on the floor where it had been stopped by the couch. Karpo Petrovich jerked a creaking foot, keeping time with his thoughts, while Susana dreamed in the quiet peacefulness of the room about the better times to come when Karpo would at last be duly appreciated. Filled with joyous sensations, she went softly up to her husband and kissed his moist brow.

It's time to go to bed. We have to get up early tomorrow. Ah, Dorik, how lucky he is!

\* \* \*

"Let me alone, Mom."

Dorya did not want to get up. He opened eyes which were scared by the light, and fell back again on the pillow. But when his mother began to smother him in her arms, and the steamboat began to rattle on the floor, he remembered immediately that it was his day. He then leaped

out of bed at once, warm, golden-haired, tall on his thin legs, and sat down in the middle of the floor to play with the toy.

Suddenly big hands, cold from washing, caught hold of his chest and ribs and lifted him high into a mixed odor of tobacco and pomatum, into tickling coarse hair and the warm lips of his father. Slightly bruised by the hard coldness of buttons and shoulder straps, Dorya trustingly snuggled against his father, and when his heels once more reached the floor, a deep voice rumbled softly above him.

"Get dressed quick. We're going now."

Dorya raised his eyes to his father. Going? Where to?

Fishing, perhaps. A placid stream and bare feet on which to ramble over the sand. The fishing-rod bent in an arch, and the silvery flickering of the fish on the line. The "plop" of the water when a stone falls into it.

Maybe they will travel far away to a strange city. They will ride, ride and ride. The trees will whirl and race backward. The fields will roll under the horses' hoofs. Flies will swarm on the shiny haunches of the horses, and birds will chirp overhead.

He wanted to ask his father, but the latter had gone.

The school bag filled with books suddenly spoiled everything. What about school lessons?

"You're not going to the *gymnasium* today," Susana explained.

He whirled on one leg, slapped his thighs with a glad-some bird-like chirp, and again began to play with his steamboat.

Soon, however, he had to leave the toy. He dressed hurriedly with a feeling of festivity and joy of living, with every sinew throbbing at the coolness of his shirt and the warmth of his mother's hands, eager for the world like a fledgling sparrow with beak wide open in its nest.

He ran all over the house, unbuttoned, with his belt in his hand. The driver and horse of a cab were nodding at the street door, the kittens were mewling in the kitchen, his father was finishing his tea in the dining-room. Dorya would have liked to cuddle up to him, but did not dare to. He only embraced his father's broad back and the shoulder straps of his dress uniform with a grateful look.

"Bloater!" He recalled his nickname at school, and tears stood in his eyes in sympathy for his father, for it was because of his father that the nickname was given him —

“bloater” being the slang for the swords the policemen wore.

The morning was windless and warm, but Dorya was told to put on a cotton-lined overcoat. The thick collar propped up his neck, and his mother, still in white night-dress, bent over him with a face puffed with sleep and tickled him with her loose hair, while forcing the coat buttons into the new buttonholes.

“Well, it’s time to go.”

The streets were deserted. It was so strange to see the houses, trees, and hedges still asleep, whereas they were riding somewhere with some unknown purpose, and his father was silent. His father’s hands, clad in white cotton gloves, lay heavily on the hilt of his sword, while the driver’s back drowsily swayed from side to side. They passed the *gymnasium* building, frigidly respectable with its heavy columns and black, cold windows. A pity it was so early, and there was no one to see Dorya riding to strange lands in a warm, new overcoat. Farewell, farewell! I am never coming back... and he would leave behind only the envious looks of the boys, mouths wide open in laughter, full of white teeth.

They left the city and descended into a valley, where the wheels were suddenly silenced, as if immersed in water. There was a smell of cattle sheds in the air, and small houses drowsed like cows in their pens.

“Are you comfortable in your seat?” his father asked him, and Dorya caught his glance at the school emblem and the glittering buttons on his chest.

The day had begun. The rich fragrance of late buckwheat and dry stubble floated up from the fields, which had already spread fluffy mothlike wings on both sides of the road, and voices emerged from the green sky.

The earth was awakening. The buckwheat floated with a white, light froth. Birds nestled warm breasts against the tilled soil, and the wind shook mullein and cornflowers. Little fat clouds, rosy like babies waking from sleep, swam across the sky; beetles had already begun their work in the stubble, and the field flies were scratching their bellies and straightening out folded wings. One could sense the elusive breath of life, the movement of earthy sap, and hot blood responded to it in Dorya’s body. Why keep on riding? They could get out here, run about the broad field or lie in the grass.

The hot sun would come out, and spread across the field like the strings of Indian summer.

Karpo Petrovich was looking ahead anxiously. He was afraid they would be late. He longed to tell Dorya where they were going. Should he tell him, or should he not? Rows of tiny wrinkles formed on his square brow, and his hands lost their heavy immobility. No, he would not tell the boy. Let it come as a surprise! He put his arm lovingly around Dorya and hugged his son.

The white mare was perceptibly limping. She lifted a rear hoof and tried to run on three. "Ah, the bastard, torturing the poor horse! The dog did not shoe her." At this instance he was for the first time troubled by a doubt as to whether he was doing the right thing by taking Dorya with him, but a memory awakened in him and he was reassured. When a child, he was taken to see three soldiers being shot, and the picture was still vivid in his memory, whereas similar events, which he witnessed frequently, no longer produced such an impression. Perhaps, he should have asked Dorya's principal for permission.

"Dorya, are you afraid of your principal?"

"Who, the Cow?"

"What cow," asked Karpo Petrovich in amazement.

"That's what we call the principal."

Dorya puffed himself up, drew his head into his shoulders, and intoned with a heavy twang:

"Young gentlemen of the *gymnasium* must behave respectably, go to church, respect..."

"Ha-ha!" Karpo Petrovich could not contain himself. "What's that?"

He could see the living image of the stolid principal with his coarse, frigid face, filled with obtuse pride to the top of his head, and sluggish like a cow with calf.

"Oh, you imp, how dare you mock your superiors!"

Dorya did not believe the insincere anger of his father. He puffed till he became red in the face, shuffled his stiffened, loglike legs, and pompously pronounced in a nasal voice:

"Those of you who take to socialism, or go to town after six o'clock..."

"Ha-ha!" roared Karpo Petrovich, forgetting all respect for higher-ups, "a real comedian!... Stop!" he suddenly poked the driver's back, "Don't you see we've arrived?"

Two wild pear-trees stood at the roadside, their leaves quivering in the morning cold.

“Stop under the pear-trees.”

Still red-faced and shaking with laughter, Karpo Petrovich got out of the cab, took Dorya’s hand, and led him to the trees.

Dorya found himself standing at the edge of a ravine, and yellow clay was slipping from under his feet. There were black figures of men at the bottom of the ravine, and white pillars loomed distinctly amidst the dense early morning shadows.

What was it?

He thought at first it was some kind of folk festivity, that a barrel organ would begin to play soon, and people would amuse themselves on swings.

He was somewhat disappointed.

His father squeezed his hand hard and whispered with a hiss through his front teeth:

“Look and don’t miss anything. Try not to be noticed. You’d better hide behind the pear tree.”

Then he began to descend into the ravine, the silver of his shoulder straps gleaming and his sword furrowing the clay, while his white-gloved hands floated in the air like doves.

The morning grew brighter. On the horizon beyond the ravine small light clouds glowed like oak-wood coals.

A man climbed up on the platform between the pine pillars and pulled at a cord, as if testing its strength.

“Yakim!” Dorya was glad to see him. It seemed to him that he could see Yakim’s watery roving eyes, into which he had so often looked when Yakim carried him in his arms.

“Where is the music?”

Instead of music, however, he saw uniforms and the cold glitter of rifles. His father stood at attention, saluted someone, and his white-gloved hand and flexed elbow seemed to tremble. Shoulder straps were bright yellow on both sides of someone’s whiskerless face, and two rows of buttons merged into yellow paths. A priest stood nearby, shaking his bald head as if driving away mosquitoes. He kept spreading the silvery silk of his beard over the cloth of his black cassock and patting the purple flaps of his wide sleeves.

“Church servicé?” thought Dorya.

He was bored and listened to the thin bustling whispering of the pear-tree overhead.

He glanced at the cab driver, who was bending over, doing something to a wheel. His long blue kaftan, worn at the folds, covered his legs to the very ground like a skirt. The white nag drowsed on three legs, the fourth raised. A bird was emitting short, intermittent chirps overhead.

Dorya once more looked into the valley. Now he noticed a woman among a group of men. A kerchief, tied in a bow under her chin, merged with her face into a single-whitish patch, and her translucent, milk-white hands shone against her black clothes like phosphorescent rotting wood in the dark.

"You've come to see the show, have you, young gentleman?"

The driver had come up and stood nearby.

"What of it?" said Dorya, turning to him.

"Oh, nothing. Have a good look, when you grow up it may come in handy."

His round eye — the cabby had shut the other — his voice, the corners of his mouth were provocative and offensive.

"Are they going to hold a church service, Semen?"

"Heh!" Semen coughed. "Church service — damn their eyes... Oh, they'll hold a church service for her..."

"No, tell me, really, Semen," Dorya entreated him.

Semen was silent. The jeering expression that had distorted his face turned into a stern, hard look. Without a word, he lifted up the skirt of his cloak, got out his tobacco and started rolling a cigarette. The mare began to urinate. Semen whistled to her softly and meanwhile some tobacco spilled on the ground. When he had finished rolling the cigarette, Semen carefully stuck the edges and looked with disbelief at Dorya.

"Didn't your father tell you?"

"No, word of honor," replied Dorya. "You see, it's my birthday today, and he..."

"So, it's a birthday present. Not a bad idea!"

Semen pinched the cigarette with his rough, black fingers, lifted up his right hand, made a circling motion around his neck, then jerked his hand upward, made a choking sound and burst into laughter.

"Kaput!"

"Kaput?" Dorya's eyes bulged in innocence.

The driver explained.

"They're going to hang the young lady now. Church service — damn their eyes..."

Dorya felt a chill pass through his body.

"That's not true! You're joking," he cried, turning red.

"Maybe, I'm joking."

Semen made a choking sound once more, and repeated the jerking motion above his head.

A lump swelled up under Dorya's heart and passed nauseatingly through his arms and legs.

"What? They'll hang her to the end!"

The boy's voice broke and misery distorted his lips.

"Not to the end. Only until her legs stop twitching."

He flung away his cigarette, spat and added:

"Yakim will manage it quickly. He's no novice."

The sunlight produced blood-red spots on Semen's oil-cloth hat, and Dorya stared at the driver with icy horror, as if the cabby and not Yakim was about to hang the pale-faced woman.

Conversations overheard at home suddenly passed through his mind... Words which at first seemed ordinary, remote and incredulous, as if part of a tale, now came close to him and proved to be a living reality.

He now stared with different eyes at the valley, at the immobile ranks of soldiers, the brilliant uniforms of the officers, the pale woman in the white kerchief and the pinewood pillars. All he saw fused into a single word: "hanging," intolerably horrifying and vile.

Meanwhile Yakim had finished arranging the cord — it now swung slightly — climbed down from the scaffold and approached the woman. She waved him away with her thin, bluish hand, faltered at her first step, but then continued firmly up to the pillars.

"Now they'll do it, now!" A voice screamed within Dorya, and seared his being. His legs involuntarily bent and stepped into the slope of the ravine, clay sliding after him.

Karpo Petrovich had been glancing at the mound near the pear-tree. At times he thought he saw Dorya there and the glitter of buttons on the school overcoat. He knew that he had broken the rules by bringing the boy to the execution, and was uneasy. What if someone saw him? But everything went smoothly — the soldiers stood stolidly like a row of fence posts, the assistant prosecutor was compressing his lips and rolling his eyes like the offering at evening

service, the priest was fumbling with his pectoral cross and patting the silk flaps of his sleeves. Yakim was fussing too long, his watery eyes darting uneasy glances around him. The chief of police was giving unnecessary orders in a composed bass, just for the sake of saying something. Karpo Petrovich listened inattentively to the orders and endeavored to restrain his arm, which trembled from the elbow to his fingertips and beat a tattoo on his temple. If it would only end quicker! If only those few minutes were over.

The woman untied her kerchief for some reason, let it down on her shoulders and, shaking her black hair loose, began to move. Karpo Petrovich felt himself growing cold in the tense silence, and the thought — Is Dorya seeing it all? — raced through his head like a heavy wave. A picture arose before him of Susana listening to her son's account of the hanging.

The woman was already standing on the scaffold, the priest's cassock was fluttering in the wind, and the cross was raised high. Yakim put his hand on the noose, darted glances around him, heavy rifles clanged dully, as if the iron groaned, and a slanting sunbeam dipped the points of the raised swords in blood.

Just then something amazing and incredible occurred. It looked as if a rock had rolled down from the brink of the ravine. Round and rough in his cotton-padded overcoat, Dorya rushed to the scaffold, sweeping the clay with the skirts of his coat, losing his blue cap on the way, and opening wide his arms. He dashed against the woman and embraced her knees, shouting:

“Don't!”

Owing to the surprise and the shout which fell among them like an arrow, the people started in alarm and gazed at the steep slope of the ravine, as if some danger threatened them from that direction.

Dorya pressed harder against the woman's knees, hiding his cropped head in her black skirt, and his shoulders shook in childish sobs.

“Don't! Don't move!”

The woman stood for a minute — tall, but somehow withered and wretched all at once — then bent down and laid a thin hand on the child's head. Everybody froze in mute expectation — the woman, the boy, the soldiers and the officials.

The chief of police was the first to come to himself.

"Whose child is that? Take him away!"

He failed to recognize his own voice, but the rough shout made everyone feel relieved, and each man tried to show that he had not been scared.

Karpo Petrovich tried to rush forward to obey the order, but felt that he could not move. His knees were weak and gelid. He overcame his weakness and hurried up to the boy. His sword was in his way, striking against and hobbling his legs, which even without that hindrance he found it difficult to control.

It was no easy thing, however, to pull Dorya away. He resisted with his whole body, and in a frenzy kept repeating, amidst his sobs and hiding his head still further between the warm knees:

"I won't let you. I won't have it!"

The woman finally staggered away from the boy. Karpo Petrovich dragged his son from the scaffold. On the way, he picked up Dorya's cap, wiped it carefully, albeit unconsciously, with his sleeve and carried it off in his left hand.

"Dad, they mustn't... Dad, don't let them," cried Dorya persistently, but sensing that his entreaties had no effect on his father, he raised his fist and cried out, turning his head round: "Yakim, don't you dare! Why, you bastard, I'll..."

"S-s-sh!" hissed his father, and dragged him on.

Dorya managed to free himself when he was on the mound. He looked into the valley and saw a black figure, lit by the sun, swinging in the air. The figure twirled in one direction and stopped, then in the other direction and stopped once more.

Then Dorya fell silent, glared sharply at his father, and shouted hoarsely into his face:

"You brute! Bloater!"

He did not say anything else, for he was flung on the ground, knocked down by his father's fist.

\* \* \*

They were no longer in a festive mood as they returned home. The father's patent leather boots were coated with dust, the sleeve of his uniform coat was soiled with clay. There was a spot of green grass on the new school overcoat

near the knee, and one button was dangling pitifully on a black thread. The white horse, looking still whiter in the sunlight, hobbled along sadly on three legs. Karpo Petrovich was not looking at the mare. He sat, turned away from Dorya, and reflected dismally. He had wished to do Dorya good, but had met with ingratitude. His son's invective burned in him; he was touched to the quick by it. "You brute! Bloater!" And who had said it? His own flesh and blood.

Karpo Petrovich tried to think of other things. He endeavored to assure himself that there were more important things to meditate on. Now the governor was sure to dismiss him, and the principal would expel Dorya. His heart grew cold at these unpleasant thoughts. He imagined the governor's rage, his own entreaties, the principal's nasal voice saying, "We don't want dissenters here," and at the same time felt that something was bothering him, like a pebble in the shoe. There, beside him, hostility in his heart, sat his own child, who claimed the right to judge his father and his actions like a stranger. The child had to be answered, and this exasperated him. How could he, a father and a police officer whom grown-ups were afraid of, submit and show contriteness to a snot-nosed kid? Once again he took refuge in brooding over trifles like his forthcoming talk with his chiefs, Susana's inevitable tears, and even the horse's injured hoof — "He didn't shoe her, the bastard!" — thinking of anything so as to stifle and deaden the gnawing and irrepressible thoughts that irritated him like a sharp stone in the shoe.

Dorya, huddled in his heavy overcoat, was quietly shaking with internal sobs. The black figure was still swinging before his eyes — twirling in one direction, then in the other. "You wait," he thought bitterly about his father, "you'll feel it when I hang myself. I'll climb up into the attic, take off my belt, and nobody will see..." He felt sorry for himself. It might be better to kill Yakim. Yakim would come to their kitchen and, as usual, fall asleep on the bench. Then Dorya would quietly take a knife, sharpen it — or no, a hatchet would be better — and chop off Yakim's head right down to the shoulders.

A little bird was stubbornly flying over Dorya's head. It kept soaring up and swooping down with a chirrup and rapid beating of its tiny wings. He became interested in it, and watched its flight for a long time. Then suddenly he

recalled his birthday and the light hand that had tenderly stroked his head, and once more began to weep softly.

“You’ll feel it... ah, you’ll feel it when I hang myself.”

Through the warm tears, large and heavy, in which everything was dimmed, willow trees and telegraph poles rushed by indistinctly. They were lifted out of the ground and twirled lightly — first in one direction, then in the other.

*Capri*

*January, 1912*

## THE HORSES ARE NOT TO BLAME

"Savka, where's my Cologne water?"

Arkady Petrovich Malina leaned out of the window and shouted angrily at the back of his servant who was helping to unharness the foam-flecked horses from the carriage.

He stood perspiring, dressed only in his shirt, which was unbuttoned at the front, and waited impatiently while Savka ran across the courtyard in his blue lace-trimmed livery.

The Cologne water bottle stood on the dressing table, but Arkady Petrovich had not noticed it.

"Always putting things where one can't find them!" he muttered crossly, as Savka handed him the bottle. He took off his shirt and began to rub the Cologne water into his pale skin, grown yellowish with age.

"Ah!... That's refreshing!" He rubbed his chest, densely covered with fine silvery hairs, then rubbed Cologne into his armpits and sprinkled the cooling liquid on his bald head and thin withered hands, terminating in desiccated fingers. He took a clean shirt out of the dresser.

He was in a fine mood as always after a talk with the peasants of his village. He was pleased that he, an old general, considered a "red" and a dangerous man by his neighbors, had always remained true to himself. Even now, in these anxious times, he maintained, as always, that the land should belong to those who tilled it. "It's time we gave up our lordship," thought Arkady Petrovich, buttoning up his left cuff and beginning on the right one, as he recalled the jubilant excitement at the peasants' meeting when he had expounded the people's right to the land.

Such things always thrilled him, and after his talk his spirits rose and his appetite sharpened.

He was tucking the bottom of his shirt into his trousers, when the door was pushed open, and his favorite dog, the thoroughbred fox terrier Myshka, rushed at him.

"Where've you been, you rascal?" said Arkady Petrovich, bending over the dog. "Tell me where you've been, you rascal!" He lovingly tickled the terrier's neck and ears, while the dog wrinkled its nose, wagged its stump of a tail and

tried to lick his face. "Where have you been prowling, you scamp?"

The midday sun was shining brightly, and seen through the window was a sea of green fields — nine hundred *dessiatinas* of the landlord's estate, sloping down toward the ravine and rising once more like a wave.

Arkady Petrovich took a comb, parted his thin hair, combed his yellow-tipped moustache, and stood admiring his lofty, lean forehead and noble aristocratic face reflected in the dressing-table mirror.

His gray eyes, rather cold and already faded, were set on whites amidst a network of red veins, and this worried him. "I need an eyewash again." He noticed a pimple on his nose, got out the cold cream from his dressing-case, applied some, and powdered the spot.

Now for dinner!

He was as hungry as a twenty-year-old, and this made him joyously excited. What a stir there would be in the house when they heard that he was hungry! How his wife — his old, solicitous Sonya — would gasp, how Savka would fuss, and how they would all stare into his mouth! It was so seldom that he had an appetite.

But Savka did not come to announce dinner.

Arkady Petrovich pulled a drawer out of the dresser and took out a carefully folded gray woolen blouse à la Tolstoy.

A delectable tremor passed over his refreshed body as he thrust his arms into the sleeves. He felt very democratic, a friend of the people, who had nothing to fear. During the time that had elapsed since he left the ministry to settle in the village the peasants had come to love him. And no wonder! He took part in christenings, forgave peasants whose cattle damaged his fields, advised them in their troubles; they called him "father." He meditated pleasantly on this, and at the same time thought that there would be fresh mushrooms for dinner, for he had seen Palazhka carrying them from the kitchen garden in her skirt that morning.

Just then Savka thrust two white-gloved hands through the door and meekly announced that dinner was served.

Arkady Petrovich, wide as a bell in his blouse, entered the dining-room.

At once there was a scraping of chairs, and at one side, bending over to kiss his hand, stood his son Antosha, who was already growing bald, and on the other side his

daughter, the fair-haired Lida, a widow of twenty-five. They had not yet seen each other that day. Antosha had just come from the fields, and Lida had slept till noon.

Sofia Petrivna — Sonya — in a freshly laundered summer dress was already holding a silver ladle in her hand, a tureen of steaming borshch before her. The table was laid for nine.

Arkady Petrovich sat down in a wide chair at the head of the table and, slapping the seat of the chair next to him, cried out:

“Myshka, come here!”

The fox-terrier looked at him out of inflamed eyes, leaped on to his chair, and sat down on its stumpy tail.

“Where is Jean? Call Jean,” said Arkady Petrovich, addressing everybody and nobody in particular.

Just then, however, the door opened, and his blind brother-in-law Jean, a retired admiral, entered the room supported by “Torpedo Boat,” as he called his valet.

Tall, powerfully built like a mainsail, badly shaven, Jean tapped the floor with his rough stick, bending his knees with difficulty, stiff and rigid in his blindness.

He was seated after lengthy fussing, and “Torpedo Boat” took his place behind his master’s chair.

“Good day, Jean,” Arkady Petrovich greeted the blind man from the head of the table, “what dreams did you have?”

Everybody smiled at this joke, which was repeated every day, but Jean willingly responded, as if nothing was amiss, his unseeing eyes directed to a spot on the wall.

“I dreamed about a city. Not with those ugly boxes that you call houses. It was not a heap of dirt and rubbish, not a burrow of human misery... in a word, the dream wasn’t about what you call a city.”

He grimaced in disgust.

“I saw a beautiful unexcelled city. All that men have created in architecture, masterpieces of the past, present and future, beauty combined with utility, a temple worthy of man... It is only your descendants...”

“Jean, your borshch is getting cold.”

“Oh, pardon me, Sonya. Well, Torpedo Boat No. 17, tie on my napkin.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” responded Torpedo Boat No. 17 (he was the 17th valet in the service of Jean who often changed

servants). He had been holding the napkin in readiness for some time.

"I think that..." said Lida kindly, inclining her fair Madonna-like head.

"Have they begun to bring in the hay, Antosha?" asked Arkady Petrovich.

Antosha did not hear him. He was putting bones on a plate for his hound Neptune, who was sitting on a chair next to him, and all they could see of him was the top of his head with its thin hair.

Sofia Petrivna found it disagreeable to look at Jean, who was eating untidily, leaving pieces of beetroot in his moustache, and she turned to her son.

"Antosha, Father is asking you about the hay..."

"Oh, excuse me," Antosha raised his sun-tanned face and said ingratiatingly, "only ten carts instead of twelve. Artem made two trips and then left, said that his Ksenka had hurt her foot on an iron rake, and he had to call the surgeon. Lying of course... And Bondarishin took money in winter and now he is trying to get out of working."

Antosha was wet and red from the borshch and the cares of the farm. Drops of moisture densely covered his pale brow, and his eyes were bleary.

He knew everything that went on in the village. He was father to at least a dozen village children, and occasionally engaged in contests of strength with the strongest of the village lads, in spite of his officer's rank.

"They are all like that," Sofia Petrivna snorted angrily, and patted the dachshund who was sitting on a chair next to her, puffing out its brown chest importantly, as if wearing a waistcoat.

"You're unfair, my children," said Arkady Petrovich good-humoredly as he finished his borshch. "The peasant has his own needs and cares just like us sinners."

He was in fine spirits after today's meeting.

"Of course, it seems to me, that Father..."

Lida once more inclined her Madonna-like head, distending her wide, pale lips in a forced smile.

But this incensed Antosha. Lida was always butting in. She had listened to the twaddle of liberal students and was repeating nonsense like a gramophone record.

"The muzhik is a muzhik, whatever you may say... You feed him honey, and he..."

The retired admiral (the "battleship" as he called himself) sensed that such talk was dangerous.

And while Savka, wearing cotton gloves, expertly removed the plates of the masters and the dogs, he began to relate another dream.

He was at a concert. They were playing the music of new generations, unprecedented combinations of sounds, music that made Bach, Haydn and Beethoven seem like pygmies...

Antosha was bored. He had heard his uncle's dreams before, and preferred to give his attention to Neptune.

He cut off a small slice of bread and placed it on the hound's nose.

"Attention!"

Neptune sat still, screwing his eyes discontentedly.

There was silence in the dining-room for a minute.

"Take it!"

Only Lida stretched out her long bare neck and affectionately inclined her head toward her uncle.

But her Miltonchik, a shorn poodle with a boa on its neck like a lady's and a bare rump, scratched its mistress's hand with its paw, begging for food.

Lida turned to the dog, straightened its ribbon, which was the same shade of blue as her dress, and gave Miltonchik a thin slice of bread and butter.

Sofia Petrivna was waiting for the roast to be brought in.

"Real life is now more amazing than dreams," she said, shrugging her shoulders and raising her eyes to the ceiling.

Antosha joined in.

"True, true. Such things are going on around us that you can't tell where it will all end. They say that the peasants plowed up Baron Kleinberg's land yesterday. The whole village came out on the field with plows and chased away the Baron's plowmen."

"What's that? They've already taken the land, have they?"

"Phew!" Antosha whistled. "The Baron's estate is gone, and he himself has run away... Terrible things are happening everywhere, and you, Father, with your liberalism are making it worse."

"A — ah!" sighed the mistress of the house.

"Well, we won't have to run away," Arkady Petrovich laughed. "They won't hurt us. Isn't it true, Myshka, that nothing will happen to us? Isn't it true, doggie?" He

scratched the dog's head, and it opened its pink mouth, gently closed its teeth on his finger, and wagged its stump of a tail. "I don't see the need for concealing my opinions." He removed his finger from the dog's mouth and held it aside. "The point is that the peasants have the right to the land. We don't till the soil, they do. That's the point. I've been saying it for a long time..."

"Arkady! Laissez donc... le domestique écoute!" \*

Sofia Petrivna was so frightened that she spoke in a bass voice.

That did not help, however.

"You would like to lord it for ever, my dear. You've been mistress long enough. Let others have their turn. Don't be afraid, they won't take all the land, they'll leave us a bit... let's say, about five *dessiatinas*... I'll take to melon growing in my old age. I'll wear a broad-rimmed straw hat and let my beard grow to the waist. I'll plant the melons, you'll gather them, and Antosha will take them to town. Ha-hal!"

"What a time to joke!"

Sofia Petrivna stared angrily at the family and the four dogs sitting at the table, but only Antosha sympathized with her.

As a mark of protest he poured himself a glass of vodka, gulped it down and, leaning back in his chair, put his hands into the trouser pockets of his officer's uniform. Jean went on calmly chewing roast meat under the protection of his "Torpedo Boat." Savka tried to look as if he were not in the room, while Lida distended her lips and leaned over toward her father.

"I was sure that..."

But Antosha interrupted her.

"It's all very well to joke in the family circle, but why does Father preach such things to the peasants? They are in such a mood that we can expect something any minute."

"I'm not joking. It's time to get rid of prejudices. If you want to eat, you must work, my dear. That's the point!"

He was merry, developed his ideas further, and with increased appetite heaped salad on his plate, without even noticing poor forgotten Myshka, who kept looking at him, continuously licking his muzzle and wagging his tail.

"Lida in her fine gown, which becomes her so, will drive the cow out to the pasture early in the morning and milk her in the evening, tucking up her dress... Ha-hal!"

\* "Stop it, the servant is listening!" (Fr.)

"As for me, I..."

"Then that's settled..."

The sweet was served. Savka rattled spoons and thrust white-gloved hands between the masters' elbows and the dogs' heads. Jean got a spot of cream on his admiral's jacket, and the "Torpedo Boat" zealously cleaned it with a napkin. Sofia Petrivna's dachshund licked a plate, and Miltonchik, forgetting good manners, whined softly to call attention to himself.

"Arkady, shall I give you some more cream?"

"Do, ma chérie \*, I'm hungry today."

Indeed, he was feeling very buoyant after today's meeting, where he had resolutely argued that the people had the right to the land.

"Blessed is he who is merciful to animals..." quoted the taciturn Jean, and his stubbly face seemed to light up. "Torpedo Boat, give me a cigarette."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"Bravo, Jean, bravo!" exclaimed Arkady Petrovich, laughing. "It's true about animals and all the more so about people."

There, they were beginning to quote from the Gospel. Antosha could not stand it. He threw a crumpled handkerchief into a corner of the room, and Neptune leaped from the chair to fetch it. It was amusing to see the hound's ears flap as he ran, and the white cloth flutter under his cold, black nose.

"Here, Neptune!"

Antosha carefully removed the wet handkerchief from the dog's mouth.

But Neptune suddenly stiffened. He lifted his head and uttered two sharp barks. The other dogs grew excited, and Myshka dashed to the door and, sitting on its short tail, began yelping.

"Who's there? See who it is, Savka."

Savka returned and announced that the peasants had come.

"Ah, the peasants. Call them in."

"Arkady, hadn't you better finish your dinner first? They can wait."

Arkady Petrovich did not agree. He had already finished his dinner.

\* my dear

The peasants entered and stood in a crowd near the threshold. Among them was Bondarishin, the one who had taken money and did not go out that day to cart hay for the landlord.

“What do you say, men?”

The peasants shifted from foot to foot silently, white as sheep in their linen clothes, and stared at the shining dishes on the table at which the masters and dogs sat.

“What business have you come about?”

Red-headed Panas winked at gray-headed Marko, who in turn nudged Ivan with his elbow. Ivan, however, thought that his kinsman Bondarishin was the best speaker, and the others agreed and winked at the latter. Bondarishin did not dare to step out from the crowd, and bowed to the benevolent landlord from where he stood.

“We’ve come, master, to talk about the land.”

“I’m very glad. About what land?”

Bondarishin was silent and glanced at his kinsman. Ivan came to his aid:

“About the master’s, please kind sir...”

“Such times have come now, you know...” added Marko.

“Yes, and you, master, have said so yourself,” said Panas, who could no longer keep silent. Then Bondarishin concluded:

“And so, the community has decided... We’ll take the master’s land.”

“What?!”

Arkady Petrovich cried out in amazement.

He rose from the table and approached them, napkin in hand.

But the people were calm, as if they had come only for advice about ordinary affairs.

Gray-haired Marko also bowed low and mumbled humbly.

“We don’t want to hurt you, master... we want things to be peaceful, according to God’s will...”

“Be quiet, let Bondarishin speak,” said red-headed Panas, pulling the old man back.

The entire family — Sofia Petrivna, Antosha and Lida — had now left the table and were standing behind the master of the house.

Only blind Jean kept his seat, his unseeing eyes directed at the dogs, who were licking the plates.

Bondarishin continued just as humbly and with apparent indifference.

“God forbid... we’ll leave a bit of land for the master... for a vegetable garden, onions and such like for your soup... and so that you can play croquet...”

“Oh — oh!” Sofia Petrivna began to swoon, and while Lida gave her some water, Antosha thrust his hands into his trouser pockets and muttered through his clenched white teeth:

“The scoundrels!”

“We’ll do the right thing, because you’ve been good to us, master... we thank you, benevolent sir,” said Bondarishin bowing.

“Of course... ‘Twould be a sin to say otherwise... all the people call master ‘father’...” muttered voices from behind Bondarishin.

“Very well,” said Arkady Petrovich, subduing a sense of injury. “I won’t go back on my word... If the community has decided...”

There was ice in his voice.

“Arkady! What are you saying?!” exclaimed Sofia Petrivna, and turning to the peasants cried in agitation, “How dare you!”

Antosha tried to say something and blue veins dilated in his white forehead.

“So you see, master... we’ll have a holiday in two days, then the community will divide up the land. Meanwhile you can think it over where you want your patch of land, near the house or in the field.”

“Near the house, to be sure... the soil’s well manured here, and it’ll be handy...” Panas burst out with advice.

“The master will have time to decide during these two days... We don’t want to act all of a sudden, for you’ve been kind to us, thank you, master, and your lady too... She never forgot us.”

“Sure, she always gave us some medicine or ointment... Good-bye, masters.”

While the men were going out, all the family stood as if turned to stone, only Arkady Petrovich kept twisting his napkin.

Sofia Petrivna quickly recovered, however.

“Arkady, you’re out of your mind! Don’t you dare give away the land. Think of your children.”

“We can’t leave things as they are, measures must be taken,” Antosha stormed, and shoved Neptune so that the hound began to whine at his feet.

Only Lida still inclined her bare neck toward her father, and a smile distended her pale lips.

"Oh, let me alone," Arkady Petrovich cried out irritably. "Don't you understand that I can't act otherwise..."

He crumpled the napkin, threw it on the table, and ran out of the room.

Amidst the hubbub which followed Jean suddenly cried out in a bass voice:

"Well, Torpedo Boat, get up steam. It's time for us to go off on a long cruise..."

"Aye, aye, sir," Torpedo Boat rapped out.

The cruise had to be abandoned, however.

It was decided that a family council was in order now, and Jean was invited to take part in it.

To keep it from the servants, they filed out of the dining-room arm-in-arm with Jean, followed by all the dogs.

Only Myshka had vanished somewhere.

\* \* \*

Myshka found its master in the study. He stood at the French window leading to the veranda, watching a fly beat against the pane with an irritating buzzing. Myshka thrust its nose against his boot, but failed to draw his notice. Then the dog kept jumping up to get at the fly, but could not catch it, became tired and lay down on a cushion in the corner.

The white columns of the veranda and the flowerbeds beyond it could be seen through the window. The flowerbeds were aflame with poppies, and early gillyflowers were beginning to bloom. Arkady Petrovich looked at the flowerbeds every day, but only today did they arouse his interest. He opened the French window, and thrust his bald head into the sunlight. He went heavily down the steps and sat down near the flowers.

He had, however, already lost interest in them. His spirits were low, but he did not want to admit that he felt aggrieved. Of course, they have a right to the land, he had always maintained that view and had always expressed it, but that his land... Here are your good "neighborly" relations! He recalled all the advice and help he had given, his attendance at christenings and weddings, where he would give away the bride. Why, he had stood godfather

to one of this very Bondarishin's children. And now it was all forgotten.

"A patch of land for onions and for croquet... Ha-ha!"

The sun was burning his bald head. It was beating down pitilessly and uninterruptedly on the flowerbeds and on the fields stretching from knoll to knoll to the very horizon.

He returned home, put on his cap and, instead of lying down on the couch as was his custom after dinner, went out into the yard. The broad yard was covered with green grass. The coachman was busy with the carriage and Savka was loitering nearby. They were probably talking over the news. Arkady Petrovich wanted to order a horse saddled, but he somehow could not get up the courage to do so, feeling that he was no longer the owner here. He went past them silently to the gate and found himself in the field. The rye was already blooming. The yellow wands of blossom swayed gently on filaments along the ear, and the inconspicuous pollen shone golden in the sunlight. Cornflowers, like babies' eyes, peeped through the dense grass. Myshka suddenly ran ahead on the path, rustling through the rye. The fields rolled gradually into recessions, then rose on the slopes of mounds, as if the earth was languidly curving its back, and Arkady Petrovich, succumbing to the will of the green waves, tried not to think of anything and only peered into the mysterious depths of the thick growths of rye, only felt the yielding softness of the furrow under his feet. Some voices rose from the earth and said something, but he would not listen to them. He wanted quiet and privacy. But the further he walked into the field, the more distinct was the voice, soft and insidious, that rose from the earth to dispute with him. And here, he first felt with all his body that his land was speaking to him, that he had become interlocked with it, as with his wife, his son, his daughter; that the ground he was treading had been walked by his father and grandfather, that their voices had echoed over these fields, the voices of a long line of Malinas. That everything he was proud of and valued in himself — his intelligence, taste and culture, even his ideas — was fed by and grew out of these fields.

But Arkady Petrovich was already laughing at himself: "Ha-ha! That's my noble blood beginning to talk..."

He shook off all thoughts with an effort of will and wandered on. The rye field ended on the left at a soggy

gully and a meadow began, where cows and horses were grazing. Fedko, the herdsman, saw the landlord, took off his torn cap and stood still, barefoot with sacks across his shoulder.

“Put on your cap!” shouted Arkady Petrovich.

The herdsman did not make out what was said, and ran up to Arkady Petrovich.

“Your cap... put on your cap!”

The cows had scattered over the meadow, well-fed and fresh-looking like the grass. The horses lifted their heads toward their master and waited, tensing the sinews of their powerful necks, ready to spring and dash across the meadow on their strong slender legs.

He went up to his favorite, Vaska, and began to scratch the horse's neck, while Vaska leaned his head on the master's shoulder, dreamily softening the expression of his shy eyes. They stood like that for a long time in a kind of animal-like friendliness and both of them experienced pleasure—the one in scratching and the other in being scratched.

This will also be taken away, Arkady Petrovich thought bitterly and moved on.

He went across the fresh grass, moist from the bog, and the sun lit up with green fire the horse sorrel and thistle stems.

There was something luring and strange about his land today. It seemed like the face of a dead woman with whom he had lived all his life and who was now gone for ever. Flowers and herbs that he had never noticed before, the gentle contours of the land, the smell of grasses and earth, the warm, friendly spaces.

Tall willows rustled over a gully, and the patches of sky seen between their crowns were enamel blue. Going over a trench through marjoram and wormwood, he found himself once more on the path. The rye waved on one side, and on the other the steep yellow clay slope was aflame with a clump of red poppies. How beautiful! It seemed to him that it was the first time he had been in that spot. Perhaps, it was someone else's land. No, it was his own. Strange how little he knew his estate! Flies buzzed among the flowers. Myshka rummaged in the clay and sniffed at a hole. The path rose gradually and in places was lost amidst densely growing burdocks. Now the plain spread out wider before him, unfolding its splendor more and more, and when he

had climbed to the top of the mound, the fields, the green patch of low meadow and the distant strip of wood all lay beneath him in their full beauty. And here, standing in the middle of his land, he felt rather than thought that he would not give it up to anyone.

“I’ll shoot if they come!...”

The exclamation burst out so unexpectedly that he looked around him.

Was it he who cried out?

But around him were only fields rolling from mound to mound.

He felt ashamed. What a horrid thought! He took off his cap and wiped the sweat from his brow. Could he really sink to that? Obviously not. How could he act against himself, against all his beliefs, which he had never concealed from anyone? There were so few people like him, what did they signify in the grand process of life? A few dry leaves on the green raiment of spring. Of course, he could not live on a few rows of onions, he would have to seek employment in his old age. Two little rooms in the suburb, his wife cooking their meals herself. He would go marketing with a basket. Heat up the samovar, Arkady. Really, could he do it? Well, he would have to learn. Antosha and Lida would earn their bread, they were young. And you, Myshka, will have to do without cream and tasty bones...

Foolish Myshka seemed glad at the prospect. He leaped on his leg and dirtied his trousers with earth. But what did the trousers matter! He was even pleased to think of himself as poor, forgotten, effaced by the grand process. He was a martyr and willingly carried his cross... He felt his body pleasantly perspiring, his breath was clean and light, and self-pity was arousing his appetite. So young and healthy an appetite was simply wonderful. If only they had guessed to stew the mushrooms for supper the way he liked them — whole, with a lot of cream and garnished with the green tops of young onions... He should have told Motrya... The devil take it! Things always upset him, made his blood boil. But what did it really amount to? Some fanciful boasts and foolish threats. They would vanish as soon as he talked to the village. Everything would remain as it had been up to now — quiet and peaceful. That anyone should be so bold as to take away the land from him... From him! Ha-ha!

“Myshka, avanti!”

However, at home they were not thinking of serving supper.

Sofia Petrivna was waiting for him on the doorstep, and she attacked before he even had time to take off his cap.

"Arkady, you have children!"

There were dark rings under her eyes.

"Well, so I have, my dear."

"It's no time for joking now. You must go to the governor."

Arkady Petrovich shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

"You must ask him to send Cossacks."

"Excuse me, Sonya, you're talking nonsense."

"What else! Wait till the peasants take the land?"

"Well, let them take it. The land is theirs by right."

"You've gone mad with your liberal ideas. If you hold back, I'll summon them myself."

"I won't stand for Cossacks at my place."

"You can't do without them."

"I'll make a scandal... I don't know what I'll do. I'll go to prison — to Siberia."

"Arkady, darling..."

"I'll go to prison, but I won't allow..."

"Be sensible, Arkady."

But he would not be sensible. He was as noisy as a samovar about to boil over. He raged, red and sweaty, stamped his feet and waved his arms, as if it was not his wife but the abhorrent Cossacks that stood before him.

The talk led to nothing, it only spoiled his supper. All the more so that they had forgotten to stew the mushrooms.

"And where is Antosha?"

Antosha was not present at supper.

Sofia Petrivna's confusion, the absurdity of her explanation, and the way Lida tensed her lips told Arkady Petrovich that something was being kept from him.

But he said nothing.

The next day Arkady Petrovich awoke in a bad mood. He sensed disrespect to himself when Savka, bringing his water, let the pitcher down with a bang on the washstand and slammed the door going out.

"The scamp knows that the muzhiks will take the land tomorrow, and there's no use being polite to a pauper."

He breakfasted without appetite and went about the farm. He walked round the garden, the barn, now locked,

near which Motrya, her skirt tucked up, was feeding the geese, and near the sties, empty in the daytime, from the deep, black openings from which rose an acrid smell.

The coachman was washing the carriage in the courtyard.

Then he looked into the stable. The horses were stamping and champing their feed. A large pile of old manure was lying at the door, and near it a barrel of water stood on a cart, the shafts of which were lowered on to the grass.

"Ferapont, shovel the manure behind the stable right away. Piling it up before the door for display!"

The coachman straightened up and stood still, holding a truss of straw in his red hands.

"Very well, master."

"It doesn't really mean anything," said Arkady Petrovich to himself, "but he said it."

Bondarishin, trudging along past the gate of the yard, saw the master and bowed.

"Ah, he hardly lifted his hat," thought Arkady Petrovich angrily. "What am I to them now? They don't need me any more." He gazed after Bondarishin and muttered through clenched teeth: "Impudent brute!"

The blind admiral, supported by his "Torpedo Boat," descended the steps and went for their daily "sail." They passed by taking no notice of Arkady Petrovich.

And that one's acting differently today, Arkady Petrovich was thinking about "Torpedo Boat." The rogue is glad that there won't be masters any more.

He walked to the field without any particular aim. Clouds appeared. Just when they are carting hay! he thought with alarm. Large drops were already falling on his cap, hands and face. The rye became fragrant. He thought he should go back, but did not. All at once sheets of warm rain beat down on the fields in shadows of blue-gray cloud, but a rainbow quickly appeared nearby, and the shower was over. Heavy drops hung swaying on the ears of grain, and a light mist rose over the fields. Arkady Petrovich also began to steam, but he did not rejoice, for now he felt he would rather have clouds and rain than sunshine. The devil take the hay, let it rot!

Again aimlessly, he returned to the yard. The coachman was still fussing with the carriage. The manure was still piled up in front of the stable, black and steaming after the rain.

Arkady Petrovich quivered with rage.

"Ferapont, what did I tell you? Do I have to repeat it several dozen times? Get going on the manure immediately!"

He even picked up a stick and, shaking it, pointed to the stable, until the astonished coachman lazily took up the pitchfork.

"He did that on purpose," said Arkady Petrovich to himself. "What will happen tomorrow we'll see, but today I'm still master."

He calmed down somewhat in his study, took off his coat and lay down on the couch in his shirt.

"It's all nonsense! Is it worth getting excited over? As if it matters where manure is piled up."

He was a bit ashamed about Ferapont. He lay silent for a while with his eyes closed.

"Well, what now?"

He opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling. There was no answer.

Through the venetian blind poured a broad stream of sunlight, gray with swirling dust particles. The clatter of dishes resounded in the dining-room. They were laying the table. Arkady Petrovich listened involuntarily to the tapping of heels, the scraping of chairs and the ring of glassware. Everything was as always, life moved on at its accustomed, ordinary pace, and it was strange to think that a change would come. However, it had to come. This evoked inconsistency in his mood. He recalled all sorts of alarming trifles — Savka's insolent expression, Ferapont's stubbornness, the disrespect of the villagers he had met, and he wished that this unknown "tomorrow" would come at last and let the crucial and dangerous play begin. How would he act tomorrow? Would he shoot and defend himself, or would he calmly give up the land to the peasants? He did not know. And the fact that he still did not know this, in spite of all theories, made the inevitable tomorrow all the more interesting.

He looked at his watch.

"Ten minutes to eleven," he said aloud. "That means" — he thought awhile — "there are less than twenty-four hours left."

Tomorrow... Suddenly he imagined tomorrow morning... The whole village crowding noisily into the yard, the women screeching shrilly, quarrelling over the land. The children

would begin to look through the windows and climb over the porch, as if the house was theirs.

He took out his watch once more. Four minutes had passed.

He rose, groaning, from the couch on his aching old legs and walked over to the window.

The grain fields waved in the wind up to the very horizon, indifferent who owned them, accustomed in all times only to peasant hands.

Antosha was not present at dinner.

Arkady Petrovich was once more in his study. Once more his "noble blood" spoke up, his mind talked, conscience gave utterance, each in his own way, and underneath it all smouldered the poignant curiosity as to what would happen and how. Filling the room with cigar smoke, treading the floor in a looped track, saturating the air with his thoughts, he still felt that the next day was lodged within him, like a bullet which cannot be reached without cutting into the body.

Through the yard dashed Antosha, dust-covered on a foam-flecked horse, and he was heard coming into Sofia Petrivna's room, while some lunch was being prepared for him in the dining-room.

"There's not much time left—the night and a few hours," thought Arkady Petrovich looking at his watch.

The shadows grew longer. The sun was about to set behind the stable. The herdsman drove the cattle in from the meadow. The cows sedately carried into the pen their bare, pink udders and sharp horns. The foals were bounding in the green yard.

Will all this really cease to be mine? Arkady Petrovich thought sadly, and suddenly heard Lida speaking.

"Don't worry, Father, you see..."

"What's up?" said he, turning quickly to his daughter.

She stood at the door with her pale Madonna face and her lips distended in sorrow.

"No need to worry overmuch... the Cossacks have come..."

"What... Cossacks?!"

"The governor sent them. They are in the yard."

Arkady Petrovich reeled. The blood rushed to his face, even his bald head became red, and against this fiery background his yellowish moustache seemed white, and his angry eyes, gray and faded, were like two frozen lakes.

"What's that? I didn't ask for them... Ah, I see, it's a

conspiracy against me... The devil! I won't permit it. Call Antosha..."

He even lifted his hand, the dry, white hand of a nobleman, as if about to beat Antosha.

"I think..." said Lida, frightened and disconcerted.

She wanted to say something that would calm her father, but he ran about like a provoked gamecock that beats his wings and stretches out his neck before beginning the fight.

"Call Antosha!"

Dust-covered and perspiring, Antosha stood at the door on legs aching from his long ride. His alarmed mother hid behind his back.

"Did you summon the Cossacks?"

"I or someone else, what's the difference, Father?" said Antosha soothingly, standing with legs astride in his officer's breeches.

"Aha! No difference... Very well, I'll show you. I'll chase them away quick... Let me go!" he shouted, although no one was holding him, and ran about the room as if he had lost his reason altogether.

"Arkady, calm down... Arkady," Sofia Petrivna entreated him with her arms stretched across the doorway. "Don't you see it's night and the men have ridden such a long way, are tired and hungry, the peasants in the village won't let them into their houses. How can you?"

"What do I care for the men... Nice men! Cossacks at my place. Let me out at once."

"But, Father, I think..." Lida began.

"It's easy to chase them away," said Antosha, interrupting Lida, "only what will come of it? They can't get pasture in the village now, and the peasants won't give them fodder willingly. They'll have to plunder. If you want that to happen, chase them away."

"Ah, the poor horses," Lida sighed, "are they to blame?"

"What did you say?" Arkady Petrovich stopped before Lida, his eyebrows raised.

"I said, Father, that the horses aren't to blame."

"You can let them stay overnight under the shed near the stable," said Antosha.

"And give them some fodder. It won't ruin us," added Sofia Petrivna.

"Keep your advice to yourself, I don't need it," said Arkady Petrovich rushing about the room and clutching his

head, "I know that the horses are not to blame." He stopped before his daughter. "You spoke the truth there. The horses have nothing to do with it. Well, and what of it?"

He was no longer insistent, however, he seemed to shrink. The blood had drained from his face, which was now of the same color as his moustache, the eyes had lost the hardness of cold ice, and there was a look of submission and a sense of guilt in the look he now raised to his son.

He hesitated a while and unexpectedly asked:

"Have we got enough feed?"

"I'll see to it. And we have fresh hay."

Without waiting any longer Antosha vanished into the entrance hall.

"Cossacks, of all the...," said Arkady Petrovich shrugging his shoulders, and began striding up and down the room.

"I and the Cossacks! Who would have believed it?"

His movements were not as tense as they had been at first.

His rage had burst out like an ocean wave, rising up in green fury, had then subsided and, creeping up the sand, had left only froth behind it.

Through the open door he heard the neighing of hungry horses coming into the yard and the clanking of the Cossacks' arms.

\* \* \*

The "terrible day" did not begin terribly at all. Sparrows quarrelled and chirruped, the sun rose so merrily that the windows, walls and even the bed Arkady Petrovich slept in were smiling. Without waiting to dress, he ran to the window. Warm air softly blew against his chest, and his eyes rested on a long row of shiny horses' rumps.

Sturdy Cossacks in colored shirts were looking after their horses and the sunlight played on their arms, bared to the elbows, on their tanned necks, on the water spilled around them.

He looked at the sun, at his fields, at the mass of horses' and Cossacks' legs that stamped the ground with equal force; he absorbed the chirping of the birds, the snorting of the horses, the coarse language of the soldiers, and suddenly felt that he was hungry.

“Savka,” his voice echoed throughout the house, “bring my coffee.” He slipped back into bed to rest his old body a bit.

When Savka brought the coffee, he looked affectionately at the aromatic beverage, smelled the still warm bread, and reprimanded Savka because the cream was too thin. Myshka slept soundly, rolled up into a ball at the foot of his bed.

*Capri*  
*March, 1912*

## IN PRAISE OF LIFE

Slightly more than a year has passed since an earthquake turned blossoming Messina into a heap of stone. It was spring, the sea was as calm and blue as the sky. The sun was pouring itself over the orange orchards spread across the hills and, looking from the boat at the grey corpse of the city, I couldn't visualize that terrible night when the earth, in its formidable anger, brushed this magnificent city off its surface, as easily as a dog shakes off water after climbing out of a river.

Setting my feet ashore, I, expecting to meet the solitude and coolness of a large cemetery, was greatly surprised when I saw a donkey with full saddlebags on his back. He carefully stepped over the cobbles of the washed-out pavement, keeping in the cool shadows cast by the ruined walls of coastline buildings.

A boy ran after the donkey and exclaimed with a purely Sicilian passion, "*Cipolla! Cipolla!...*" \*

To whom was he calling? To whom did he want to sell? Maybe, to those stones which were once melted into one solid wall and had now again begun living their separate lives?

People, however, appeared. Unexpectedly, dark figures flowed from the streets, from the disorderly heaps of stone. Their steps were muffled by the hot soil. People went alone and in groups. There appeared some ladies in long dark veils, with dead and motionless faces. There appeared sombre workers whose sternness seemed to be enhanced by their dark suits and crêpe neckties. A thin iron lamppost bent over them in an unnatural way, as if examining them from above with its glassy eye. On one side, the sea was gently splashing and, on the other, hung the cracked walls of palaces, without roofs and windows, with their doors half blocked with crushed stone. And again moved dark men and quiet women, as if nuns, as if guests coming to bid their last farewell at someone's funeral. The farther I proceeded, the more often I met these people, swept with grief, the more expressively I felt ill at ease. I had to

\* Onion (*Italian*)

circumvent entire heaps of crushed stone, rafters and plaster piled up in the streets. I had to jump over fissures on the ground which resembled greedily opened mouths. I climbed over marble columns and peered into windows from which emptiness stared back at me. And, again, a dark figure quietly flowed from beyond the corner and its silent eyes met mine. At that point, I finally understood what had made me ill at ease. It was the eyes! Those horrible, dark, fearful eyes encompassed within themselves the inferno of that Christmas night \* and couldn't see anything else. The sun may shine, the sea and the sky may display their blue, joy may laugh, but those eyes, wide open and deadly glowing in their enlarged sockets, would turn their glance inside themselves and would insanely scrutinize the unsteady walls, the fire and the corpses of dear ones. It occurred to me that, if they were photographed, the film would show not human eyes, but a picture of the ruins.

The side streets were already cleaned up a little. Yet, the downfallen facade walls on both sides created a rough layer of compressed rafters, mattresses, books, plaster, metal beds and human bodies. In those places where the walls were still standing, they barely did so. The blue sky peered through their wide cracks. At times, lonesome stairs could be seen through broken doors. These stairs, on which nobody would ever step, led God knows where. In a five-storied building reaching high into the sky, only the front wall had fallen and the insides of the house were exposed, as if on stage. Bright wallpaper, a metal bed with a towel hanging from its side, a photo on the wall, the image of the Mother of God at the head of the bed — all this privacy of another man's home seemed to still retain the warmth of human hands. This impressed me more than the dead grey ruins.

I knew that the city was a cemetery, that something near 40,000 bodies had not yet been dug out from under the ruins. I knew that in this compressed mass which surrounded me, suffocated children, women and men lay in different positions.

The excavations continued. A group of workers would bend down and then straighten themselves over the heap of crushed stone, their pickaxes and crow-bars regularly rising. A policeman, his cloak on his shoulders, was sitting,

\* Messina was ruined on Christmas — *Author*

bent down, somewhere high on the wall. His cap was glistening in the sun. Suddenly, he rose to his feet, raised his hand to his cap in salute and stood still in this posture of respect. I came closer. The workers discovered a woman's nightshirt under the rafters. Then they pulled out the legs and put them into a copper basin. The legs were followed by the waist, stomach and chest. All this was also put into the basin. I left the place. I wanted to look at the sky. All of a sudden, I saw similar groups of workers scattered over the ruins above and below. Every now and then, the policeman would stand up and raise his hand to his cap.

The square in front of a cathedral was so crowded that it was hard to turn around. The entire square was littered with the old marble of the church, with fragments of the pilasters and the ornamentation of the embrasures. Mosaic gods, their heads or half their faces missing, were scattered about in the dust below one's feet. An ancient fountain had suffered little damage but it had gone dry that night, as if it had shed all its tears over others' grief. The dry mouths of the Tritons were dying from thirst.

"Is *signore* examining our ruins?"

I turned around. In front of me stood a dark gentleman with a pale face, obviously quite prosperous only recently. The yellow sacks under his eyes and on his cheeks hung as loosely and uselessly as his clothing — wide and shabby, as if somebody else's. His left hand shyly clutched at a bunch of onions. My eyes met his. Oh, again those eyes!

"Yes, *signore*, this is what is left of our beautiful city. Those who hadn't heard, cannot imagine that infernal night. There was such shooting, such a cannonade, as if all the forces of the heavens, the earth and the sea had simultaneously fired their cannons. I still have that rumble in my ears... I was rich and happy, *signore*. I had a wife, four children and a banking office. And now my family and entire fortune are lying under crushed stone and here's what I have to feed myself on!..."

And with the affected gesture of a real Sicilian, he raised his hand and shook the onions so that their tops rose over the grey ruins and displayed their green against the blue sky.

"My buildings stood not far from here. Maybe, *signore* wants to take a look?"

A grim crease encircled his mouth.

I thanked him, setting off further.

The narrow streets were deserted and lonely as a corridor. To the left and to the right stretched an unending compressed mass of wood, bricks, paper, clothes, lamps, furniture and human bodies. It seemed that all the miseries which had lived in those human habitations had piled up barricades not to let in help. Demolished walls, ready to fall at any moment, perched over one's head. Below, in the shadow cast by the ruins, a woman with dark uncovered hair was sitting, dressed all in black. A child was playing on her knees. Her sad face and faded eyes made my hand reach for my purse, but the woman didn't respond to my movement. She only shook her head in denial. Then I realized that she was one of those who were used to giving and hadn't yet learned to take.

Once in a while, a worker, arms in his pockets, passed by me. His face with its thin lips bore disgust for a land which couldn't cherish the fruits of human labor. Through broken windows, emptiness stared back at me. I saw neglected curtains covered with cobwebs, or a lamp hanging from a cracked ceiling. I proceeded farther.

Now my attention was occupied by the seemingly frozen figure of an old man whose lonely dark silhouette was projected against the ruins. I saw his stooping back, his old shabby top hat and his arms folded across his knees. Only the tip of his white beard shone against his dark chest under his top hat. All his buttons were tightly fastened. Suddenly, as I was looking at that motionless blot of sorrow and despair, the earth under my feet produced a muffled rumble and waved like the back of a cow trying to rise to her feet. It was the earthquake — this I understood at once. Numb as I was, I stood and watched how the walls had been set in motion as if alive, how they rocked over my head. While I was standing and waiting for them to fall on me, my entire life instantly ran before my eyes and — a strange thing — I couldn't take my eyes off that grim figure of the old man. In a minute, the earth became calm. The walls, brushing off only small pebbles, again became firm, but the bent old man didn't even raise his head. His top hat bent down in the same manner, covering half his beard. His was stooping and his hands motionlessly rested on his dark knees.

I have no idea how I appeared in S. Martino Street. There were people here and some kind of life. They had already managed to put up small wooden kiosks which looked like

macaroni crates, and sold cards for the *forrestieri* \*, bread and fruits. Sometimes, an unpleasant impression was yielded by a shop window where new black velvet was covered by watches, broaches, pins and rings. All this was worn and old, with marks left by the hands of the owner, now dead. That faded metal hid, in itself, many stories.

In one place, a crowd had gathered, predominantly women. They surrounded a wagon like a dark swarm of bees. A well-built gentleman stood on the wagon, high above the crowd. From afar, I noticed his white shirt front, a tailcoat and red whiskers on his ministerial face. He was saying something to the crowd. He raised his hands to the sky, stretched them toward the people and his voice buzzed with confidence and inspiration. I decided that he was a preacher, that he was speaking about the vanity of everything living before the harsh face of nature, before inexorable death. I came closer to the crowd.

It astonished me when I saw that the whole front of the wagon was occupied by beautiful vials with golden labels and that it was those same sparkling vials which the plump gentleman raised to the sky over the crowd.

"*Signori e signorine!*" he let out from his chest, or maybe from his heart, "*Signori e signorine!* Here you see one of the real miracles of modern cosmetics. This lotion is the best thing to protect your youthfulness and beauty. Before sleep, rub a thin layer of it onto your face and you wake up fresh as a rose covered with dew... Each vial for only four *soldi*..." \*\*

He thrust the vials into the hands of the women, took a new vial and lifted it over the crowd, into the glittering southern sun.

"*Signori e signorine!* Youth and beauty for only four *soldi*..."

And the dark women, covered with the crêpe of sorrow, crowded around the wagon. Their horribly, deadly glowing eyes which couldn't be contained in their sockets, which reflected the unsteady walls, the fire and the corpses of their close ones, those eyes which could produce a photograph of the catastrophe — those eyes closely followed each movement of the red-haired charlatan. The ears of the women, still filled with the thunder of that infernal

\* That's how foreigners are called in Italy — *Author*

\*\* *Soldo* — a small coin, nearly 2 kopecks — *Author*

night and the shrieks of death, were following this inspired speech.

*“Signori e signorine!... Here’s one of the real miracles... Youth and beauty for only four soldi...”*

I turned and looked into the distance. Somewhere afar, the walls of the most dangerous houses were being pulled down, rumbling and producing clouds of dust. Here and there amidst the ruins and grey crushed stone, a policeman stood and raised his hand to his cap in respect for the dead. But it no longer impressed me. Suddenly, I saw green mountains in the distance with the merry sunshine pouring itself over them. I saw orange orchards and the boundless silky vastness of the blue sea and, over this cemetery, my soul sang in praise of life.

*Chernihiv  
May, 1912*

**МИХАИЛ МИХАЙЛОВИЧ КОЦЮБИНСКИЙ**

**ЃATA MORGANA  
И ДРУГИЕ ПРОИЗВЕДЕНИЯ**

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