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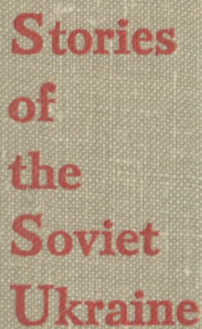

Stories of the Soviet Ukraine

STORIES OF THE SOVIET UKRAINE

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Progress Publishers
Moscow

CONTENTS

Introduction 5

A. Dovzhenko. THE ENCHANTED DESNA 11

A WILL TO LIVE 36

A. Golovko. THE RED KERCHIEF 45

O. Gonchar. SUNFLOWERS 65

A MAN IN THE STEPPE 82

Y. Gustalo. BATHED IN LOVAGE 95

IN THE FIELDS 105

R. Ivanichuk. NO CLAIM TO KINSHIP 115

THE TEDDY BEAR 121

I. Lye. A MAN OF STRONG WILL 130

P. Panch. TIKHON'S LETTER 147

L. Pervomaisky. THE STORY OF MANKIND 154

I. Senchenko. ONE'S NATIVE LAND 165

A. Sizonenko. WATERMELONS 178

THE OLD MAN 182

M. Stelmakh. NEW YEAR'S EVE 193

M. Tomchanii. THE STORK 205

G. Tiutiunnik. THE FIRST BLOSSOM 212

SPRING MINT 217

O. Vishnya. OPEN SEASON 224

THE BEAR 228

Y. Yanovsky. A QUESTION OF DYNASTY 233

Y. Zbanatsky. THE STORM 242

S. Zhurakhovich. THE HUNDREDTH DAY OF THE WAR 253

THE SINNER AND THE RIGHTEOUS WOMAN 269

P. Zagrebelny. THE TEACHER 279

Biographical Notes 293

Translated from the Russian

Designed by V. Ilyuschenko

УКРАИНА РАССКАЗЫВАЕТ

Рассказы писателей советской Украины

На английском языке

First printing 1970

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INTRODUCTION

The Ukraine is associated in one's mind with rich and fertile soil, the Black Sea in the south and the towering Carpathian Mountains in the west. The Ukraine is so beautiful it virtually breathes poetry and music.

Our literature began with poetry, with songs that were sung on the ancient roads of the Ukraine and in its town squares. When literary critics of today turn back to the sources of Ukrainian folklore they recall the nameless bards of yore who were both authors and composers, theirs was a very special kind of literature, created by a very special kind of people.

There are few other peoples whose history is so complex and tragic as that of the Ukrainian people. Invaders marched across it from the east and from the west, cities were devastated, tens of thousands of people were killed, manuscripts and the priceless cultural treasures perished and it seemed that everything was lost forever. In the past war against nazim close to five million citizens of my Republic were killed, cities were destroyed, cathedrals and manuscript dating back to the beginning of our era were turned to ashes. There were many invaders; the latest of these were not as romantic as the Mongolian khan who, six centuries ago, forbade his army to burn Kiev, which it had conquered in bloody battle, for the beauty of the city astounded this conqueror who had long since forgotten the meaning of kindness.

Each time the towns and villages, the people and libraries were destroyed, the world was informed of the

extinction of my people, and this was repeated many times over.

It was not by coincidence that our great writers always combined talent and courage, for through the centuries our culture survived despite the oppressors; and nearly always the works of Ukrainian writers, dating back to the times of the Chronicles, were perhaps more a political manifestation than merely literary pieces. One cannot but admire the spirit of a people who as recently as fifty odd years ago was ruled by a tsarist edict that outlawed the Ukrainian language, and yet gave the world such bright talents as the writers Ivan Franko, Lesya Ukrainka, Kotsubinsky and Stefanik.

Half a century before them Taras Shevchenko died, but he is still revered throughout the world as one of mankind's great freedom fighters. Shevchenko was a poet, an artist and engraver. He reshaped the literature and the soul of his people. One will have difficulty in finding another such example of art so closely bound up with the fate of a people. There are many monuments of Shevchenko throughout the Ukraine, there are also monuments to this great poet across the seas, in the centre of Washington, D.C., near Toronto, and in Winnipeg. His famous "Kobzar" has seen printings of tens of millions of copies.

I have spoken of the past, because it is impossible to speak of modern Ukrainian literature without referring to its sources, to its traditions, most of which are still such a vital part of the present. In olden times our minstrels were usually wounded soldiers, men who had known the glory of battle and who still carried on the battle for their Motherland, no longer with the sword, but with their ballads. Both strove for the same goal: the defence of their people. More often than not their words were deadlier than the sword, for while one might escape from the latter, the former sought out its victims everywhere. Words that were Truth. From time immemorial the writer was the warrior's equal. It holds true today, too.

Many Ukrainian writers have gained world fame in the past years. Each book which has been translated into foreign languages—by Gonchar, Stelmakh, Korneichuk, Tychina and Rylsky—has contributed, as it were, a page to the story of our people, a part of the overall picture, with characters that live and breathe today. The books of our modern writers are the subject of much heated discussion; withal, there is the inherent desire of each to understand life and try to improve it.

Books and literary magazines in Ukrainian are published in printings of from 5 to 150 thousand copies, which means millions of books annually. Usually the entire printing of a good book is sold out within the first few days. Readers see in the authors their allies in their striving for justice; this union is bound by blood shed in the war and is invincible.

Two out of every three Ukrainian writers left for active service in the very first days of the Great Patriotic War. Not all of them worked on newspapers, either. The names of those who did not return from the fronts are engraved in marble on a wall of the Kiev Writers' Club. Most of them were killed in battle.

Ukrainian literature never was a field of pure entertainment, it was invariably the voice of the people's suffering; the feeling of self-respect which it engendered is alive in our people.

The history of cultures and the history of peoples are identical; a better knowledge of either enriches us, for it is well to know the river bed before setting off on an expedition down a river.

This collection includes two stories by Oles Gonchar. He has probably written the best books on the war that have appeared in Ukrainian. At the age of thirty he completed his trilogy "The Standard-Bearers", which brought him immediate fame. There followed novels "Tronka" and "The Cathedral", and short novels and screen stories. In most of these, too, the war rises up again with

its fire and suffering. The three "For Valour" medals which Sergeant Gonchar was awarded in the course of the war were not simply mementoes of past battles, they were living proof that volunteer Gonchar had fought honourably and well.

There is a story by Hero of the Soviet Union Yuri Zbanatsky who, as Pavlo Zagrebelny, a former inmate of a nazi death camp, began writing during the war.

The first two stories in the collection are by Alexander Dovzhenko. Here is a man who travelled the width and breadth of our land of sunshine, who wrote so much about the Ukraine and its people, who produced such magnificent films about it. Dovzhenko, our great writer and outstanding film director and screen writer, is well known to the cultural world.

In speaking of Ukrainian writers of today one must stress yet again that World War Two has left its imprint on every one of us. The Ukraine was occupied by the nazis. Its ancient cities were razed, millions were killed. Kiev, capital of the Ukrainian Republic, suffered losses greater than the entire US Army did during the war. Many are surprised by my people's bitter memory for these facts, for the names of all those who were killed and for all the war-torn, ruined streets. But it is a good kind of memory to have. We speak often of the past war, because I know there is not a single person in the Ukraine who does not abhor the very thought of a new world holocaust.

It has become an accepted fact that we judge of the past not simply by the works of historians, no matter how well-documented, but, ever more often, by literature, which is a mirror of its epoch. In our minds the Civil War in the Ukraine, and this holds true even for those who participated in it, is inseparable from the fictional heroes created by Yuri Yanovsky, Andrei Golovko and Leonid Pervomaisky. In speaking of the 20s and 30s we refer again and again to the works of Pyotr Panch, Ivan Lye

and Mikhail Stelmakh, while the years of the Patriotic War have been immortalised by Dovzhenko, Gonchar and Zbanatsky.

The short stories of the younger writers are equally compelling. Mastery comes with years and experience. I do not wish to stress the age factor, since history has always divided writers into the good and the bad, the talented and the hacks, rather than the old and the young. However, there is such a thing as a school of writing, and one can clearly map the ties that stretch over the past fifty or sixty years to bind Stefanik, Kotsubinsky and Franko with the writers of today.

One can never confuse the colourful, out-going characters created by Roman Ivanichuk, an inhabitant of the Carpathian Mountains, with the solid citizens of Mikhailo Stelmakh's books; nor the characters of Ivan Senchenko of the Donetsk Region, a major industrial area, with those of the wonderful humourist Ostap Vishnya. Grigor Tiutiunnik, born and raised in a village, whose stories are about village life today, is quite unlike Yevgen Gutsalo, a sensitive writer and keen observer of human nature. Oles Gonchar and Semyon Zhurakhovich approach the same theme from very different angles.

All this is only natural, but it serves to illustrate my point, namely, that creative affinity does not mean creative monotony, and writers who hold the same beliefs have very distinct ways of putting their thoughts and ideas into words.

The eldest author represented in this collection is nearly fifty years older than the youngest. This will give the reader some grasp of the fifty years which have marked the revolutionary development of Ukrainian literature.

If you have never visited our Republic this book will enable you to travel across the ancient roads of the Soviet Ukraine and have a close look at your companions on the way. For peoples, as the individuals who make up each people, cannot be friends if they do not know each other.

I sincerely hope that these stories will bridge the distance between us, bringing us closer together.

The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic is one of the oldest and largest nations of Europe, the second largest, both in population and industrial potential, of all the Soviet Republics. The Ukraine speaks to you here of its present and its past. Listen to what it has to say.

Vitaly Korotich,

Ukrainian poet and critic

Alexander Dovzhenko

THE ENCHANTED DESNA

How gay it was in our garden! You step down from the porch and look around at the wild greenery! How the garden bloomed in spring! And what happened in the early summer: the cucumber vines blossomed, the pumpkin vines blossomed, potato plants blossomed; raspberries, currants, tobacco and beans, all blossomed and the sunflowers, poppies, peas and dill! There was nothing our indefatigable mother didn't plant in that garden!

"I love nothing more in the world than to plant something in the earth so that it can grow. When little shoots climb out of the ground—that's my joy," she loved to repeat to us.

The garden was so filled with plants that by the middle of the summer they could no longer fit in it. Then they would crawl onto one another, spread over the shed, climb onto the eaves and over the fence. The pumpkins dangled from the fence right into the street.

Red and white raspberries, cherries, pears that are so sweet you eat till you're ready to burst! All day long your stomach feels like a drum.

I remember too, we grew lots of tobacco, through which we little ones walked as in a forest, and where we earned our first blisters.

Along the fence, behind the old barn, big currant and elder bushes grew, and some other

unknown plants. We seldom went there. It was dark there even in the afternoon, and we were afraid of vipers although we had never actually seen one.

In the garden in front of the house there were jasmine, dahlias, nasturtiums and hollyhocks. Behind the house, near the cherry trees, overgrown with wormwood, was an old cellar with an open door, that always smelled of mould. There in the cellar toads jumped at dusk. There were probably vipers there, too.

Grandfather loved to sleep on the cellar roof.

We had a grandfather who looked very much like God. When I prayed to God, I always imagined it was Grandfather's portrait fringed with tarnished silver foil which hung in the icons corner. Grandfather himself lay on the stove bench and coughed quietly as he listened to my prayers.

On Sundays a blue lamp burned in front of the icons which always attracted flies. The picture of Saint Nicholas also looked like Grandfather, especially when Grandfather trimmed his beard and drank a glass of vodka before dinner and when Mother didn't get angry. Saint Theodosi looked more like Father. I didn't pray to Saint Theodosi. His beard was still dark and he had a long staff like a shepherd in his hand. But God, who looked like Grandfather, held a round salt shaker in one hand while three fingers of the other hand were held together as though to pick a clove of garlic.

Grandfather's name, I learned later, was Semyon. He was tall and thin with a high forehead. His wavy hair was grey and his beard was white. He had a hernia from working as a carter in his youth. Grandfather smelled of the earth

and a little of the mill. He knew Church Slavonic and loved to read the psalm-book solemnly on holidays. Neither Grandfather nor we understood what he read, and that always intrigued us and gave the words a special, festive meaning.

Grandfather loved a good chat and a kind word. Sometimes on our way to the meadow a traveller would ask for the road to Borzna or to Baturin. Grandfather would stand in the middle of the road for a long time, shaking the handle of his whip, as he shouted instructions: "Straight ahead! Just straight ahead! Don't turn left or right—just straight ahead! That was a good man. God bless him," he would sigh gently as the traveller disappeared beyond the brush.

"Who was that good man? Where is he from?"

"Who knows? How do I know? Why are you standing here like a bump on a log?" Grandfather would address his horse as he climbed into the wagon, "Giddap! Come on, boy!"

He was our kindly spirit of the meadow and the stream. In the woods he collected more mushrooms and berries than any of us and he spoke to the horse, to the calves, to the grass, to the old pear tree and the oak—to every living thing that grew and moved around him.

Grandfather would take us into such dense fairy-tale thickets that we would stop breathing and slapping the mosquitoes on our necks and legs and then they would drink their fill of our blood. Evening had turned into night, the big fish splashed in the Desna among the stars, and still we listened wide-eyed until we fell asleep in the sweet hay under the oaks by the enchanted Desna River.

In the summer Grandfather often lay on top of the cellar roof to be nearer to the sun, especial-

ly at midday when it baked so that all of us, our cat, our dog Pirate and even the chickens hid among the flowers, the tobacco or in the current bushes.

Grandfather loved the sun more than anything else in the world. He lived in the sun almost a hundred years, never hiding in the shade. And when his time came he died in the sun, by the cellar, near the apple trees.

Grandfather loved to cough. At times he coughed so long and so loud that no matter how we tried, no one could imitate him properly. The entire village could hear him cough. Old people even predicted the weather by Grandfather's cough.

Sometimes, when the sun baked down especially hard, he turned blue from coughing and roared like a lion, holding his stomach with both hands and throwing his legs into the air like a baby.

Thousands of tiny pipes would suddenly start to play in Grandfather's chest. The cough gurgled inside him like lava in a volcano, long and threatening. After the very highest notes, when Grandfather was as blue as a morning glory, we would scamper away in all directions and then for a long time after his thunder and blissful groaning would follow us.

Escaping one day from Grandfather's bellows, I jumped from a currant bush right into the tobacco patch. The plants were tall and dense, blossoming in splendid golden-green clusters like the priest's chasuble. Bees hummed above the chasuble. The great tobacco leaves immediately enmeshed me. I fell into a green mass and crawled under the leaves right into the cucumber patch. There were bees in the cucumbers, too.

Having passed the time with the bees and eaten my fill of budding cucumbers, I came upon the carrots, as I remember. I loved carrots more than anything else. I still love them. They grew in bushy rows between the cucumbers. I glanced around. No one was looking. I pulled up one—so small. The leaves were big, but the carrot itself was tiny and white and not sweet at all. I went for the next—still smaller. The third was also small. How I wanted some carrots! I pulled up a whole row but didn't find a single good carrot. I glanced around. What shall I do? Then I quickly stuck all the carrots back into the ground. "Let them grow," I thought, and I went off to hunt for something sweet.

I wandered around the garden for a long time. After trying the carrots, I sucked the sweet nectar from the tobacco and pumpkin blossoms which grew along the fence. I tried the white poppy seeds—still milky. I tasted cherry juice, took bites out of ten green apples and was about to go back into the house when I saw Granny—Grandfather's mother—waving her arms near the carrot patch. I scampered off. She noticed me and started after me. In my flight I trampled one sunflower, then another.

"Where are you going, you devil!"

I made for the tobacco. "I'll run into the raspberries," I thought. "Yes, I'll crawl under the tobacco." Pirate was after me.

"You're breaking the tobacco plants! I'll break your neck for it! I'll make you sit in that tobacco till doomsday, till you wilt, you demon, like you made the carrots wilt!"

Just as Grandfather loved quiet and sunshine, his mother, our great-grandmother, who I later learned was called Marusya, loved to scold. She

swore at everything in sight: at the hogs and the chickens, at the piglets to stop squealing, at Pirate to stop barking, at the children, at the neighbours. She swore at the cat three times a day, so that he finally got sick and departed this world.

She was so small and quick and her eyes were so alert and sharp that nothing in the world could hide from her. She could go without eating for three days, but she couldn't live a single day without scolding. That was her spiritual nourishment. Curses flowed from her mouth in torrents like verse from an inspired poet. At such times her eyes would light up and her cheeks would flush. It was the creativity of her burning, dark, ageing soul.

"Saint Nicholas, Saint Gregory and Saint George on your white steed! Punish him so that he won't eat those carrots, so that warts will gnaw at him and rot will eat him!"

Granny crossed herself to the sky with such passion that she shuddered and rattled all over from her crosses.

A little angel, fallen from heaven, lay among the raspberries and wept without tears. He fell unexpectedly from the clear blue sky onto the earth and broke his delicate wings in the carrot patch. That was me. Hiding behind a currant bush, I listened spellbound to Granny's imprecations. I was afraid to move a muscle so that the Virgin Mary in heaven might not notice me there among the raspberries.

"Punish him, Saints—all of you. And you, Virgin Mary, give him so much work, he'll know no sleep or rest, and send him such a boss. . . ."

I didn't hear the detailed characterisation of my future boss. I had no time to bother with

bosses. I had to escape before it was too late. Having made my way to the old skiff, which had long been stored in the shed, I started to think. What can I do to atone the saints? I decided to perform some good deeds. I won't, I thought, eat meat during Lent. I'll carry water for Granny, as much as she wants. I'll go to church regularly. I noticed the swallows, "If only a baby swallow would fall from its nest! I would feed it flies and crumbs. If only the swallows could see my good deeds and tell Jesus." But the baby swallows did not fall from their nests. Instead, they opened their mouths wide and cheeped demandingly. Their parents flew back and forth above me, carrying insects to them.

"What else?" I thought, leaving the swallows.

"I'll go out in the street and pay my respects to honoured people. Grandfather said that many sins are forgiven for that in heaven. I'll tip my cap to them and say, 'How do you do?' " Luckily, Grandfather's cap was right there in the boat. You can't find such caps any more. It was heavy and looked like a copper cauldron. It was as heavy as a cauldron, too. First it lay in the passage and every year the cat raised her kittens in it; but this year Granny drowned the kittens in the pond and threw the cap into the boat. That's why the cap didn't smell of Grandfather any more, but of cats. However, there was no time to think about all that. The important thing was to have something to take off my head in order to show my respect. I put on the cap, it reached down almost to my mouth, and went out of the gate to do good deeds.

After having passed several deserted lanes with growing anxiety, I suddenly remembered that I should have started with our old neigh-

bour Zakhar. He would undoubtedly be sitting outside his house.

"Good day, Uncle!" I said, removing my cap with both hands, and started off. There was no answer. The old man didn't notice me. He didn't hear me. I'd better return and say it again louder. "Good day, Uncle!" I repeated in a quivering voice, removing the heavy cap. Wouldn't he absolve even a little of my sins? But the old man didn't make a sound. What was I to do? Where was I to go?

I left the lane and went out onto the street in hopes of seeing someone else. The street was deserted. There was a lump in my throat and my neck was beginning to ache from the weight of the cap. I stood there for a few minutes, thought, and went back to Uncle Zakhar to perform a good deed.

"Good day, Uncle. . . . Well?"

"Beat it, you devil! Don't pester me!" he shouted angrily.

I wept bitterly.

All of that happened a very long time ago, long before I could know that everything passes, that everything changes in the inevitable motion of time and that all our sorrows and all our deeds flow as spring tides between the banks of Time. Therefore, my suffering was infinite and my life seemed condemned forever.

Thus, in my misery, realising the futility of seeking salvation, I ran home as fast as I could. I darted, unnoticed, across the garden and into the shed and lay down again in the skiff on Grandfather's old sheepskin coat. "I'll sleep, and grow a little while I'm sleeping. Grandfather said that I grow in my sleep." That's how I reasoned as I lay curled up in Grandfather's old boat. I

cried a little more, and sighing mournfully thought, "Why was I ever born? I shouldn't have been born.... How little I am here in Grandfather's boat, and how many awful things I know! How awful it is when Granny swears at you, or when it rains for a long, long time or when a leech fastens onto your leg, or when strange dogs bark at you, or when geese hiss at you, stretching out their stupid long necks and pecking at your trousers. And it's awful to carry a pail of water in for Granny two or three times a day, or to weed or to trim the tobacco plants. And when the bees sting you, is that pleasant? And how awful when Dad comes home drunk and starts beating the horse or yelling at Grandfather, or smashing the dishes! To walk barefoot through the stubble is also unpleasant. And it's very unpleasant to laugh in church when you oughtn't to, but just can't help it. And to ride on a wagon full of hay is scary when the wagon almost topples into the river. And how scary it is to look at a house in flames, but a little fire is pleasant. And it's pleasant to hug the colt with its bushy tail, or to sleep on the oven bench in the winter and wake up early to see a calf in the room that was born in the night. It's pleasant to wade through a warm puddle after a thunderstorm, or to catch young carp and pike with your bare hands, or to watch a net dragged through the lake. It's pleasant to find a bird's nest in the grass, or to eat Easter cake, its nice when the water floods the house and the shed and the street in the spring, and everyone wades through the water. How pleasant it is to sleep on the spread rye and millet and barley, on all kinds of grain on the oven bench! The smell of all the different grain is pleasant. It's pleasant when the hay is

being stacked and you run around the stack in the loose hay. It's pleasant when the apple which you thought was sour turns out to be sweet. It's pleasant when Grandfather takes you to the meadow, or when he talks to the horses as if they were people. And I love it when a stranger passing us on the road at night says, "Good evening", and Grandfather answers gently in the darkness, "God be with you".

It's pleasant when the fish splash in the lake or in the Desna at sunset, or when you're driven home at night after haying and you watch the stars in the sky. The squeak of the wheels is pleasant and the chirping of the birds in the gardens or the fields, and the lapping of the spring water, and the gentle croaking of the toads in the evening as the warm spring waters recede, and the young girls' spring songs coming from across the water. . . .

I loved to fall asleep on the hay-wagon, and when it stopped in the yard I loved to be carried half-asleep into the house. I loved the creaking of the wheels of the hay-wagon in the stubble. I loved the chirping of the birds in the garden and in the field. I loved the swallows in the shed, the cranes and the quails in the meadow. I loved the lapping of the spring waters and the toad's gentle croaking in the marsh, when the water recedes in the spring. I loved the girl's songs—spring songs, wedding songs, carols. I loved it when the apples fell in the garden at dusk. They fell unexpectedly, secretly to the earth, to the grass. I always sensed a kind of mystery and eternal consistency in that dropping of fruit. Thunder was also pleasant, although Mother was afraid of it. Thunder, rain and wind were good for the gifts of the garden.

Thus, gradually, the pleasant won over the unpleasant and the distressing and I unconsciously began to fall asleep and to grow. At the very last moment, just before sinking off to sleep, all my sorrows and fears disappeared, and Grandfather's old tarry skiff suddenly seemed to lurch under me, float out of the shed, into the garden, fly past the apple trees, the bee-hives, the raspberry bushes, the tobacco plants and past Great-grandmother, into the blue expanse. And in the sky above me, under clouds which looked like giants, were the pigeons I loved.

But more than anything in the world I loved music. If someone were to ask me what kind of music I loved in early childhood—what instrument, what musicians, I would have answered that more than anything else I loved to hear a scythe sharpened. When, in the silence of the evening before the feast day of Saints Peter and Paul, our father began to tap his scythe with a hammer in the garden by the house, it was the most enchanting music imaginable. I loved it so and longed for it as angels long for the Easter church bells—forgive me, Lord, for the comparison! At times, even today, it seems to me that if someone were to sharpen a scythe under my window, I would suddenly become younger, kinder and would take to my work with renewed energy. The high, clear ringing of the scythe heralded joy and consolation for me from my earliest years.

"Don't cry, Sashko!" Great-grandfather Taras would say when I started to bawl. "Don't cry, little dunce, we'll sharpen the scythe. Yes, we'll go to the Desna and mow the grass. Yes, we'll catch fish and we'll boil some porridge!"

I fell silent. Then Taras, Grandfather's father

would take me in his arms and tell me stories about the Desna, about the grass, about the secret lakes—Church Lake and the Silent Lake, and about the river Seim. His voice and the expression in his eyes were so kind and his great hairy hands, so like the roots of a tree, were so gentle that I'm sure they never hurt anyone or anything in the world. They never stole, never killed, never spilled blood. They knew work and peace, generosity and kindness.

"Yes, we'll mow the hay and boil some porridge! Don't cry, little one!"

I stopped crying. Then the tips of my toes would take off from the earth somehow and immediately I found myself at Church Lake, Silent Lake and the Seim River. Those were the finest lakes and river in the world. Such lakes and rivers aren't any more and will not be ever again, anywhere.

That's how, dreaming in the boat on Grandfather's old sheepskin coat, I gradually closed my eyes. But that didn't make it dark inside my head. Closing my eyes, today too, I don't feel darkness. My brain is still shining, constantly and clearly, lighting up the apparent and non-apparent with an endless, at times disordered, flow of pictures. The pictures float above the Danube and the Desna. Clouds float through the sky, in the blue expanses, waging such battles and competing in such numbers, that if I were fated to reproduce even a tiny part in clear literary or artistic form, not in vain would I have lived on this earth and nor would I have grieved my superiors in vain.

What didn't I see in the sky! The world of the clouds was overflowing with giants and prophets. The giants and prophets battled constantly,

and my child's soul did not always take it lightly, but sank at times into grief.

I saw movement, competition and battle everywhere: in the bark of the oak and willow trees, in rotten stumps and the hollows in old willows, in marshes, in old stone walls. No matter what my eyes lit upon—everywhere I saw something that looked like people or horses, wolves, vipers, angels, something that looked like war, or fire, a battle, or flood. Everything lived two lives in my eyes. Everything had its comparison. Everything was like something else, something seen long ago somewhere, something imagined, something experienced. . . .

But what am I doing?

I should write about the old skiff and here I'm writing about clouds. Yes, back to the old boat in the shed, to the old skiff.

Well, so I talked to myself in the skiff, and closed my eyes and started to grow. Then, little by little, the boat started to rock under me and sailed out of the shed into the garden, along the grass between the trees and bushes, passed by the cellar and sailed past Grandfather. For some reason Grandfather became very small, smaller than I. He sat in Granny's arms in a long white shirt and gently smiled after me. And the boat kept on sailing through the garden into the meadow and past the farmsteads on to the Desna.

Play, music, sing, birds in the sky, toads along the banks, girls under the willows. I sail beyond the water. I sail beyond the water, and the world sails over me. Spring clouds sail through the sky frolicking with one another. Birds in flock sail over me: ducks, seagulls, cranes. Storks fly like sleeping men. Vines, willows, elms and poplars sail below like green islands in the water.

I dreamt something like that, incredibly wonderful, there in the tarred old skiff—but I've forgotten what it was. Perhaps I didn't dream it? Perhaps all of that really did happen on the Desna?

All of it really happened, only very long ago. By now everything has passed and got lost somewhere along the way. Never again will the sanctity of barefoot childhood return. And tobacco doesn't bloom for me the way it did, like a splendid chasuble.

My clear day has turned into evening. Fog has covered the field, and I look anxiously around. I must hurry. Guests are sailing in willow boats. Waves are chasing each other on the Desna. Visiting thoughts sail from a warm distant land, and bring me. . . . What? Well, what do they bring?

*

In early childhood I had four nursemaids. They were my brothers: Lavrin, Sergei, Vasilko and Ivan. They didn't live long. It is said that they started to sing early. Sometimes they would climb onto the fence, all four of them, sit in a row like swallows and how they would sing. Where did they get their songs? Who taught them to sing? No one. When they died in an epidemic, all in one day, people said, "The Lord took them for his angels' choir." Indeed, they had sung all the songs of their short years as if they had sensed their brief fate. Many a delicate female soul could not endure their singing. Women looked at them and shaking their heads sadly, wept not knowing why. "Oh, no good will befall such children!"

It happened, people said, on Whitsunday. Evil came to our white cottage. I was then in my first year.

Learning at the market-place in Borzna that the children were dying at home from an unknown disease, our Dad began to whip the horses. He tore along twenty miles, mercilessly whipping his horses, to save us. How desperately he shouted for the ferry-man on the Desna and from there, how he flew. People spoke of it long after. But at home people only saw how he drove his unfortunate horses into the gate, smashing it, and how the maimed horses fell into bloody foam. Dad rushed to us, but they already lay dead, I alone survived. What could he do, beat our frantic mother? She was only half-alive by then. Our Dad wailed bitterly, "Oh, my sons! My children, my nightingales.—Why did you finish your song so early?"

Then he called us his baby eagles and Mother called us her little nightingales. People sobbed and lamented for a long time that there would be no fishermen of us, no hay-makers in the meadow, no ploughmen in the field, not even a soldier to defend the Tsar's land.

To what can I compare the depth of my father's grief? In bitter desperation he cursed God that night and God was silent. Had He appeared then, even in all His glory, Dad would most likely have pierced Him with a pitchfork or slashed Him with an ax.

He drove the priest right out of the house and announced with rage that he would bury his children himself. A similar explosion of desperation and fury, not against God this time, but against us adults, was seen by Mother near the Dnieper River, half a century later, during the

Nazi occupation, when Father again wept on the fallen Kiev hills, reproaching us all to the last man. Whether this unfortunate, enslaved old man was right or wrong is not for us to judge. It has long been known that the extent of suffering is measured not by the weight of circumstances, but by the depth of the human trauma. And to whom, to whom indeed has life brought more trauma?

I've seen many handsome people, but I've never seen anyone as handsome as my Dad. He had dark hair, a large head and large dreamy gray eyes. But for some reason his eyes were always sad: he was a prisoner of his own illiteracy and bondage. He was totally imprisoned by sorrow, but at the same time enriched by a great inner culture of thought and feeling.

How much soil he tilled! How much grain he mowed! How beautifully he worked. How strong and clean he was. His body was white, without a single blemish. His shining hair was wavy; his hands were big and generous. And how gracefully he lifted his spoon to his mouth, and held his bread in the palm of his hand so as not to drop crumbs on the tablecloth of the Desna—the grass! He loved a good joke and a good word. He understood tact and respect. He despised the authorities and the Tsar. The Tsar insulted Dad's dignity with his scanty red goatee, his insignificant figure and his low army rank.

One thing that was not attractive about Dad was his dress. He wore such ugly clothes so colourless, so wretched, as if some fiend, wanting to belittle the human form in general, had draped an ancient statue in rags. He would walk home from the tavern, dragging his legs and gazing down at the earth; and I wanted to cry as

I hid in the raspberries with Pirate. But even then he was handsome—there was so much wealth of the spirit in him! Whether he mowed or planted, shouted at Mother or at Grandfather, smiled at his children or beat the horse, or whether the watchmen beat him cruelly—it made no difference.

When this eighty-year-old man was abandoned by every living soul, standing homeless in the square in fascist captivity and people took him for a beggar, even then he was handsome. He could have modelled for the portrait of a knight, a god, an apostle, a great scientist or a sower: he was suited for all.

He raised a lot of grain, fed many, saving them from hunger. He tilled much land before he was freed of his sorrow. In the fulfilment of the eternal law of life, I bow my gray head under the northern sky, remove my hat, sanctify my thoughts with silence, and turn my melancholy talent to him. Let him dictate his own behest to me.

He stands before me, far away on the Kiev hills. His beautiful face is bruised with the nazi beatings. His hands and legs are swollen. Sorrow has filled his eyes with tears, and I can barely hear his distant, "My children, my nightingales!"

*

We lived in complete harmony with the forces of nature. In the winter we froze; in the summer we roasted in the sun; in the fall we waded through mud and in the spring we were flooded with water. He who hasn't experienced such things doesn't know the joy and fullness of life.

Spring usually swam into us from the Desna. At that time no one had heard or knew anything about taming nature. Water used to flow wherever it felt like. Sometimes the Desna overflowed so widely that not only the woods and the meadows were flooded, but whole villages sank as they cried out for help. That was when the hour of our glory struck.

One could write a book about Dad, Grandfather and I saving people, cows and horses. That was my pre-school heroism, for which I would now probably be sent to Artek in the Crimea. We didn't know of holiday camps then, either. It was all long ago. I forget in what year, in the spring, just before Easter, there was such a flood as no one, not Grandfather, not Grandfather's grandmother had ever known.

The water rose with an unprecedented force. In one day the woods, the meadows and the gardens were submerged. It grew dark. A storm broke. The Desna roared all through that night. The church bells tolled. People shouted in the darkness far away, dogs howled, and the storm raged. No one slept. By morning all the streets were under water, and it kept rising. What was to be done?

Then the district police officer sent his head policeman, Makar, to our Dad.

"Save the people in Zagrebelye. They're drowning. Do you hear?" he ordered Dad in a hoarse voice. "You have a boat that will hold the whole province and you're a seafarer yourself."

Hearing the order, Mother bursts into tears, "He can't go, it is Easter!"

Dad swore at Mother to shut up and said to Makar, "Why, I'd be glad to save the people, but I'm afraid it is a sin. I can't go out to save

them before I have eaten some Easter cake and drunk some wine, according to the rules. I haven't had a drink for two months. After all, I can't disrespect the holiday."

"We'll put you in jail," said Makar as he sniffed the roast pig in the oven. "Instead of an award for rescuing men and beasts, you'll be feeding bed bugs in the lockup!"

"All right!" Dad said. "You be damned! I'm going!"

Mother, who always seemed somewhat irresponsible just before Easter, screamed in despair, "Where are you going?! It's Easter!"

"Give us the unsanctified cake. If we are to sin, let us sin! Sit down, Makar! Christ has risen! Pour another! To the spring, to the swallows, to the water, to the sorrows!"

Thus, having broken the fast on Saturday, we gradually dozed off, slept through church services and only the next morning, with great difficulty, began to row to the flooded village of Zagrebelye.

The entire Zagrebelye parish was sitting on the roofs of their sunken houses with their unsanctified Easter cakes. The sun rose. The scene was remarkable—like a dream, or a fairy-tale. Lit up by the sun, a completely new world opened up before us. Everything was different, beautiful, strong, gay. Water, clouds—everything swam, everything rushed ahead without restraint, gurgling and glistening in the sun.

Spring is beautiful! We rowed with all our might, with Dad calling the strokes. We were hot from our labours and gay. Dad sat with his oar on the stern, happy and strong. He felt himself to be the saviour of the drowning, like the seafaring hero Vasco da Gama. Although life had

allotted him a puddle instead of an ocean, his heart was oceanic. And perhaps because his heart was as big as the whole ocean, Vasco da Gama could not always endure the discrepancy, and sank his boats in the tavern. It is said that to a drunkard the sea is only knee-deep. That's not true. Only I didn't understand that until much later. Our Dad sank his ships so that once in a while in the dirty saloon the little puddle of his life would be transformed, if even for an hour, into a bottomless, boundless sea.

The water rose with incredible force. You didn't have time to look around as the village became an island and then the island began to sink.

"H-e-l-p!"

The waves poured down the streets, into gardens, slapping at the porches, doors and windows. Barns and sheds were flooded. Then, rising by a yard in almost no time, the water burst into the houses through the doors and windows.

"Help!"

Houses trembled under the roaring current. Cattle bellowed in their stalls. Horses became numb, standing in water up to their necks. Pigs drowned. The deluge carried bloated bulls from the neighbouring village. The water found its way to the church. The whole village sank. Only Yeryoma Bobyr, our kinsman on Grandfather's side, didn't suffer in that tragedy. He knew the omens for the various natural phenomena and particularly believed in the predictions of mice. He knew about the flood in advance, back in the winter. When on Epiphany the mice started to run from the shed across the snow, our clever uncle guessed that there would be trouble in the spring. While his simple-minded neighbours

laughed at him, he silently dismantled the eaves over the porch and built a stable in the attic. He built a gangplank and filled the attic with grass and grain. When the village, instead of holiday songs, desperately cried for help, Yeryoma Bobyr's whole family celebrated Easter in the attic, beside the stable filled with cows, horses, sheep, chickens and pigeons, just like in the old painting that once hung in church.

"Help! Our house is floating!"

"Christ has risen!"

That day Christ was to hear such oaths as a result of the flood the likes of which no farm chairman has ever heard for corrupt practices. Someone set afloat a bit of slander about the priest's wife having eaten meat during Lent. There was much indignation. Actually, if you think about it, those were not anti-religious or ungodly conversations. Sitting on the roofs of their flooded houses with their unsanctified Easter cakes in the midst of their drowned cattle, the believers merely wanted God to pay a little more attention to the world he had created. We could say that they wanted something better from God, the Virgin Mary and all the saints than that untimely debacle.

"Well, after all, what the devil of an Easter is it if—forgive me God—you've got to eat unsanctified cake! The whole parish is sitting on their roofs and catfish are swimming in the houses."

"Christ has risen, wet-bottoms!" my Dad shouted gayly, when our large boat sailed over the fence, across the yard and bumped against the eaves.

"Ah, hell. . . ." answered a middle-aged man, Lev Kiyanitsa, and handed Dad a glass of vodka.

"He has indeed risen! Save us, Petro, and don't laugh, please. I can see the house will soon float away. Hey! It's moving!"

"Save us!"

"We're drowning! Help!" the women shouted.

That's what the flood was like.

But when that cheerful little village perished and disappeared from the face of the earth it was not from water, but from fire, and also in the spring, half a century later. My little village was razed because it gave aid to partisans. And the peace-loving people who were not killed threw themselves into the water, their clothes aflame.

The church was set on fire with screaming widows inside. The leaping flames blazed in the night, crackled, exploded with muffled bursts, and great stacks of burning straw, like the souls of the perished mothers, were carried off by the wind into the dark emptiness of the sky. The nazis chased the women through the streets, grabbing their children and throwing them into the flames of the burning houses. The mothers, in order not to live, not to see, not to weep, not to curse, threw themselves in after their children and burned in the flames of the terrible fascist inferno.

Hanged men gazed unseeingly from their horrific gallows, swung on their ropes, casting their moving shadows onto the ground and the water. Everyone that had not had time to escape into the woods or brush or to secret partisan encampments was destroyed. The beautiful village was no more. There were no houses, no gardens, no kind, jolly people. Only ruins were left to bleach in the scorching heat. I burned in that fire, too. I experienced every form of death—

human, animal, vegetable. I blazed, like wood and the church; I swung on the gallows; I blew away in ashes and smoke from the catastrophic explosions. Soap was boiled from my muscles and shattered bones in Western Europe in the middle of the twentieth century. My skin was used for book-bindings and lampshades, and lay scattered on the roads of war, dirty, trampled, and ironed flat by the heavy tanks of the great war of mankind.

One day I could bear it no longer and, shouting battle slogans from the flames and calling for vengeance, I groaned, "I'm in pain!"

"What are you talking about?" They said reproachfully. "What caused you to scream out in this great hour of trial? Pain, fear?"

"Suffering. I am an artist, and imagination was always the cause of my joy and my damnation. It has suddenly betrayed me. For an instant it seemed to me that it is not my village that is perishing but all my people. What can be more horrible?"

Since then I began to comfort myself with the chimeric idea that humanity's pure soul is primarily the result of chance and good fortune rather than of inborn virtues. I was, of course, mistaken. One must never forget one's purpose and always remember that people choose their artists, primarily to show the world that life is beautiful, that in and of itself it is the greatest blessing and joy. It seems at times amazing and unfortunate that we lack the clarity of spirit to imbue the constant alternation of drama and joy with a daily sense of the happiness of life, and therefore so much beauty passes without a trace before our eyes.

I am not an adherent of the old village, of old

people, of ancient things in general. I am the child of my century and belong entirely to my contemporaries. If I gaze occasionally back upon the well from which I once drank water and on my friendly old cottage, and send them my blessing in their distant past, I am only making that mistake which is made and will be made by artists of all epochs and all lands as they recall the unforgettable charm of their childhood. The world unfolds before the clear eyes of the first years of learning. All the impressions of life blend into an immortal, precious, human harmony. I pity the man whose imagination has dried up or become blind; who, when looking at the purest sources of his adolescence, sees nothing dear, nothing unusual, and nothing warms him—no joy and no human sadness. Such a man is colourless, whatever his high post, and his labour, unwarmed by the hot rays of time, is colourless.

The present is always on the road from the past to the future. Why then must I scorn the past? In order to teach my grandchildren to scorn one day that which is dear and sacred in my present, which will also be the past for them some day in the great epoch of communism?

There was much good in the lives of my fathers, but there was also much trouble and regret, much disorder, darkness and evil. Clouded hopes and futile expectations found their graves in vodka and discord. But more than anything else, was their share of hard toil. Each one lived his life out unhappily, each in his own way: Great-grandfather, Grandfather, Dad and Mother. Each was born for love, it would seem, and each had the talent to love, but evidently they didn't find one another, they didn't search to the end,

and anger and hatred, which were always unnatural and unnecessary to them, were none the less pushed onto them by that sorcerer—Fate. All their lives deceptive fancies harassed and excited them futilely. Their lives were as tragic as the lives of primitive men. They did not know how to change life, and longing for that which their time could not give, they were not happy.

But all that happened so long ago that almost everything has dissolved in the distant haze of time like a dream and has drowned. Only the Desna has remained imperishable in my memory. The sacred river of my unforgettable childhood!

For me there are no rivers today like you were once, my Desna! There are no secrets in the rivers and no peace. All is clear. There is no God and no devil, and sometimes I am sorry that there are no mermaids in the rivers and no water sprites.

The Desna was then a deep and fast river. Almost no one bathed in it then, you saw no one naked on the sand. The young girls, ashamed to remove their dresses, did not bathe even on holidays. The men, from long custom, considered it unseemly to bathe. The women were afraid that the water would wash away their health. Only we small children bathed. The Desna was still a young maiden then and I was an amazed little boy with wide green eyes.

Be blessed, my untouched maiden, my Desna!

Recalling you these many years I always become kinder, and feel rich and generous, so many are the gifts you have given me to last my whole life. I am happy that I was born on your banks; that in my unforgettable years I drank your soft, cheerful water; that I walked barefoot along your untouched beaches; that I heard

fishermen's tales as I sat in your boats, and fairy-tales of yore; that I counted the dawns reflected in you from the overturned sky; that to this day, looking down sometimes, I still have not lost the joy of seeing those dawns again in the puddles of life's many roads.

A WILL TO LIVE

"Old man," I said to the army surgeon Mikola D., "you've been at the front for almost a year and a half. You've operated on hundreds of people. . . ."

"Thousands," the surgeon calmly corrected.

"Thousands. . . ."

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine the suffering, the groans of thousands of people, their pleading looks: Tell me doctor, tell me. . .

"What colossal labour! What emotional strain!" I thought aloud.

"Habit."

"Oh? Possibly. But you saw the most terrible human suffering every day. Did you discover anything in man? Among the multitude of diverse mutilations did you discover something new, unknown, perhaps some secret of man at war? Or didn't you notice anything beyond your knife?"

"I did find something," my friend answered and paced the room, apparently recalling his most successful operations.

I didn't take my eyes off Mikola and, to be honest, in the depths of my heart I felt envy and reverence for his profession. To rescue human life, to ease suffering always seemed to me to be the highest, most noble calling.

"Will-power," said the surgeon, stopping, and he even struck the table with his large first. "Man at war is will-power. If there is will-power, there is a man! If there is no will-power, there is no man! Man is as great as his will. That's what I found."

*

Ah, how he didn't want to fall. How loth he was to drop the sub-machine gun. But it had already flown out of his hand and there was nothing to pick it up with from the dirty earth. True, his right arm was only slightly wounded by a mine splinter. But the left, comrades, hung shattered as the blood gushed from the mutilated shoulder.

"What can I do? I must stop the blood. How? It doesn't stop. It won't stop!"

Then the scout, Ivan Karnalyuk, started to run. His brain worked feverishly.

"I'll run," he thought, "as long as I have blood. Only I mustn't fall. I mustn't fall, not for anything! They'll kill me, the damned nazis! Oh, be cursed! They'll kill me. They won't kill me. They won't kill me...."

Karnalyuk ran. He was filled with frenzy and fury. It seemed that if he had met a nazi now, armless, he would have torn him apart with his teeth.

Having passed the danger zone, he seemed to suddenly lose his hatred. He stopped, began to grieve and melted like wax in the sun. Then he collapsed. It seemed to Ivan that he fell not onto the earth but into the water and the current carried him quickly off, curling between trees, clouds and villages, and suddenly he splashed home, as if in a fairy-tale. Father and Mother,

Grandfather, Grandmother, sisters, all of them so dear and welcoming.

"Ivan! It's you, our own Vanyusha!"

He saw his native home on the edge of the village and the path running through the garden to the house. And along the path she ran, his longed-for Galina.

"Ivan, Ivan has returned! Vanyusha!"

"Galya!"

Karnalyuk opened his eyes.

"I'm fainting", he whispered and was frightened. Ivan Karnalyuk was an ordinary soldier. He was not noted for exceptional bravery, although he had already sniped the lives of fifteen nazis, not to count his regular encounters with the enemy. In appearance, too, there was nothing heroic about Ivan: of medium height, slim, with gray eyes, twenty-five years old, he had grown up in the beautiful Podolye region; a native son of the great epoch of the Revolution, the epoch of great works and the Patriotic War.

One of the millions of Soviet young men, his thoughts, till the very beginning of the war, were devoted to peaceful labour.

He did not compete in track and field, or on the shooting range, or in the ring. He competed where glory was won through valiant labour: at the Exhibition of Economic Achievement in Moscow, the beautiful and noble exhibit of human endeavour. There he won a gold medal for raising a bull the likes of which no cow has ever dreamt of since the beginning of time. Ivan was a collective farm shepherd from Podolye.

"I'm fainting!" he cried out in alarm, as if he wanted to wake up and stop the quick-flowing river.

"Stop, stop! I won't give in!"

Karnalyuk crawled to a tree and with difficulty leaned his shoulder against the trunk, thus closing the torn artery. His lips were stretched so wide and his open eyes so glazed that when orderlies came to pick up the wounded at dawn, they thought he was a corpse.

"I'm alive," whispered Karnalyuk. His face was deathly pale.

Battles raged day and night. Inside the hut, the walls of which were lined with sheets and towels, the surgeon had been working without rest for several days. Such a sea of suffering spread on the table before him that no new man could have withstood it and would have wept in horror and pity had he seen that frightful sacrifice of war for even one hour.

Two nurses had been carried out, unconscious from many sleepless nights. Other nurses and orderlies continued to place shredded people on the table. Death devoured its spoils, yet the surgeon snatched quite a few from her festive table.

The hut shook from the thunder of bursting bombs. In the yard the wounded were lying on the ground. They were placed in three rows according to their type of wound: head injuries, hopeless cases and others.

The surgeon was exhausted. To save his strength and time, food was brought to the operating table. A powerful man by nature, even he was falling off his feet. More important, depression was overcoming him. Everything has its limit. The wounded were driving him to desperation. That which he had always admired in man now failed to move him.

"What the hell! Where does this patience come from? I've been operating for fourteen months.

You'd think at least one of them would scream out his hatred for death, or curse it, the bitch! No! They're silent. They submit," he thought helplessly, and went on for the thousandth time, sewing a man together from torn, bloody scraps.

"Next!"

Karnalyuk lay before the surgeon.

Three days had passed since he was wounded. His condition became progressively worse. The heat in his bloodless body already brought the thermometer above 41 degrees. Dreadful gaseous gangrene had hit him. His arm lay swollen, enormous, dark, with purplish-blue spots, blisters, and exuded an insufferable odour. For three days Karnalyuk had not taken his eyes off his arm. He gazed at it as at a mortal enemy and was silent.

The surgeon was a master at healing gaseous gangrene with his own new method, but Karnalyuk's arm could not be saved.

"It's too late," he said feebly to his assistant, "we'll have to amputate. . . ."

"Amputate! Cut quickly!" Karnalyuk said suddenly with anger and determination.

The surprised surgeon turned his head. Karnalyuk's wide gray eyes lighted on his.

"Cut quickly!" Karnalyuk repeated imperatively and even shook his head as if he had decided to throw away the unnecessary arm.

The amputation of his arm didn't help Karnalyuk. The antigangrene serum, introduced into his body by the surgeon's special method, didn't help him, either. Nor was the attempt to transfuse blood a crowning success. The gaseous gangrene spread. It crawled from the shoulder joint into the neck. The inflamed shoulder was a threatening, unbearable sight.

When Karnalyuk was taken into the ward he had no pulse. His condition was hopeless. Life was leaving him. But he did not give in. He did not lose consciousness for a single moment, and people in the ward did not hear a single sound from him. He was silent. All of his will was being exerted in that silent battle with death.

"How do you feel?" the surgeon asked during a routine check and took his hand. There was almost no pulse.

"All right. Tell me, will I live?" Karnalyuk whispered, gazing, it seemed, into the very soul of the doctor.

"Live? Of course! Definitely!" the surgeon replied, knowing that Karnalyuk was dying, that he had only minutes to live, and then walked off to the next patient, without ordering a new dressing or any other treatment.

Karnalyuk understood that he had lost his last hope.

"Wait! Doctor!"

The surgeon looked back. Karnalyuk guessed all his thoughts.

"I don't need any more dressings, eh?" he said, burning with the fire of gangrene and piercing the surgeon with his stare.

What could the surgeon say? What can a surgeon say who day after day stands at the bedside of dying men?

"No. You will live."

And the surgeon went off, together with the doctors and nurses into the dressing station. Karnalyuk threw himself onto the pillow and sobbed.

He recalled Podolye, his own golden country, with its boundless fields, gardens, herds of cattle, his bull Mina, the ancient Bug River and Galya,

his love. He had dreamt of living his life out with her on the banks of the Bug.

"Where are you, Galya? Look at your Ivan! Can you see me?"

Karnalyuk looked around. There was no one but wounded soldiers on all sides.

"Here I am, dying, so far away!"

Ivan Karnalyuk began to toss on his death-bed, trembling like a slain bird. He did not want to die, he wanted to avenge the enemy. To live!

"Curse you! Oh, curse you! No, I'll avenge you, even with one arm. I will!"

The soldier groaned, he ground his teeth and was silent.

After making the rounds of the ward the surgeon stopped at the dressing station. Having checked that it was in order, he sat down by the window.

The morning was dull and gray. He rested his head on his hands and sank into thought. Suddenly he heard a noise at the door which caused him to jump. The surgeon looked up to see Karnalyuk! He stood in the doorway in his underwear. His dressing was wet with blood and pus. He was drenched in cold sweat.

"A new dressing!" Karnalyuk groaned. Stretching his right arm out he moved towards the operating table. "I want to live! Give me a new dressing and do whatever you have to!"

He moved to the operating table swaying as if he were on a ship in a storm.

The surgeon froze in his chair. Karnalyuk was terrible and beautiful.

"You thought I died, did you? Get me a dressing! I want to live! What are you waiting for?"

Karnalyuk fell into the doctor's arms. The sur-

geon lifted him like a child and placed him on the operating table.

"Do you think you can save him?" his assistant asked as he ran into the dressing station.

"He has already saved himself," the surgeon replied in a jolly voice. "Hold this. That's right. Hold it, damn you!"

The assistant handed him the necessary instruments with his usual efficiency.

The surgeon seemed to have been reborn. He worked quickly, with unusual energy, admiring Karnalyuk as he operated:

"Ah, what a Hercules! Look at his rib cage! And shoulder! Yes!" He spoke with animation. He cleaned the sinister wound with peroxide and covered it with an aseptic bandage.

"And what solid legs . . . and his neck! Did you see how he walked in? Slender, like a young god. Camphor! Caffeine! All right. Wonderful. That's a lad! Look at those muscles. How he walked in, eh?"

"How did he ever get up?" the nurse said with amazement.

"Ah, you don't understand!"

"And where did he get the strength? He had no pulse," said another.

"He had the will. Hold this."

"Do you think he'll live?"

"He'll live longer than any of us! Hold this. Believe me, he's already done much more for himself than we are doing now. Gauze!"

The surgeon worked with inspiration and love. Never had he wanted to save a human life as ardently as now. Ivan lay before him in complete oblivion, but his mighty will to live was transmitted to the doctor, it seized hold of him. He forgot his exhaustion, his sleepless nights, and

worked as one who had slept and bathed. He worked easily, joyfully and the sun which glanced into the operating room from behind a cloud seemed to smile at him like a promise of happiness. The strength of Karnalyuk's resistance to death augmented the doctor's own strength, who then passed that strength back to the patient.

Having given him another dose of anti-gangrene serum and a pint of blood, the surgeon requested that the patient be given some warm wine and hot tea and that his bed be well warmed. Karnalyuk's pulse was stronger. His cheeks were a little pinker. He opened his grey eyes.

The same question burned in them.

All four, the surgeon, his assistant and the two nurses, nodded and turned away unable to speak.

Karnalyuk smiled at the surgeon.

"You won with hardly a chance of victory," the surgeon said in a choked voice. "Thank you. You've taught me to live. I admire your willpower."

When Karnalyuk was brought back from the operating room the entire ward applauded him. The other patients looked at their comrade with pride and thanked him with joy, for Ivan had passed on to them his will to live.

Think about this, my brothers, and if something should happen to any one of you—anything is possible—fight there on your hospital beds for your own victory. Take from your great-grandfather's treasure chest his precious potion, the root of life, inhale it, absorb its essence into your body, chew it, eat it day and night: it is the will to live!

And it will serve you in good stead.

Andrei Golovko

THE RED KERCHIEF

Oksana was happy. Mother had given her cloth for a kerchief and had dyed it red. Oksana had a red kerchief.

When the girl brought the cows home from the steppe at dinner-time it was hanging on the fence to dry. Behind the fence the hollyhocks bloomed a violent red. It seemed that a petal had been flown onto the fence. The kerchief was a joy to look at.

The girl smiled when she saw it. She chased the cows into the shed and ran for the kerchief. She snatched it but it was still damp. Well, so what, it will dry on her head. And she'll press it. It was a good thing she took it from the fence. After all, it was a holiday. Grandpa would tend the cows after dinner and she would go to the landlord's pond to swim with the girls.

"Oh, how red it is! It hurts my eyes."

She hopped into the house. The house was celebrating, too. It was very clean. Mother took a crock out of the oven and poured borshch into a bowl. Grandpa was finishing his pipe on the threshold, and Father sat on a bench. There was silence. In the silence you could hear the sun stretching its thread-like rays against the window-pane: buzz . . . buzz. . . . Or maybe there were flies on the windows? Oh, what a weaver—steam

from the soup and the bluish smoke from Grandpa's pipe all interwoven by the sun. It was like a fairy-tale!

Grandpa knocked his pipe against the door frame and looked at his granddaughter, "She's a big girl, will be a bride one of these days. She's no head for tending cows now. I'll bet she let them trample the buckwheat."

"What would I let them in the buckwheat for? Am I that dumb?" answered Oksana. "There's stubble enough for them."

"Well, I'll take them out after dinner and see."

As a matter of fact, that's what he wanted to say. I'll take them out, he was saying, and you play with your girl friends. His threat was only in fun. That's the kind of man he was.

"Did you watch out for the sheaves in the field?" Father intervened.

Oksana was embarrassed. She recalled how a week before their cow had scattered their neighbour Galushikha's sheaves in the field and what a noise Uncle Musii had raised.

"Keep your eyes open so that it doesn't happen again."

Grandpa interrupted, "You, and your sheaves. It was Denikin himself who ordered us to give something to the landlord."

"That's a pretty good 'something'. Two-thirds for the landlord," said Father.

"What?" Grandpa began to fidget. "Blast him, the devil! He didn't plant and didn't reap. He loitered abroad all year. Now he's returned and takes two-thirds."

"There's nothing we can do, Father. They've got the power now."

Then Mother at the stove, "D'you know, Musii will take all the grain for himself. His wife said

he asked the landlord and the landlord promised not to take anything from them."

"Not everyone will bow before the landlord like Musii," Grandpa said and Father added, "No, this isn't a matter of bowing. The landlord isn't so generous or such a fool to give grain for mere bows."

They sat down to dinner on the porch. They ate silently, each lost in his own thoughts. Father was thinking about the grain, and Grandpa, too, and Mother most likely.

Oksana was thinking of how to eat faster and get out into the street and go to the pond with the girls. Through the open porch door she could see the garden. Yellow sunflowers were bending over the fence and sparrows were fluttering among them, chirping. Farther on was a patch of poppies and still farther the green veil of the garden. She knew that there, beyond that veil, was the meadow. In the grass, under the white aspen trees, the paths criss-crossed, one going straight to the landlord's pond where willows bent and the osier bushes on the bank hung their curls over the water.

Some horsemen tore down the street and shot past with a whoop. So much dust was raised that you could see it settle in the yard.

"It must be the Cossacks," said Mother.

"Where are they cantering all the time?" Grandpa wondered.

Father wrinkled his brow. There was a deep crease on his forehead. "They'll get there all right. They're not the first ones who have ridden this road—the Germans, the Haidamaks. And they all came crawling back on all fours."

Oksana looked through the open door. There, beyond the fence, she saw Mariika come out of

the Musii house and run towards the pond. Oksana shouted to her, "Mariika, I'm coming!"

She stood up and tied on her red kerchief. "Mamma, I'm off."

She turned and headed towards the meadow through the back gardens.

*

They walked among the aspens, along the path below the gardens, Mariika in the lead and several other girls behind her.

Oksana shouted to them and they stopped. When she caught up with them they surrounded her and began admiring the kerchief.

"Oh, how beautiful? Did you do it with dye?"

"Yes."

"It's awfully pretty. Just hope it won't fade."

They said they were on their way to the pond. Would she go? Over there, Hvedorka is picking cucumbers in her garden. They'd call her, too. Passing by Hvedorka's garden, they called to their friend, "Come on!"

Hvedorka looked up silently. Then she dropped the cucumbers from her skirt and, stepping carefully between the plants, went over to the girls.

"Let's go swimming," Oksana offered.

"Don't want to."

"Why not?"

"Just don't."

The girl looked off with pensive eyes, recalling, perhaps, her father who had left home to hide from the Cossacks, or perhaps she was thinking about the landlord's family which she had seen returning from the city yesterday. She didn't say anything, and the girls coaxed her. Oksana even pulled at her arm.

"Come on."

Hvedorka smiled weakly and went off with them. The pond was not far away. They passed along the meadow, then jumped over a ditch—there hadn't been a fence for ages—and came to the tall willow trees by the pond. Higher up there was an orchard and between the trees you could see the red brick of the landlord's mansion house.

Mariika was the first to undress and jump into the water.

The others were undressing when suddenly a small bow-legged dog ran barking at them from the orchard. Soon two fine ladies appeared from among the trees. A long-legged boy in knee-pants, the landlord's son, followed.

The girls were caught unawares. The ladies were so close, only a few steps away. The girls could see the grimace on the pallid face of the elder lady. As she hissed, "It's simply horrible. There's no escaping them even here. Get out, you filthy things! Now they've dirtied the pond. Get out of here!"

The dog barked and jumped around the lady's legs. The girls snatched their clothes and flew like the wind, making the osier rustle. They stopped out of breath on the other side of the ditch in the sunflower bed. Only here Hvedorka put on her skirt. Then she stuck her head out of the sunflowers and, making a face to imitate the lady's, she squealed, "Oh, oh! It's simply horrible. There's no escaping them even here!" And she put her tongue out at them.

The girls caught on. Poking their heads out of the bushes, they also squealed and teased the grand lady. She got angry and shook her blue parasol at them. The little boy swore at them,

then grabbed a stick and tossed it at the girls. It didn't reach them.

"You missed!" one shouted and, grabbing a clump of earth, threw it back at him. The others followed suit and laughed. Mariika was the first to stop.

"To heck with them. Let's go, girls. They're the bosses now. They can get us in trouble. Let's go."

They ran through the back gardens, past the sunflower bed up to the street. They were already at the fence when Oksana, who was running ahead, stopped short, turned and looked at the girls in fright. "Look, the Cossacks are leading some people. Look!"

They clung to the fence and a row of frightened eyes looked out at the street.

A horseman galloped by. Under the horse's hooves the dust rose and blanketed the street in a dirty cloud. Nonetheless, you could see that a crowd of people was moving along the street. Cossacks with bared sabres rode on either side of five peasants who walked downcast, with heavy steps, their heads bare. They were silent. All that could be heard was the sound of the horses' hooves.

The girls held their breath. One gasped. Hvedorka pushed forward and staked intently. She took a sudden breath as if gasping for air. A twig from the wicker fence crunched in her hand.

"They've taken Dad!"

She turned deathly pale. Her eyes followed the procession down the street. It vanished from sight in the clouds of dust. But you could hear the landlord's gates squeaking, swallowing the crowd and squeaking shut again, while an alarming dust cloud ran along the street and disappeared

far beyond the village. Hvedorka ran home sobbing. The girls were depressed. They began walking away.

Mariika and Oksana started off along the path that ran below the gardens through the aspen grove. They walked in silence, Mariika in front, Oksana behind her. Oksana suddenly asked, "Is it true, Mariika, that the landlord said he won't take any grain from your father?"

"I don't know," the other answered. She thought, "It's true. I heard them speak of it at home," and said, "Maybe he won't. I don't know why."

Here Oksana had to turn off. Mariika went on ahead. Oksana turned in at the potato patch and went on to the house. She walked slowly and unwittingly recalled first the angry lady with the blue parasol, then the crowd in the dusty street. And she recalled Hvedorka, how she turned completely pale and her frightened eyes. And it hurt.

*

Grandpa had already taken the cows to the steppe, the cattle-shed stood open. Mother was standing with a neighbour in the sun on the porch. Oksana ran to them and told them she had seen prisoners. They were being driven along the street. The women had seen them, too. They were from Katsaivka, all of them. Only Semyon, Hvedorka's father, is from here. But he hid in Katsaivka. Well, they caught them.

Oksana was sad. And the kerchief, lying across her knees, seemed to have faded all at once. She remembered how (before there were any Cossacks) once after a meeting, right here, on these logs, Grandpa had said to Semyon, for all to hear,

"Good boy, Semyon! You're a poor man, and you're looking out for the poor. Good work, son!" and he had thumped him on the shoulder.

Grandpa, after all, is gray and wise. Does he know what happened?

She was sad. Her heart ached.

The girl ran into the garden. She watered her flowers. But still she was depressed. The neighbour went home and mother lay down for a nap. What heartache! Then she went out of the yard, walked across the stubble and headed straight for Grandpa who was with the cows beyond the burial mound by the buckwheat.

There she stayed until evening. When the sun set she came home with Grandpa. She was a little more cheerful. She went to bed hopeful. After all, Grandpa said that they might be released.

*

The next day Oksana woke up before the sunrise, as always. From Grandpa's face she immediately guessed that something unusual had happened. He smiled and winked at her gayly.

"You might as well hunt for the wind in the field. They've escaped."

"Who?"

But she had already guessed. Her eyes sparkled.

"And Hvedorka's?"

"Yes. All of them. They dug a passage out of the stable. The guards heard them, but too late. They were already running. What shooting there was! But night is our native mother. Try to catch them!"

He laughed with his eyes, delighted that the fugitives were so lucky. He looked at his granddaughter, at her shining eyes and smiled. Oksana

was also happy as she herded the cows out to the steppe.

Until dinner she tended the cows with the other girls. They played jackstones and embroidered. After dinner the boys joined them and started to tease. One threw a stone, another threw something else. One grabbed Oksana's red kerchief and started to play "revolution". The girl got angry, "They'll tear it!" The boys paid no attention to her. Luckily, she got it back. Mariika helped her. Then they walked away from the others.

They drove the cows right up to the burial mound. There they sat under a stook of wheat, embroidering, while the cows grazed in the stubble. There was complete silence around them. Far away they could hear the sound of a scythe. Someone had still not harvested his grain.

The girls bent over their sewing and two voices began to hum a song. From behind the stook, a sunbeam fell onto their work. It sparkled on their needles and turned the red cross-stitching to gold.

"Oh, how pretty! Mariika, what if thread was really golden!"

Oksana leaned back and looked at the cloth with awe. She glanced aside: the calf was in the buckwheat! If it were at the edge at least, but no, it had made its way into the middle.

"Wait till I get you!"

She jumped up and ran after the calf, stumbling through the tall buckwheat. Suddenly she stopped, dead. A man lay right at her feet: pale, bareheaded, his eyes like dark spots staring at her. They were both silent. Then the spots of eyes seemed to come alive and the man said, "Did I

scare you? Don't be afraid little girl. I won't hurt you."

He smiled, as if in pain. Oksana trembled, but remained standing. The man spoke again, "Is there anyone around?"

The girl looked around at the steppe, the stooks, and said, "No one."

"Good."

He was silent. His eyes examined the girl from head to foot. He spoke again, "Your dress is patched. You must be poor."

"Yes, we are."

He was silent again. Then he rose on his elbow and whispered, "Then listen, I'm hiding from the Cossacks. But don't tell anyone or they'll kill me. D'you understand?"

Oksana nodded. Then he asked if she had any water. She did, in a bottle in her sack. She looked around. There was no one in sight. Then she sat down quickly, like a quail, disappearing into the buckwheat. She handed the bottle of water to the man. He leaned foreward and gulped it down. Then he put the bottle on the ground and smiled at the girl again, as if in pain.

"Grow up to be a good strong girl," he said, "and be happy. Ah, I feel better already. I've been burning inside since the middle of last night. And there was no dew at night. I thought I'd burn up."

Oksana gained courage and asked, "Where were you, Uncle? How did you get here?"

The man was silent. Then he said, "We escaped during the night. They caught us yesterday and brought us to this village and locked us in the landlord's stable. They would have shot us, but we escaped. We dug a passage out. Ha!"

He showed her his hands, bloody and black

from the earth. "D'you see what we dug with! The nights are short in summer. If you lose a minute you won't gain it back. We had to make it by sunrise. Well, we made it. But the guards heard us and started to shoot. The night was dark. We scattered. Try and catch us!"

He had reached the stubble when he had been shot in the leg and fell. He crawled on. It kept getting lighter. He was losing a lot of blood and was getting weak. Then he hid in the buckwheat.

"Did they all escape? Was anyone killed?"

"No, no one was killed."

"Are they still hunting for us?"

"Yes. When I was home at dinner, Dad said they'd ridden to Katsaivka. But they didn't find anyone. Grandpa says, 'Try and find the wind in the field.' "

"Of course, if it wasn't for my leg. But I can't move. And how do you hide in the buckwheat if it's only a patch in the middle of the steppe? I'll have to do it, though. I'll lie here the night and another day. Then I'll start crawling towards the woods, over there on the horizon."

"Maybe they won't find you," Oksana said hopefully, "And when I come back with the cows tomorrow, I'll bring you some food and water, a whole bottlefull."

The man smiled and passed his hand, dirty from the earth and stained with blood, over her blond hair.

"Dear little girl! You bring it. But not a word to anyone in the village."

"No. Do you think I'm dumb?"

She rose. It was evening and the last rays of the sun poured blood on the white buckwheat. She took a step, then stopped and called back softly, "Don't be afraid, Uncle. I won't tell."

Then Oksana chased the calf out of the buckwheat. She did not hurry back to the stook where Mariika was sitting so that she could calm down at least a little. Mariika finally had to call to her.

"What were you doing in the buckwheat?" she asked when Oksana finally came up to her.

"I wasn't doing anything."

"Don't lie," Mariika said gazing intently at her friend. "What did you find there?"

Oksana held her breath. Barely able to hold back her alarm, she shrugged. "What could I have found there? I dropped my needle," she invented quickly. "It's good it had a thread in it."

"Needle!" Mariika squinted at her. "Then why are you blushing like that?"

"I'm not blushing! Why do you keep pestering me? You always pester me."

Mariika got angry.

"Is that so? So I'm only a pest, not a friend!" She fell silent and went back to her sewing, with an injured air.

Oksana tried to embroider but couldn't.

"Come on, let's drive the cows home, Mariika," Oksana said consolingly after a long, depressing silence.

"Go on, if you want to," Mariika answered coldly.

Oh, no. She wasn't that dumb. "You're just waiting for that," Oksana thought, "I'll leave with the cows and you'll follow my tracks into the buckwheat." The girl was struck with horror from the thought. She waited patiently until Mariika got up first.

They drove the cows home together, but separately, never uttering a word the whole way. The silence began to depress Oksana. She felt sorry for her friend. "I offended her, it wasn't

fair of me." But that unpleasant thought disappeared as soon as she remembered the man in the buckwheat. On the contrary, she was glad and proud of the fact that she had held her tongue and kept her promise, not a word to anyone.

They were not far from the village when Mariika said unexpectedly, "Well, Oksana, you're some friend!"

"What do you mean 'some friend'?" Oksana answered happily, happy that Mariika had spoken.

"No friend! True friends never have secrets from each other."

"I'm not hiding anything from you."

"Don't lie. You think I'm a dope? I saw everything."

"What did you see?" Oksana stopped.

"Everything. I saw how you looked around, then took the bottle from your sack and crouched down in the buckwheat. Who did you give a drink to?"

Oksana froze. The thought "It's all over!" shot through her like lightning. There was no use in pretending now. She understood that. She didn't know what to do. She looked at Mariika with horror. Then, in desperation, covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

Mariika had never seen Oksana in such misery. She, too, became flustered. She tried to comfort Oksana, but to no avail. Oksana was sobbing so that she couldn't hear a word. When Mariika finally said, "Hey, shush! There are people there!" Oksana stopped crying.

The girls were silent as the hay-makers passed them. Then Mariika reproached Oksana, saying, "Silly! Do you think I'd tell anyone? Who is he?"

There was nothing more for Oksana to hide. She told Mariika about the man in the buckwheat,

repeating her conversation with him. "But not a word to anyone, Mariika, or they'll kill him," she warned at the end of her story.

"Don't you think I understand!" Mariika said heatedly.

Then they agreed to take the cows out together the next morning. Mariika would also bring along some food. Then they parted.

*

Oksana drove the cows home. From her face you could tell she had a secret. Grandpa sat on a bench, smoking his pipe. He squinted at her, "Oh-oh, it looks as though you've gotten into some mischief."

"No," the girl answered nervously and lowered her eyes. She was silent. Then she thought, "Grandpa is on our side. He would never tell anyone." And, wavering for a while, she told him all about the man in the buckwheat.

Grandpa thought for a while then told her not to say a word to anyone else, no matter what.

Of course not! Didn't she understand? They'd kill him. She didn't even tell her parents. Perhaps Grandpa told them, because when they sat down to supper Father suddenly asked, "What did you see in the buckwheat?"

Oksana grew cold. Grandpa reassured her. "Speak up, child. There are no strangers here."

The girl told her story again, how she had stumbled upon him, what they had said, what he looked like.

"He's wounded in the leg. His trousers are torn to the knee. His leg is all bloody. He can't even move. He said he'd stay there that night and another day and then crawl into the woods."

Father was pensive. Then he said, "It's all right. Keep quiet about it."

He left the house right after supper. It was night, everyone had gone to bed, but he was still walking about somewhere.

Oksana could not sleep. She stared into the darkness and listened nervously. A thunderstorm was approaching. At first a peal of thunder rang out far away and all was silent again. Under the window leaves from the aspens rustled anxiously. Young men walked along the street, singing.

The young voices died out somewhere beyond the house. Again there was silence. Suddenly there was a flash of light in the house, as if someone had struck a match. A shot, as if fired from a cannon rang out in the meadow. Even the window panes rattled. There was another flash and a crash in the steppe. It was the thunder. The storm broke behind the house. For an instant it was caught up in the trees in the orchard, then it tore itself loose and went on. Rain fell noisily, refreshing everything about.

Mother prayed to God and crossed herself. Oksana hid her face in her hands. Her thoughts, like paint brushes, painted a picture: night in the steppe, thunder, the man lying in the buckwheat with only a shirt on, and the barren, silent steppe. The picture was in colour. Then it began to fade. Or perhaps it became hazy and grey from the rain, with dark spots for the stooks. Oksana fell asleep.

She woke up. Someone made the door creak. It was Father. It was dark and quiet in the house. Somewhere far away there was a rumbling noise and then silence. Under the windows the aspens whispered wearily.

Father undressed and lay down on the bed. All was silent. Oksana could not sleep. She

heard Mother ask, "Why did you come back so soon?"

"Nothing doing," Father said wearily. He was silent for a moment. Then, in a whisper, he started to explain, "Gritsko and I had already ridden out of the village. And there were the soldiers coming towards us. 'Who are you? Where are you going in the middle of the night?' And they sent us back. It's lucky we got away. We said, we wanted to bring the sheaves in before the rain, and they let us go."

"What'll you do now?"

"We'll go tomorrow morning."

"Morning?" Mother said anxiously.

"Morning is safer than such a night. The village is full of soldiers. Maybe they'll leave by morning. We'll go for the wheat, and bring him back under sheaves."

Oksana pricked up her ears. She raised her head and turned it towards them. Father heard her, "Is that you, Oksana?"

"Who is he, Dad? Who will you bring back?"

"No one," and he added gently, "Sleep, little one."

For a while silence reigned in the house. One might think everyone was asleep, but no. Father suddenly raised his head and asked quietly, "Oksana, are you sleeping?"

"No, Dad. What is it?"

"You didn't tell anyone besides us, did you?"

"Oh, no," she replied hastily and felt her cheeks flushing. "I'm glad it's dark," she thought and asked, "Why?"

"Nothing. Go to sleep."

Oksana turned towards the wall but continued to listen intently. Maybe Father would say something else about the man in the buckwheat.

"Musii ran to the landlord," Father said after a long silence. Mother did not answer.

"That's why landlord agreed not to take his grain," Father continued. "He went to pay up his debt."

"Pay his debt?" Mother did not understand. "Why at night?"

"In the day time he listens to what the people are saying. When it gets dark he runs off to the landlord to report to him."

"What do you mean?" Mother was even indignant.

"You heard me!"

*

When Oksana woke up the next morning she went straight to her mother. "Has Dad gone already?"

"No," Mother sighed.

"What will happen now?" the girl asked anxiously.

Mother reassured her. "If Father said he'd help, he'll think of something. He went to our relatives in Katsaivka. He'll get a cart from them."

"Meanwhile, take the cows out. I've prepared some food for him."

Just then Grandpa entered. He gave Oksana his pouch. Perhaps the man smoked.

"But be careful!"

"Of course."

Oksana led the cows out into the street. When she passed Galushchikha's yard she shouted to Mariika to join her, as they had agreed. But Mariika was not going out today.

"Mother won't let me," she said. "She said to let them graze in the garden till dinner. She says it's too wet and cold."

"Yes, it's cold," Oksana said and added, "and someone is not only cold, but hungry, too."

Mariika understood and lowered her eyes. Nevertheless, she asked, "Do you have something for him?"

"Of course."

Mariika, having recovered from her embarrassment, lifted her eyes, "My bundle was ready last night. When Mother found out. . . ."

"Your mother found out?" Oksana turned pale. "Did you tell her?"

"They saw my bundle and forced me to tell them. They scolded me so! They even beat me!"

"What for?"

"They said if he escaped from under arrest and if Denikin's men learn that you brought him food, they might even burn the house down. Oh, Oksana, be careful!"

Oksana turned cold inside. But she didn't show her fear to Mariika. She shrugged and spoke with deliberate calm, "Well, that's if they find out. I'm not so dumb any more. I won't be like I was yesterday. I'll be a hundred times more careful!"

She turned and ran after the cows.

*

The steppe was bare. The sheaves were turning dark, they were disheveled by the wind. Here and there cows wandered among them. In the distance the strip of buckwheat could be seen. As ill luck would have it, someone was mowing the barley close by. It was very close to the buckwheat. Now she would not be able to take him the food.

Oksana felt sad.

She left the cows to graze and stood by the sheaves, lost in thought. She glanced at the mower. No, he'd notice her. She'd go into the buckwheat and he'd guess and come after her to see what was there. No, she'd better wait. Maybe he'd sit down to rest or to sharpen his scythe.

She stood by the stook, holding the bundle and the bottle. "What if I run into the buckwheat, as if after a quail, give it to him and run back out again? I'll wait till the mower gets to the end of the row and turns the other way."

Suddenly she squinted. Her heart turned cold. Half a mile from the burial mound three horsemen were galloping towards them.

They rode up to the mower and then spun around. Perhaps they had asked him something. Then one shouted and galloped into the buckwheat! Into the buckwheat he flew, along one edge, then right towards the centre. He stopped! He shouted and waved. The other two galloped towards him.

At that instant it seemed to Oksana that a mountain had crashed down on her head. She fell to the ground, burried her face in her hands and stuck her head, like a frightened quail, into a sheaf of wheat. She was trembling violently.

The silence lasted for a second, perhaps a minute. Suddenly there was a bang, like the crack of a whip. Then everything was still. Then there was another bang. A little later the Cossacks tore past her.

Oksana was afraid to look up. Finally, gaining courage, she glanced out of the sheaf. The steppe was gloomy. Maybe it just seemed that way. Shadows cast by the clouds roamed over the stubble, as if in silent despair. They were moving

faster now. The Cossacks, like three crows flying low over the earth, raced across the shadows. And to one side the buckwheat lay flat, trampled by their horses' hooves.

The girl suddenly stopped breathing and seemed to hear the words: "Musii ran to the landlord to pay up his debt." It was Father speaking. Mother didn't understand, "What do you mean?" "In the daytime he listens to what the people are saying. When it gets dark, he runs off to the landlord to report to him."

"Oh, Mamma!" she cried in anguish. "It was Musii's doing. He learned about the man from Mariika. What have I done!"

She twisted the corners of her red kerchief and ripped it in her grief. Bare-headed, with the kerchief dragging behind her, she wandered into the buckwheat. She stopped. At her feet her fugitive lay on his back, motionless. There was a dark blotch on his forehead above his brows, and a red pool of blood under his head.

She gazed at him unseeingly. Then she bent down to the cold man and covered his face with her red kerchief. She stood some more, bowed down by grief. Then slowly, on tip-toe, she walked out of the buckwheat.

She moved through the stubble like ghost with wide open eyes staring straight ahead. The shadows of the clouds moved on, their black wings touching her. The horizon was clear, the blue sky, embroidered with sunshine, gazed secretly into her eyes and waited.

Oles Gonchar

SUNFLOWERS

While waiting for someone to fetch the collective farm chairman, the sculptor sat on the office porch drinking mineral water. It was an unusually hot day. The branches of the young trees hung limply, as if they would curl up and hide in their own shade. The deserted yard, so spacious, hot and sandy, resembled a bit of desert cast down here quite by chance. It was the lunch hour and every living thing had sought the peace and protection of the shade. From time to time the clicking of an abacus could be heard from the office and above that the buzzing of the bees in the flowers. The sculptor was relaxing after the noise and commotion of the city and the long trip. He took off his tie, unbuttoned his collar and felt nearly as comfortable as if he were at home.

This pleasant state was suddenly dispelled by a group of half-naked boys, burnt nut-brown by the sun. They scooted out from around the corner and stopped short at the sight of the middle-aged stranger in a white suit, wondering who he could be.

"Maybe he's a lecturer, or another Candidate of Science?"

"He's probably here about crop rotation."

"Or about the merino sheep."

"Look how bald he is!"

The sculptor chuckled good-naturedly. In his mind's eye he could see their lithe bodies in clay, then in bronze and, finally, adorning the town park.

Just then the chairman, a jovial, apple-cheeked man with keen eyes appeared. He knew the sculptor had come to do a portrait head of Melania Chobitko, a well-known farm woman.

"We'll have it all set up in no time," he said. "Melania will be along soon." Then he invited the visitor into his office.

The large, sunny office was spick and span. There were several red banners ranged along a wall.

They sat looking at each other in silence for several moments. The chairman resembled a merlin, bright-eyed, alert, and short-necked. At first the sculptor was surprised by the contrast between the carved desk set and polished desk top and the chairman's sunburned hands, the black sleeves of his jacket. Yet, in this, too, he found a charm all its own. The gnarled hands were a worthy subject for any sculptor.

"What can you tell me about her?" he asked, settling back and crossing his legs. "All I know is what I've read in the papers."

"I really don't know what to say," the chairman replied, wondering what this bald man with the well-fed face wanted of him. "She's one of a kind. Very modest and hard-working. Everyone respects her hereabouts. She received a Gold Star for raising maize. This year she's trying her hand at sunflowers."

"Yes, yes, that's all very well, but that's not what I want to know. I'd like to know about her as a person, about her soul, if I may say so, and not her work record."

The chairman sighed. How was he to guess what each of them wanted: one wanted to hear all about her work record, another wanted to know about her soul, and a third about something else again.

"You'll see, she's every kind and soft-spoken. As for her soul," here the chairman chuckled and looked up at the ceiling. "I don't know whether you'll ever get to know her soul."

"Why not?"

"Oh, well. A person's soul is something very special. You need to find the key to it first. But what do you want to know about that for? If you're doing her bust you need her face, don't you?"

"There's more to it than that." The chairman felt he was out of his depth. "The features are important, but true beauty. . . ."

Someone knocked softly.

"Come in!" the chairman called.

The door opened and a well-built young girl in a black woollen jacket adorned by a Gold Star entered. She had a white shawl on her shoulders.

"Did you want to see me, Ivan Fyodorovich?"

"Yes. I want you to meet the sculptor who has come to do a bust of you."

In a glance the sculptor realised why all the photographs he had seen of her in the press showed her in profile. Melania was no beauty, and the photographers had done their best to make her appear more attractive. They had succeeded. But what was he to do?

The chairman offered her a chair and looked on encouragingly, admiringly, as if she really were a beauty. Perhaps that is how she appeared to him. However, she herself was quite aware of her shortcomings and seemed terribly embar-

rassed by the sculptor's searching gaze, as though she were in some way at fault. She was very ill at ease, her shoulders, hands, feet, her entire body seemed to get in her way.

"There's going to be an exhibition, Melania, and our honoured guest here is going to do a bust of you."

He looked at her with a twinkle in his eye, the sculptor followed his gaze, and she herself seemed to look at herself from a side.

"Really!" she said, dropping her eyes and blushing crimson. "Couldn't you find someone more suitable?"

The sculptor was observing her and did not like what he saw. Melania seemed bent on destroying all his plans. She was constrained, awkward, and was becoming more so with each passing minute. He realised that a country girl would find it difficult to pose for an imposing sculptor from the city, trying to please him, yet not knowing how. He waited for her to relax, to be herself, but in vain! She was on pins and needles, she kept smiling awkwardly at the chairman, raising her handkerchief to her lips each time. At first this gesture seemed amusing, but then it began to irritate him. Perhaps she did not know how to behave differently, perhaps this affectation had become a part of her and could not be overcome? Besides, why was she dressed as if she were going to a village wedding? Ah, Melania, I'll have a hard time trying to do your portrait!

The conversation lagged. Each time she said something she would glance at the chairman, as if to ask: did I say the right thing? The sculptor felt sorry for her. She was so buxom and strong, so healthy looking, yet so helpless. If she were

given half a chance she would probably be only too happy to have the chairman talk for her, pose instead of her, anything at all, to save her all this bother. "Is she always like that?" he wondered nervously. "Doesn't she possess any spark of originality at all?"

"Do you have a large family, many friends?" he asked, trying a new approach.

Melania blushed again.

"Yes, I have a lot of relatives," she replied in a barely audible voice after a pause. "And friends. Which of my friends would you like to know about?"

"She's not married yet," the chairman said crossly.

He seemed to have put his foot in it again. But no matter what avenue of approach he tried, he could not get through to her.

"Nothing will come of this," he said to himself angrily. "I'm wasting my time here. I'd better get back before it's too late. But how can I bow out graciously? After all, it's not her fault. Nor mine, either, if it comes to that."

"This is your big chance, Melania," the chairman said jovially. "There was a time when they only did statues of goddesses, but now it's our turn. That's progress for you. Aren't I right?"

"I'd much rather you did my friend Ganya."

"Ganya's a fine girl, but don't you be so modest. Go ahead and have your statue made. Now there's another question: where shall we put up our guest?"

"Oh, I won't be here long," the sculptor said, paving the way. "I might be leaving tomorrow."

"What? Can you do it in an evening?" The chairman was amazed.

"Actually, I'll be doing all the work back home, in my studio. I'll just do a few sketches here." The sculptor sounded a bit apologetic. "I have my own method. The main thing, as I see it, is to get a mental picture of the person, and then. . . ."

"That's up to you," the chairman interrupted. "It's not for me to judge your method. But it is our duty to put you up. Wait a minute and we'll see."

"What's there to see," Melania said softly. "If he came on my account, he might as well stay at my place. He won't be putting anyone out."

"Right," the chairman said. Evidently he had expected her to invite the sculptor. "Your place is nice and quiet, there aren't any children running about. I'll leave it to you, then."

They rose. The sculptor headed towards the corner of the room, where he had left his suitcase, but Melania was quicker than he and no matter how he protested, she insisted on carrying his bag.

She crossed the yard quickly. The sculptor could barely keep up with her. Then, as never before, he felt he was getting old.

Melania's house was straight out of a picture book: it was cool, clean and green, with fresh grass on the floor. The whitewashed oven was decorated with roosters, and an embroidered cloth covered the table. A book stand occupied the corner where icons would have hung of yore.

Soon an array of plates and bowls were placed on the table. The sculptor looked on apprehensively: he was thinking of his ulcer.

"Please don't put so many things out, I'm on a diet," he said.

"What can you have?" Melania seemed confused for a moment.

"Please don't bother."

"Well then, tell me what you can have and I'll give you that. Can you have cream? Eggs? Milk? Honey? Take what you want, because I don't know what you can have." She set everything out and handed him a clean towel.

He sat down to the table and every piece stuck in his throat. He'd be leaving tomorrow, having accomplished nothing. Another failure. "Perhaps my sight is failing? Perhaps I can't see the things I used to?" he wondered, swallowing Melania's fragrant home-made white bread with difficulty. "Why can't I do a plain peasant woman? I came here to gain a better understanding of the working man, of his exalted, noble mission in life. And how does it end? For shame! I become disillusioned and scurry off. What will the chairman think of me, or this simple, naive and kind Melania?" The sculptor had never paid much attention to people like them before, but now he valued their opinions, he was concerned by what they might think. "Perhaps someone else might have done the portrait?" It was a bitter thought, one which made him go over all his colleagues in his mind, especially the younger, talented ones. "Perhaps their eyesight is keener, perhaps I'm slipping, perhaps I'm mistaken about some things, and can't understand or discover the key to her soul?"

In the meantime, Melania had changed in the adjacent room and now stood in the doorway in her work clothes, barefoot, attractive and trim.

"I'll have to go now. There's the sunflowers to see to. Make yourself at home. This is your bed, here are the clean sheets."

"Thank you."

Melania left. In a moment darkness descended upon the house. She had closed the shutter from the outside, concerned lest her distinguished guest be too hot.

In the hours until evening the sculptor rested up, did several sketches of the boys he had seen near the office, and was taken around by the chairman. They saw the different cattle sheds, the smithy, the power station. The news of his arrival had spread by word of mouth, and everywhere they went the villagers greeted the sculptor with genuine hospitality. When they stopped at the dairy the dairymaids surrounded him, wanting to know whose busts he had made, how they had come out, and how he intended Melania to pose.

"Make her so that everyone stops to look, she deserves it!" they said.

When they entered the smithy the smiths took a break, lit up and answered his questions readily. He wanted to know who had planted the flowers all around the smithy.

"The girls did. They've planted them everywhere: near the office and around the clubhouse, and even here, at the smithy. It all began when Melania. . . ."

There was that Melania again! No matter where he went, she had already been there.

"Is she really so good at everything?"

"That shows you don't know her. There's not another girl like her."

"She's always in the fields at sunrise."

"Make her as beautiful as she is. You're a sculptor, you have the talent to do it."

The talent to do it! The sculptor was both touched and depressed by the respectful interest the collective farmers showed him and his art. He felt he did not deserve such admiration and

trust. His conscience bothered him, he felt like a man who was unwittingly taking credit for something that did not belong to him.

He was becoming more and more convinced that the sooner he left the better. He had no right to become a burden to these honest working people, concealing his ineptitude from them, taking advantage of their hospitality. Here they were, going out of their way for him, expecting something of him, while he.... What could he do to please them? The best thing was to get out! Yes, he was bothered by how they would accept his retreat. It did not take much imagination to foresee that: he, and not Melania, would be fully to blame. No matter whether he did her portrait or not, she was a "real beauty" to them.

"This is our power station," the chairman said as they climbed the dam, and he pointed to a large red brick building at the other end. "Isn't it a beauty?"

"Yes," the sculptor agreed, stopping to look at the raging waterfall and the mist that rose over the foaming water. "When did you build it?"

"It was put into operation two years ago, but we started building it during the war, in 1944. This whole dam was put up by our girls and women. They are really wonderful. If I had your talent I'd do busts of all our collective farm women, they're the true heroines of our times!"

"Why don't you try?" the sculptor said and smiled. "Then you'll see it's not all that simple."

"I didn't say it was. But they deserve it, they honestly do! Just look back a bit. While we were still fighting the war, they were busy on the home front, pulling the threshers across the fields themselves, putting up a dam like this, ready-made for us when we returned. Do you think it was easy

to move those mountains of sod? And, by the way, Melania was among the best, driving herself day and night."

The sculptor listened to the chairman speaking of her, he tried to imagine her dragging a thresher across a field or pushing a wheelbarrow at the dam site, but nothing could change his first impression of her, she was still as unattractive, awkward and constricted as she had been in the office that morning. In vain did Ivan Fyodorovich try to improve matters and impress him with Melania's feats. "I appreciate her heroism in everyday affairs, her wonderful achievements, but can this really compensate for that which she so sadly lacks in personality?" he wondered.

"The people here are really splendid, Ivan Fyodorovich, and I understand your feelings about them. But I'd like you to understand me, too."

"What is there to understand? You've decided to leave, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"All right. I have to go to the district centre tomorrow anyway, and I can drop you at the station, so's we won't have to send a special team of horses for you."

Their parting was chilly. Ivan Fyodorovich muttered that he had to see the tractor drivers and headed across the dam towards the steppe, while the sculptor headed home, as he considered Melania's house.

To his dismay, he could not locate it. All the houses seemed alike: all had a blue trim, as Melania's house did, all had electric wires disappearing under the eaves, all reflected the crimson sun in their windowpanes as it set beyond the river and the hill.

"That's a fine how d'you do! Getting lost in broad daylight! Which way do I go now?" he mused, stopping by a gate.

Just then he noticed a cloud of pink dust at the far end of the street: it was the herd returning from the pasture. He would have to turn off somewhere.

But which way?

The rescue party awaited him. It was the very same crowd of boys he had sketched. They stood now with their hands behind their backs, trying not to laugh. They had probably been following him all along, they had seen him pass Melania's house and stop in confusion at the sight of the herd which now blocked the entire street.

"We'll take you home," a blond boy of about eight offered. "We know where you're staying."

"Tell me."

"At Melania Chobitkova's house."

"Right."

"But we'd better hurry or you'll get dusty."

"Won't you?"

"We don't mind."

The sculptor followed the boys shamefacedly.

"The houses all look alike, that's what confused me."

"They're very different inside."

"I'm sure they are."

"They all have the same blue trim because they were freshened up for May Day. The manager brought the same kind of blueing for everyone. He said it was so that there wouldn't be any arguing. Here, this is where you live."

"Yes, I've recognised it. Thank you, boys."

"You're welcome."

The sculptor entered, pulled the gate shut and sighed with relief.

Melania was not back yet.
She returned after sunset, carrying an armful of meadow grasses and cornflowers she had gathered along the way.
She found her lodger in the garden. He was wandering about, smelling and peering at the green clumps.
"Do you find it interesting?"
"Yes. Is this all there is to your garden?"
"I don't need any more. My real garden is over there," she said, waving in the direction of the hill. This is just to brighten up the yard."
"There are only flowers here. Marigolds, pansies and violets. Where are your sunflowers, and your maize?"
"Everything's over there," Melania said with a smile and waved towards the hill again.
The sculptor did not smile.
"But what about tomatoes, cabbages, parsley and such?"
"I get that from the farm. Nearly everyone prefers to. The vegetables are better and they ripen sooner."
"Is the climate different?"
"No, its the irrigation. If you raise cabbages yourself you spend the whole summer watering them, and who wants to bother? You have no time to read, no time for films. We put up a pumping station for the farm."
"Well! I see that the peasant's household is changing radically. I guess no one sows buckwheat or corn on their private plots any more, do they?"
"What for? They're all in the fields. You can't introduce crop rotation in your garden. That's why we prefer to plant flowers. As for all the rest, I put my trust in my fields. If the farm is prosperous, I will be, too."

"So that all you have is out there?"

"All I have is there and all of me is there," she said and smiled again.

The sculptor liked her this way, smiling and at ease. He wanted to see the expression on her face, but it was getting dark and he could see nothing save her dark form.

"We'd better go in," Melania said, heading towards the door. "There's a Komsomol meeting tonight. Do you have the key?"

"Yes, if I didn't lose it."

"I usually leave it here behind the shutter. You do, too."

"But I'll probably be leaving tomorrow."

"So soon?"

"Yes. Perhaps I'll come back in the autumn."

"Ah. Some day you surely will. Why don't you just say that I'm not the right type?" she thought. "Well," she added aloud, "it's not for me to judge." Melania unlocked the door. She sounded hurt.

He felt guilty, he wanted to console her, to explain somehow, but would she understand him?

He sat down on the bench outside, too ashamed to enter the house. Melania pottered about, he could hear the radio. What could she be thinking of him? She certainly realised the situation, she was not as naive as he had taken her to be at first.

Soon a group of her girl friends came to call for her.

They streaked by him in mock fright at seeing a stranger outside the house and a moment later he could hear their chatter and laughter. They spoke of someone named Dmitro from a neighbouring farm, and he guessed from their teasing that Dmitro was Melania's suitor. Nor was he

surprised by now that a young man could be in love with her.

It was a beautiful, starlit night, a night made for singing. The air was cool, filled with the fragrance of night-blooming flowers.

A loudspeaker near the village clubhouse was broadcasting a concert from the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow.

Melania, who had changed and was nicely dressed, appeared, followed by her friends. She said that supper was on the table, took her friends' arms and they all disappeared in the dark. He could hear their laughter in the distance and knew that they might very well be laughing at his expense but did not feel offended. He rose wearily and headed for bed.

The next day the sculptor left with Ivan Fyodorovich.

He did not even have a chance to say good-bye to Melania, for when he awoke his special breakfast awaited him, but she was nowheres to be seen. She had already left for work. He locked the friendly little house and stuck the key behind the shutter, as he had been instructed to do the night before.

Now he was on his way in the chairman's wagon. He felt bad, as if he were running away.

"Ivan Fyodorovich, do you think we could stop off at wherever Melania is working for a minute?"

"Certainly. It'll take us a bit out of our way, but no matter. Step on the gas, Misha," he said to the driver.

The narrow road wound between clay hills covered with bushes. The blue sky came down to the very road up ahead, while behind them the lazy river meandered among low marshy mead-

ows, and the whitewashed village houses clustered along its bank. There was Melania's house with the winged shutters. It faced south, its windows glittered at a slant, as if they were turning away from the disappointing visitor.

The horses snorted at the steep rise, and the three men got out of the wagon. As he walked along the edge of the road the sculptor kept picking up clumps of clay, working them in his hand.

"Excellent clay!" he said, turning towards the chairman. "Perfect for modelling."

"And here you are, leaving after a night's stay. To tell you the truth, I had planned it all differently. I thought you'd make something for our clubhouse. You know, something grand. We've tons of clay everywhere!"

They reached the top of the hill. Here the sculptor stopped.

"What's this?" he asked in amazement.

The sight that met his eyes made him catch his breath. There, as far as the eye could see, was a vast plain of golden sunflowers. It was an ocean of stately, full-blossomed plants stretching to the far horizon. Each and every one of them faced its heavenly idol, the Sun. It seemed that they, too, gave off a golden light. Perhaps that is why the impression was one of festive charm, as if they were in the realm of the Sun. The air itself seemed suffused with sunlight.

The driver reined in the horses. He lit a cigarette disinterestedly, while the sculptor and the chairman headed towards the sunflowers. The sun-scorched blossoms enveloped them in a wave of heady, unforgettable fragrance.

"These are Melania's," the chairman said. There was satisfaction in his voice. "It says so

here on this marker. Farther on are the others' sectors."

"It doesn't seem real!" the sculptor breathed. "It's hard to believe that all this magic comes from a grey mass, from the dust, from the earth!"

"It doesn't come of itself. It was planted and nurtured, and so it matured. It's the people, the equipment and nature, of course. There they are, the ones who did it all."

A white kerchief bobbed among the flowers, then another and a third.

"They are real masters. There are masters and, if you wish, inspiration in any job."

The girls were moving between the rows, coming closer and closer to the road. Something was happening to the flowers as they passed: they suddenly came to life, swayed and brushed against each other only to fly apart again, laughing and nodding at the sun.

"What are they doing?"

"Don't you know? That's artificial polination. Why wait for nature to take its sweet time?"

The sculptor recognised Melania out in front. So that's what she was really like! There was something majestic about her movements, her appearance, her stance. She seemed to be floating proudly through the fragrant golden sea, striking her golden cymbals lightly and rhythmically. She was so taken up with her work that she did not notice him. Her face was flushed, glowing with an inner light, inspired. The transformation was amazing: here were beauty, strength and purity of line!

The sculptor suddenly felt the years falling away, a creative urge returning. If he could only remember her as she was now, if he could start working here, this very minute!

"Hello, girls!" the chairman called. "The bees are angry with you for doing them out of a job."

The pollen rose in a golden cloud above the girls' heads, settling on their kerchiefs, their eyebrows and eyelashes.

Melania looked at the sculptor intently, as if trying to recall who he was and why he was here. She was hot from her work, filled with the joy of it and had not yet returned to earth from that abode where she was all-powerful, where she could be herself, relaxed and natural. There was no trace of her former constriction or clumsiness.

"Melania," the sculptor mumbled. He could say no more.

She waited in dignified silence to see what would follow. Her eyes shone, the fragrant sunflowers brushed their heads gently against her shoulders and bosom.

"Melania," the chairman intervened, "our honoured visitor is leaving. He wanted to say good-bye."

"No, I didn't!" the sculptor interrupted decisively. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying. And this will be my studio, right here. Is that clear?"

Melania and her friends exchanged amused glances.

"As you wish."

She entered a new furrow between two rows and a moment later her strong sun-tanned arms were delving into the sunflowers, touching the round blossoms with infinite gentleness, with classic grace.

Her friends followed her example, each one took her place in the row and the hot, rough thicket came to life: the bright sunflowers began

kissing again as the girls moved off towards the far end of the field.

"Throw down my bag," the sculptor said with his back to the wagon. "I'm not going with you."

He stood there transfixed. Everything not directly connected with his vision had disappeared. All he could see now was an ocean of sunflowers, a white kerchief and two graceful arms rising rhythmically to strike their golden cymbals.

A MAN IN THE STEPPE

The steppe was bound by frost. Then suddenly it turned into mud and slash and it became impossible to travel by car or on foot. The tracks dug by the snow ploughs were full of deep ruts. Here the earth was very black and heavy.

It was the middle of winter, but it seemed like autumn. There was no snow, the colours of the landscape were dull, there were turbulent clouds in the cold sky, and the bare, newly planted saplings were swayed by the sharp wind of the steppe.

The deserted steppe, swept by gusts of wind, was wet and water-logged. At dusk it resembled the sea in stormy weather. One felt that there was no life here. Yet, there was. Perhaps it was that tiny dot in the distance which gave it life.

A small truck was making its way along the snow tracks which had been broken up by lorries. It kept plunging into the deep oily ruts and was bespattered with mud. Someone had said that even there, where nothing could pass, this inferior looking toiler of the steppe would pass.

At the wheel of the jeep sat a driver named

Kozhuschenko. Though middle-aged, he was still in his prime. His resilient strength born of constant work was descernible in the hands that clutched the wheel, in his shoulders and neck under the sweater. Not only his hands, his whole body was tense. The jeep was moving along jerkily, it kept skidding and plunging into potholes. Kozhuschenko's eyes were fixed on the rutty road ahead which was hardly visible through the spattered windscreen.

"Will we make it? Do you think we'll get there in time? Will we manage to save them?" the driver's companion kept asking him nervously.

Kozhuschenko replied brusquely, never taking his eyes off the road:

"We'll scrape through somehow."

Dusk fell, but they hardly noticed it. It was light in the steppe, and a full moon was shining in the clouds behind them. Small patches of ice shone in the ruts which seemed as endless as winding front-line trenches. Bare, newly planted trees stood out like wires, and the tops of the high voltage lines were lost in the clouds. Such was the countryside through which the two of them were struggling.

Kozhuschenko's companion was a young lad with a thin face and a longish chin. His unruly hair, ending in dark sideburns, protruded from under his small cap. He was wearing a new coat made of good cloth with a grey astrakhan collar. He should have felt warm in the coat, but he sat huddled up the whole time, burying his head in his collar as though trying to escape from the wind. His name was Seryozha, and he was the son of the chairman of the collective farm. He had finished school the previous year, had intended to study at an institute, but had not passed the

entrance exams and was now temporarily running the club at the collective farm.

One might have thought that he was sorry he was with Kozhuschenko, but, in fact, he had gone at his own wish.

No one in the village would have thought a few hours earlier that such a disaster could befall them. It was a Sunday. Children were skating on the ice in the bay, and occasionally some of them would venture out onto the wide expanse of the frozen Kakhovka Sea. As far as one could see over the grey expanse of storage lake, there were figures, some alone, others in groups. These were fanatic fishermen. They had been sitting there all day, huddled over their holes in the ice and were oblivious to the hard frost. Then, in the early evening, disaster struck.

A hupe piece of ice was broken off by a squall and carried out to sea with the fishermen trapped on it. Fifty people were there on the ice. Almost every family and home was plunged into grief. Women wailed on the hillside and in the village. In the office they were trying frantically to ring the nearest town, but were unable to get through. The wind had probably torn down the telephone wires. The only solution was to send out Kozhuschenko's jeep.

The jeep rushed up the hillside and stopped for a moment amongst the crowd. The chairman of the collective farm was standing there with the wailing women as they gazed out to sea. Seeing the jeep, they all turned to this tarpaulin tent as though it were their last hope of rescue. At this moment Seryozha suddenly shouted to his father that he was going, too.

"We'll get through and rouse everybody!"

He said this in a sudden burst of passion, per-

haps because at that moment he saw the tear-filled eyes of his sweetheart, whose father was among those carried out to sea.

They had been driving for three hours, skidding, getting bogged down and pushing the jeep out onto the track again. Their thoughts were with the men on the icefloe. Were they still alive? Would the ice break up before they had alerted the people in town?

"Maybe they got to them in the boats," Seryozha said. "Did you hear Father saying the long boats were to be sent out after them?"

"Who knows what will happen to them before the boats are pulled off the bank. It's the sea, after all!"

"They've been warned so many times!"

"What's the point of blaming people when they're in trouble? Don't think about that now."

"I think the wind's blowing up."

"It might freeze."

"And the road's all broken up here. When shall we finally get good roads?"

"Who'll build them if we don't do to it ourselves?"

"I wanted to go in for road construction, and get some training, but I wasn't good enough for them. I'd have built good roads, then."

"Well, your road is only just beginning."

The jeep drove down into a gully. At the bottom was an ice-covered pond. The jeep accelerated over it towards high ground. The engine roared. The slope was one of those which make one feel that the engine will not make it and the passengers involuntarily press forward, as though trying to push it themselves. However, there was not enough power, and about half-way up the rise the driver had to reverse down into the gully

and then race up the hill again like a battering ram. The motor failed at the same place again, and the jeep rolled backwards to accelerate once more.

This happened several times. The driver could see nothing, neither the slope nor the broken road. The entire windscreen was smeared with mud.

Kozhuschenko stopped the jeep, got out, wiped the glass and had a look at the road. He found nothing remarkable in this impassable mess. He had spent a good half of his life on roads like this, at the front, when he had driven his lorry loaded with shells over brushwood along the Dnieper, on heavy, oozing sand and, later, in the mountains, where he had driven over ice-bound mountain rivers. The driver had thought of this as normal and was surprised when he was presented with the medal "For Bravery". Nor had he expected it to be easy on the roads of the collective farm. Every summer they were covered by a heavy layer of dust. When he drove the grain to the elevator clouds of dust enveloped the steppe. And in autumn the steppe roads are always a challenge to drivers. He had got used to spending the night in the steppe, to returning home covered with mud to his waist, but this time he could neither return nor spend the night here. He must hurry, he must press on at any cost. Kozhuschenko resented every lost moment, for he felt that the cruel wind beating against the jeep was also thrashing the men on the ice, driving them out into the darkness to meet their doom. He knew that the jeep was unable to make the slope because of its worn tyres. And he thought how ridiculous it was that people should die because of these bad tyres. He had to put some branches or sticks under the wheels, but there were no bushes around.

Before the war blackthorn had grown in this gully, but now there was nothing.
Kozhuschenko took off his sweater and flung it angrily under the front wheel.
Seryozha was standing behind the jeep, ready to push. The jeep jerked forward, the wheels spun round and it began to move up the slope, eventually gaining level ground.
They stood there for a while, unable to believe they had got to the top. Seryozha was covered with mud that had squirted from under the wheels as he had pushed the jeep. In spite of this, his face shone with joy. They had made it!
Standing on the hill, they were hardly able to keep on their feet, as the wind was tearing at them. Kozhuschenko seemed lost as he stood there in his thin velveteen jacket.
Before they set off he ran to fetch his sweater. He returned and shoved it under the seat, a blob of muddy wool pounded by the wheels.
They moved on. The moon had hidden in the clouds. Slanting snowflakes which looked like hail stones danced in the beams of the headlights.
They drove off the deep ruts onto the side of the road and sped over the field sown to wheat where many others had driven before them.
It was getting colder, the ground was freezing solid. This was apparent from the way the jeep kept skidding and lurching. At one point it spun around and ended up facing backwards.
"I'm losing control of it," Kozhuschenko said.
He turned and drove on with increasing speed. They still had a long way to go. Distances in the steppe are measured in dozens of kilometres. The snow was becoming heavier and the wind was blowing in through the gaps in the tarpaulin.

They came to another gully, and he wanted to cross it at a go, pressing down on the accelerator. It seemed that the car would bound over to the opposite side, but then, suddenly, it skidded and the next moment they felt as though they were turning over and falling. When they came to, they could not at once understand what had happened. They were not hurt, however. And the car was still standing. They lept out and saw that they were at the very bottom of the gully. It was deep. They would not be able to get out unaided. The sides, covered with black ice, were steep and as slippery as glass.

Gusts of snow were blowing into the gully, covering the sky and steppe.

"What'll we do?" Seryozha said, trying to see Kozhuschenko through the snow.

"You go on on foot."

"What about you?"

"I'll stay here with the jeep. Someone might come along and help me out. I'll catch up with you."

"I can't go before morning. It's night, there's a snowstorm."

"Keep to the road. There's the high voltage line."

"I can't. I'm not going. I'll get lost in the snow." He almost shouted these last words in a frightened, childish voice.

Kozhuschenko went up to him and looked him in the eye.

"What about the others? Won't they get lost?"

"Say what you like, I can't go. I've got a bad leg. I didn't feel it before, but it hurts now."

Kozhuschenko scowled and said nothing.

"Then I'll go. You stay here."

Seryozha had no time to say anything before Kozhuschenko, in his light velveteen jacket, was out of sight, caught up in the snowstorm.

The engine was turning. Seryozha stood there for a while, then climbed onto the seat and closed the door tightly as though the windscreen and the tarpaulin could shield him from the night, the storm and the raging wind. More than once he had heard of people perishing in the steppe, of how they had been found after a storm, and their frozen bodies, the lifeless remains of what had formerly lived, breathed and laughed, dug out of the snow. No, he did not want such a fate. He had only just begun to live. And he was loved by girls. Why, last night the girl for whose sake he had set out on this journey had kissed him. He could still feel her tender hands stroking his hair. No, he was not going to die. However fiercely the storm raged, he still had shelter. He found comfort in this secure jeep which was warming him with its engine. But would it warm him for long? He glanced at the petrol gauge and saw that the tank was half-empty. And what will happen when it would run out? Was there a reserve? He began to look for a petrol can and came across something soggy and cold on the floor. Kozhuschenko's sweater! Although all the warmth from Kozhuschenko's body had been squeezed out of it on the road, it still seemed to contain something of Kozhuschenko and emanated intense reproach, which made him recoil. Everything suddenly appeared to him in its true light. Why had he refused to go? Why had he lied and said he had a bad leg? Was he a coward? Had he been lying when he had boasted to his girl that he would go to the Antarctic, that he had no fear of the freezing cold and ice?

He wanted to call Kozhuschenko back, to go on instead of him. He lept out of the jeep and fell into a snowdrift which had formed beside the jeep. The sky had disappeared. He could see neither the sky, nor the road, nor the high voltage lines, only the turmoil of snow. The snowstorm was raging. A moment later he was back inside the jeep. The snow on him melted, making his clothes damp.

The engine was still turning. The petrol gauge was illuminated. This feeble light somehow made him feel more secure. He thought of Kozhuschenko struggling through the storm and the wind without his sweater. He imagined how he would finally collapse from exhaustion in a deep rut and how the snow would pile up on top of him. Then the wind would carry his warmth off without a trace. He also thought of a recent news-reel he had seen about the Antarctic. In the last item a tractor driver named Ivan Khmara had been engulfed together with his tractor by the fathomless, icy ocean as those present looked on in horror. And what about the men on the icefloe? Where were they now? Where would the wind blow the icefloe to! Perhaps it had already broken up. Perhaps the deep had already swallowed them, and there was no one left to save, so that Kozhuschenko was risking his life in vain. But if Kozhuschenko did not get through, if he dropped on the way, then he, Seryozha, would also perish. For it seemed that the snowstorm would rage on for hours. The warmth made him feel drowsy. He turned up his collar to blot out the sound of the howling wind and shield himself from the foul weather. He felt as warm and relaxed as though he were at home. He imagined a different steppe around him now, the sunny steppe of summer. He

looked around, and as far as he could see there was a field of wheat. A harvester combine swam across this sea of wheat until the combine operator stopped and asked in a surprised voice, "Have I lost my way?"

When he awoke the engine was no longer running. He turned the starter and pressed the accelerator, but nothing happened. There was nothing to do but wait. Alone, with no warmth, no engine. It had become lighter inside. It was obviously morning. He tried to open the door but it was jammed by snow. He was trapped in the jeep!

Seryozha was terrified. He felt as though he were in a coffin of white snow. Who would ever find him? Who would ever dig him out? Why had he stayed here? He should have gone on. He was young, he was wearing a warm coat. He should have let Kozhuschenko stay here in his thin velveteen jacket.

Poking his hands through the tarpaulin, he began shovelling the snow away. With a great effort he finally opened the door and squeezed out.

It was morning. The sun was apparently rising beyond the gully and the snow drifts, its pale light filling the sky above. This light was the sun's envoy, an element stronger than the storm. It seemed to pierce the opaque vortex.

The wind appeared to have subsided slightly. It looked as though the sun would soon appear and the clean white sheet of snow sparkle in its rays.

Stumbling through snow drifts, Seryozha made his way to the road. On the opposite side of the track, amongst the bushes at the bottom of the gully, he saw a battered lorry half-buried in the snow. Overcome with joy at the hope of seeing another human being, he rushed towards it.

But there was no one inside. The people, having got stuck at the bottom of the gully at night, had apparently pushed on foot like Kozhuschenko. There were some petrol cans in the back of the lorry. Seryozha seized them, but flung them aside in disappointment. They were empty. So he returned to his jeep.

The sun was not visible all day. Towards evening the storm blew up again with greater force. The second night set in. Seryozha watched it come, huddled in his jeep, lacking even the small amount of heat he had had the previous day. The petrol had run out, the engine had stopped.

It was cold and dark in the cabin. His legs were numb with cold and he was unable to open the door. The windscreen was covered with snow, making him feel that he was submerged in a mountain of snow that would press down forever on his frozen jeep.

Seryozha did not sleep that night. Partly, because he was afraid he would freeze, partly, because his imagination haunted him. He kept seeing his father, his mother, his sweetheart with her kind, tear-stained face. They were all questioning him, trying to find out how it had all happened. "Why did you do it? Why didn't you walk along the road like Kozhuschenko did? Were you frightened for your life? You can die here and no one will have anything to praise you for, but you could have been a hero; giving your life in order to conquer the elements and save others. We had a different opinion of you. You were so nice, so cheerful at the club, so popular with the girls. Whenever you came to the animal farm, the milk maids shone with joy. And your father's a real man, a brave soldier. What would he have

done in your place? Would he have acted as you did?"

He felt that the night would never end, that the snowstorm would never subside, and that no one would ever come to rescue him.

However, someone was making the journey. It was still dark when Seryozha heard the cheering rumble of a tractor.

A tractor was moving along the road! It had come for him! But it rumbled on, making for some further destination. Had it not noticed the jeep buried in the snow? Or was it on some other errand? Seryozha was unable to attract the driver's attention, because while he struggled to open the door of his jeep, the tractor roared on and passed out of sight. It was like a death sentence. Nobody would dig him out. Perhaps they would never even know that he had died here. What if Kozhuschenko had not made it and they now had no contact with humanity?

However, a while later Seryozha again heard the tractor. It must have turned back, it was looking for someone in this gully. Seryozha hammered on the door. He shouted, but knew his voice was muffled by the snow.

Yet, they seemed to have heard him, for the tractor stopped. Then he heard voices in the darkness. He distinctly heard someone shout,

"Give me the tow-line!"

The steel tow-line slipped twice, but they finally managed to pull the frozen jeep out and drag it to the top.

"Hello, Snowman!"

These strangers, Kozhuschenko had summoned, joked as they looked with interest at the lad they had found and dug out of the snow in the pale, early morning.

He stood hunched up on the road facing them. His side burns were lost in the strubble of his beard. "His girl friend won't recognise him," Kozhuschenko thought and ran his hand over his own bristly cheek.

"What about the others?" Seryozha asked guiltily.

"They've been saved," Kozhuschenko growled. "A helicopter was called out from Zaporozhye and picked them all up."

We were travelling through the steppe at night in the same jeep. The moon was wandering among the clouds, and the wind beat against the tarpaulin covering.

Kozhuschenko, his hands on the wheel, told me this story calmly. He said Seryozha was still in the hospital suffering from frost-bite, but that he would soon be home.

My thoughts now, though, were not with Seryozha, but with Kozhuschenko and all those like him who are forging over bad roads tonight.

The snow was gone and the road had turned to slush and mud again. The endless steppe engulfed us. Far away I could see a small light. It was moving. Someone was driving a lorry, a car, or a tractor. Hail, unknown light! While you are here, the steppe is alive, for you are the spirit of the steppe. Without you it would be a cold wilderness in the night. I am waiting for you to draw closer. Who will you be?

Yevgen Gutsalo

BATHED IN LOVAGE

In summer they milk the cows in the fields near the oak grove. From afar the grove resembled a solid low ridge, with the leaves on the young oaks a tired green and the spaces between the trunks, filled by the evening air, drenched by the sun, invisible. Everything about the field camp smelled of milk pails, clean white smocks and cow dung drying in the sun.

Uncle Oleksa drove up in his wagon. He was sitting atop a mound of dark green clover with his chin resting on his chest, the row-hide reins hanging limply from his hands and peaceful laziness filling his faded eyes. He was seeped in the smell of clover, tendrils of it hung from his old sun-bleached clothing, and when he stood up in the wagon the high shaky pile of it swayed under him. "Hup!" he grunted, pulling his pitchfork from the luscious, fragrant clover and heaving a forkful into the air. "Hup!" he said as he tossed it down. It fell to the sun-scorched earth and the smell of clover became stronger. A bee buzzed over the little pile and flew off towards the grove. Oleksa spit on his palms, feeling the taut, dry skin, then heaved up another forkfull and tossed it down as the wagon swayed again. The bay horse snorted, lowered its head and sniffed the ground gently. Its nostrils became dilated as it stretched its neck forward.

"Vustya!" Oleksa shouted to a girl who was milking a cow nearby. "Do the boys come calling on you yet?"

Vustya turned her sweet sunburnt face towards him and smiled shyly, revealing two rows of even teeth. She pulled on the teats more vigorously. White streams of milk hit the bottom of the tin pail like rain and slowly covered it. Then they were dissolved in the little lake. The loud sound became duller and more forceful. Vustya saw nothing save the quick streams, she heard nothing except the sound of the milk. The cow stood very still, listening intently, turning her spotted red head to look at Vustya with gentle concern as she might have looked at her calf.

Oleksa unloaded the wagon, resumed his seat, gathered up the reins and repeated: "Well, do the boys come visiting you yet, Vustya?"

She didn't even turn her head from where she sat on her little milking stool with a light blue kerchief tied about her head to shield it from the sun.

"It's time they did. You're a big girl now!" Oleksa continued. Clicking his tongue, he urged the horses on. They moved off slowly, then he clicked his tongue again and they changed into a trot. The iron wheel rims clattered loudly on the hard road, raising puffs of fine grey dust while Oleksa, thin and frail, bobbed up and down on the driver's seat.

Vustya stopped her milking for a moment. She dropped her hands and her fingers brushed against the sharp, dry tips of the grass. She sighed, raised her head and looked at the sky over the shiny red back of her cow. For some reason, she knew not why, she suddenly felt sad. A few hours ago they had been riding along in the farm truck,

singing and laughing and joking, with the road a white ribbon ahead of them and the sun dipping into the warm rye beyond the road. Vustya had laughed and joked together with the rest. They had banged on the roof of the driver's cabin and shouted to him to stop, though there was really no need to do so, they were just having fun. Now she forgot about the laughter, her movements were languid, she did not feel like working. She breathed in deeply and suddenly realised that somewhere in her breast there was a tiny little heart, so small and week and lonely. What if it suddenly stopped? For a moment she thought it actually had stopped and she pressed her hand against it, holding it there until she felt a strong rhythmic thumping and a smile spread over her face.

A hawk was soaring in the sky. It turned its wings lazily, as if climbing an invisible flight of stairs, then floated in the air, its small head and sharp beak pointed downwards; soon it would start flapping its wings again to keep from falling into nothingness. For a moment Vustya felt she was also flying, sadly and slowly, with the cool air streaming by her head. She even dug her heels into the ground to keep from falling. She did not want to make the white streams of milk shoot out from the heavy udder, she wanted to lie in the grass with the stalks rising round her head and body. From below they would seem so tall, they would be propping up the sky, while the clouds floated by, brushing the grass. She did not want to think about anything, she just wanted to lie there with twilight descending upon her and the fragrant grasses and bitter wormwood seeping through her skin.

7-1715

She heard someone talking by the truck where the milk pails were lined up beside Gorpina's checking table. The voice was familiar.

"What'd you come here for?" Gorpina, their bookkeeper, said, laughing. She was forever laughing, even if there was nothing to laugh about. No sooner had she greeted a person than she would burst out laughing. Her laughter was infectious. They said it was a sickness of some kind and when this was mentioned in her presence she would become serious for a moment and say in surprise: "Why, it's no sickness," and would begin laughing again.

"There must be a reason since I'm here," the voice replied.

"What do you want?"

"Never you mind!" The youth sounded calm and confident. "Can't you see my bike's broken?"

Gorpina laughed, as if it were really funny.

"Why did it break?"

"It didn't ask my permission."

She laughed again.

"Why don't you go over to the grove, Gritsko? The tractor drivers left their motorcycles there, maybe they can help you."

"That's a good idea."

She heard a bicycle being rolled through the grass, there was a sudden smell of rubber, machine oil and hot metal. Gritsko stopped by Vustya.

"Hello," he said.

"Good evening," she replied without turning her head.

"Why aren't you milking your cow?"

Gorpina shouted from where she sat:

"Vustya's not milking, she's dreaming!"

And she burst out laughing.

Once again the white streams came to life under her fingers, striking at the foam, raising bubbles in the pail.

"What's the matter, cat got your tongue?"

She said nothing.

"Well, you don't have to talk if you don't want to."

She was silent.

"You're a strange girl. You can't even talk."

And he was off. Vustya sighed. A warm, pleasant feeling spread through her as she thought of the various ways she might have replied to his questions, for all the while he had been standing behind her and she had watched the front wheel moving back and forth by the cow's red flanks, she had been unable to utter a word. A strange excitement had gripped her and so she had milked away feverishly. But now she was calm and could think of Gritsko more sensibly. Was what he had said true, didn't she know how to talk? Of course she did. After all, she wasn't a baby any more. She had always been shy when she was a little girl. She would just gaze at a person or an object silently, her eyes taking in everything. But now she had not even been able to look at Gritsko. Her head simply refused to turn. The excitement had died down, but a strange uneasiness remained. Somehow she still imagined him as he had stood there, rolling his bicycle, as she glanced stealthily at the wheel through the cow's legs. But there was nothing there now. The cow has chewing its cud.

She carried the full pail of milk into the tent. It was twilight, the molten sun hovered in the clouds over the horizon like a burning ember that would soon turn to grey ashes. Then the ashes would turn black, concealing the heat beneath. There was a notebook and a chunk of bread on

the table, for Gorpina believed it was good for her health to eat bread with her milk.

"It took you an awful long time to fill your pail," Gorpina chided, and her dark, sunburned cheeks twitched with annoyance.

Vustya did not feel like answering, but after she had poured the milk into the milk-churn she summoned up her courage and replied:

"There's still time."

Gorpina burst out laughing. Her eyes sparkled with mirth. Vustya did not like her laughter, nor her coarse jiggling cheeks. Why was she laughing? Why was she forever laughing? It must be a sickness. But Gorpina never listened to good advice when she was told to find out what was wrong with her.

Vustya left the tent feeling refreshed. She wanted to think about the village and her mother, of how she would return home, do her chores and make her bed that smelled of wild grasses. She had spread grass under the mattress several weeks before. It was dry and light now. Then her thoughts suddenly jumped to the rustling grass as the bicycle had rolled by and the air had suddenly been filled with the smell of rubber and metal. She thought of Gritsko standing behind her, talking to her when she did not even dare turn and look at him, standing there covered with dust, sunburned, tired and smiling; she imagined his expression, though she had not seen his face, his deep gentle eyes and the shaggy, kind brows above them.

Suddenly she jumped to her feet. Someone had splashed water on her neck. She thought it was one of the boys, but no, it was Varka. She always enjoyed a practical joke. There she stood, her fists on her hips, freckle-faced and big-mouthed.

"What's the matter? Did it burn you?"

Vustya's fright turned to anger, but she said nothing. Then she heard Varka walking off heavily, for she was a fat, buxom girl. How carefree she was, ready to love all the boys with equal fervour. She imagined her face and neck were covered with the traces of their kisses. But why did they all run after her like butterflies flocking round a torch? Vustya washed her hands, then her face and rubbed them dry with a rough towel. Everything seemed to have changed. The calm pensiveness of the evening steppe became a part of her. She took off her shoes and began washing her feet and suddenly said to herself: "That was silly of me! I should have started with my feet."

It was very still.

Vustya stood up and looked around. The blue sky seemed fathomless. The sun had vanished. Far away, at the very edge of the horizon she could see a group of women in white kerchiefs. Their village seemed squat beneath the low grey clouds, the houses and trees were tiny, the streets were narrow, and the smoke rising from the chimneys was barely visible.

She could not endure just standing there. An unseen force was drawing her towards the grove. She left her shoes by the tent and walked barefoot along the cool evening grass. Grasshoppers chirped. Sometimes one or another would pop up like a green comet, fly a few feet through the air and drop into the grass again. She entered the grove and stopped. The young oaks smelled of heavy leaves, firm bark and dust. They were low and grew close together, their branches intertwined. Two of the trees had not taken root and now two small dry trunks stuck out of the ground, forming a little clearing. Three motorcycles lay on

the grass in the clearing. Gritsko was bending down nearby.

"Is that you, Vustya?" he asked, though he saw it was she. "How are things?"

She had not intended to speak to him. She had just come for a walk. If she was bothering him she could leave. She would give him no chance to tease her.

"Still not talking? Well, never mind. I know you don't know how to."

He had spread the various parts of his bicycle on a bit of dark-brown wrapping paper and they glistened with oil.

"I see you're still fussing with it."

"Am I? I thought it was fussing with me."

"I'm sorry I asked you."

"Not at all."

"Then why are you so touchy?"

She felt awkward. But what had been the sense of coming there if she was ready to leave? He might think.... But if she just stood there he would start teasing again.

"I'm not touchy," he said. "That's just the way I talk."

"Oh."

His sleeves were rolled up and she could see his sinewy neck through the open collar of his white shirt. His shoulders were not broad but they were hard and strong. Vustya felt like touching them and wondered why she did.

"There's trouble at home," Gritsko suddenly said, raising his dark, kind eyes and then looking down again. "Father was stringing a cable at the farm and fell off the pole. He blacked out and was lying there unconscious till they found him. Then they rushed him to the hospital."

He seemed very depressed. Vustya felt sorry for him and his father, a tall stern man. But she did not express her sympathy, though she felt unhappy, too. Gritsko seemed more dearer to her than before, more accessible.

"Mother rushed off to the hospital to be with him." And he sighed as deeply and as sadly as a child.

"Your father's a strong man. He'll pull through," Vustya said and was surprised at the insignificance of her words. Was that sympathy? She was really sorry about the accident but she was unable to put her thoughts into words. Everything she said was so ordinary and insignificant.

As she looked at Gritsko he became the most handsome and dearest person in the world. Not even her parents had been so close to her heart, nor anyone else she knew. What had made her come here, where he was fixing his bicycle? Why had she no courage to speak to him when she had been milking the red cow? It was all so strange.

Finally he rose, shook his bicycle and then put his weight on the seat to see if the tires had enough air.

"I guess it'll be all right now."

Then he looked at Vustya keenly. They gazed into each other's eyes. The eyes she saw were kind and gentle, grey and calm. The ones he saw were wary, expectant.

"You know, you smell of lovage," he said.

She blushed shyly and replied:

"I washed my hair with lovage and bathed in it."

"Oh." He put his weight on the seat again. "Do you want me to ride you back? Are you through with your work?"

"Yes."

"Do you want me to ride you back?"
"No. I'll go back in the truck with the girls."
"Do as you like." Still, he hesitated. "Good-bye then. I'm going across the ravine."
"Good-bye," she said and suddenly felt chilly, as if a wind from the river had blown over her, making her heart empty and lonely. "Good-bye," she repeated softly.
He crossed the oak grove, then his white shirt flashed in the distance and was gone. For a few moments she could hear the sound of the wheels, then that, too, disappeared.
Then she heard a cow mooing. The sound was close by and comforting. She headed towards the cow, feeling terribly lonely, thinking that now he was riding down the ravine ever so quickly. Then he would dismount and roll the bicycle up the steep hill.
Vustya returned as everyone was getting ready to leave.
"I see you've been off to the grove to see the boys," Varka said.
Gorpina burst out laughing, and her cheeks shook like jelly.
"How awful she is," Vustya thought sadly, then found her shoes, put them on and climbed into the truck.
It was dark, the first stars appeared in the sky and were soon joined by others. The girls and young women laughed and shouted, they were glad they were returning home. Vustya felt terribly lonely. It was as if her heart had been taken out of her. The cool chill of the steppe touched her cheeks in the darkness but it was not a welcome feeling, for it chilled her when she was already cold.

IN THE FIELDS

The war had just ended, our fathers were returning. The railway station was located beyond Blue Grove so that everyone crossed the field by the rustling oaks to get there. We children went along with our mothers and sisters. Our big brothers did not go, for there were no older brothers in the village. They were also awaited home from the war.

A carpet of rye covered the field, its blue-green waves stretching off to the horizon. Black rooks stood out sharply against the young rye.

Grey wormwood was growing all around a cannon that stood black and ominous in the field. It was a German cannon. Its muzzle was pointed upward as if it were aiming at the festive blueness of the clear sky. It seemed depressed at not being able to blast the stillness into confusion any longer.

That is how I remember it: a black dead body among the bitter smell of wormwood and the young greyness. Sad and depressingly still.

Unploughed fields stretched beyond the warm field of growing rye. There were no horses nor enough people to disturb their rest. There was yet another reason: mines lay among the weeds dropped in the course of the war and still dangerous.

Charred brick chimneys rose in the orchards, all that remained where houses once stood. There were dug-outs nearby, covered over with twigs and sunflower stalks, like beggars' hovels, with the sun streaming in through the bits of glass stuck in the walls. And yet, the earthen walls were whitewashed. Some of the soldiers' wives had even painted flowers on their walls, simple and

charming, buds and all, in the hope that they would some day blossom.

There was a smell of freshly cut wood and shavings in the air, for the people had begun building again. Day was still fighting off night somewheres very far away, but here the matter was settled: no longer did one have to bury one's heart and one's thoughts in the ground, no longer did the children have to be hidden away from death under a heavy layer of black earth.

Everyone went out to meet Stepan Galaida. As soon as word passed through the village that Stepan was on his way home, that someone had seen him at the station, everyone left their jobs, ran down the street and through the field of rye. They hurried along happily, their heads bobbing up and down among the green waves.

The children ran on ahead. Some of them knew Stepan was a great big fellow, the best singer for miles around, but many had never seen him.

We ran along shouting, "Stepan's coming home!"

His mother stumbled on behind the rest, old and weak, supported on both sides. She had died and been resurrected when the shelter in which she had been hiding during an air raid had caved in. She had been wounded by shrapnel and her arm had been amputated.

As she hurried along now she kept repeating, "My boy, my dear boy!"

We caught sight of him across the field. Stepan recognised the villagers and stopped. The wind was blowing through the rye and against his khaki shirt, tearing at his open collar.

Everyone crowded round him talking and laughing. Stepan was silent. Young, broad-

shouldered and unscathed by the war, he was waiting for his mother, staring at her empty sleeve flapping in the wind. He could not move. Then he rushed towards her.

"Mother, what happened to you?" he cried, holding up her sleeve.

She smiled.

The sun sparkled in her tears.

We all turned home, through the green waves, past the black cannon, to the sad, silent chimneys in the orchards.

No one wept. Not even Stepan's mother. She kept looking at Stepan, at her strong boy. He had returned alive, he had come out of the nightmare alive. Why should she weep? Life seemed as beautiful as this warrior.

Stepan did not recognise his house, for there was nothing but a bit of fence left and even it had fallen to the ground.

"Won't you all come in and be my guests," his mother said.

No one refused. Everyone rushed home to get whatever meagre provisions they had. They spread canvas sacks under the cherry tree and put the food on them.

Dew glittered on the trees, birds called to each other.

"Never mind, son," Stepan's mother said. "We'll soon set things right again."

I remember those days. We were hungry, barefoot and tattered. Our hands and feet were covered with more warts than there were stars in the skies. The mainstay of our diet was sorrel. We picked it in the forest and it puckered our mouths so that we felt we had no teeth left at all. After the long day our evening meal was slop: a few potatoes cut into a huge pot of boiling

water with a bit of flour added and the rest of it made up of beet-tops. This hungry soup bloated our stomachs. We looked strange and pot-bellied and were always hungry.

I remember the day we stole old Zoya's hen. The hen was scratching about among the green potato plants, clucking cheerfully. A small under-sized boy nicknamed Kapshuk fell upon it like a hawk.

"What are you doing!"

And Kapshuk, patting the hen's heavy crop gently, replied cheerfully, "We'll make a fire and roast it."

"Let it go. It doesn't belong to us," we protested. "What if old Zoya finds out and tells our mothers?"

"We'll roast it in the cemetery, and nobody will see us."

Kapshuk's skin was stretched tightly across his bones. His ribs looked like barrel staves.

Grazy Galka, mad but harmless, took the hen from him, hid it under her black blouse, and we all set out for the cemetery. It smelled of grass and tombstones. Sad little cherry trees grew by the tombstones, stiff shiny leaves of periwinkle glittered beside them.

Galka sang a strange, monotonous song about a grey road winding through the fields and a girl who turned into a poplar trees, waiting for her beloved to come back from the wars.

Kapshuk began twisting the hen's neck—back and forth, back and forth. Then he threw it down on the green grass and the hen jerked several times, unwilling to die.

Galka sat on the ground, singing her song, gazing intently at the bright spots of blood on the periwinkle leaves.

We had no trouble starting a fire. We made a little mound of powder from the cartridges in our pockets and then focused a sunbeam on it through a magnifying glass. When the powder burst into flames we added bits of paper and twigs.

Soon we had a fire going. Then we remembered that a chicken ought to be plucked first and we began pulling out the feathers, tossing them up into the wind. Galka continued to sing.

Though the hen was heavy, there was no fat on it, it was blue. When we held it over the flames that looked white in the sun no fat hissed in the fire. After a while the meat began to roast and turn black. A tantalising smell rose above it.

Before we had a chance to realise what was happening, Kapshuk twisted off a leg and sank his teeth into it. Galka followed suit. The rest of us shared the body, which was dry and stringy.

The meat had a sweetish taste. It was half-raw and unsalted, it burnt our lips but we fell upon it greedily.

"I've never had anything so tasty," Kapshuk said, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

The green grass was littered with white bones.

Old Zoya was waiting for us, standing outside her gate, disheveled and enraged, brandishing a huge stick. We stopped a good dozen steps away.

"A-a-a-ah! So you stole my hen!" she bellowed.

Then she lunged at us. We scattered. She stopped in the middle of the road and began to scream, cursing us, sending down such misfortune upon our heads that the plague might seem desirable by comparison, while shingles and warts were a joy one might only dream of.

Galka's house was in the middle of the village. By some strange miracle it had survived. We

usually stayed there when we were hiding from our mothers, when punishment was imminent. Sometimes one of Galka's relatives would come over and chase us out.

"Get out and stay out! You're driving the woman mad. Find someone your own age, go some place else," they'd say.

Galka would be silent, smiling helplessly, but as soon as the uninvited relative had left, she would rush all over the village looking for us, gather us again and lead us back to her house.

Galka was crazy. Everyone said so. She had married young and her husband had been called up. Soon after she was notified that he was missing in action. Galka had cried out just once at the news. Then she had locked herself in her house for a week. When she came out again, she was strange. They said she was like a child again, she began playing with us children and had not a care in the world.

She ran along with us across the field to meet the soldiers returning home. She looked into their faces anxiously, for they had changed so during the war years. She was always the first to rush up and embrace them. This made their mothers and wives angry.

"That crazy Galka! We should be the first to kiss them, but no, she has to be the first!" They grumbled.

Galka only laughed.

"Crazy!" they all said.

We didn't think she was crazy. She was our friend.

"Galka, how old are you?"

Galka laughed.

"Galka, what's your name?"

"Galka, where's your husband?"

"Galka, why are you laughing?"
But all she did was laugh and laugh.

One day there was an explosion in the field beyond the cemetery. It was muffled, and it wasn't terrifying at all.

At noon word spread through the village that Stepan Galaida had been killed by a mine. He had been ploughing a field no plough had touched since 1941.

When we rushed to the site of the accident we saw bees humming over the high thistles. The horse was lying on its side, its belly ripped open and its blue intestines pouring out onto the dusty weeds. The air still held the smell of gunpowder. Stepan was lying on his right side with one hand bent under his body and the other shielding his chest. His face was calm. There was not a drop of blood to be seen anywhere on him. We stood there, stunned. People kept coming up. The furrow the tiller had ploughed across the green deserted field now seemed like a mournful black strip. It was so bright it hurt our eyes. We didn't want to look at it, yet our eyes were drawn to it. It was warmed by the sun's rays, by sweat and by blood.

Stepan's mother was brought over. She did not weep. She did not shed a single tear. She pressed her lips tightly together and her eyes became hard.

Then Stepan was taken back to the village in a cart. The wheels clattered on the dry road. The people walked along in dead silence. His mother sat beside her son, leaning over his face and the wind rippled the empty sleeve of her old blouse. Galka stood by the ruined mill. She just stood there. As we approached we could hear her singing her song.

She did not come over, she did not look at the cart to see what was in it and discover why everyone was silent. No one shouted at her, no one told her to be quiet, that this was no time for songs.

The wheels creaked, there was the soft slow thud of our steps as the procession passed Galka like a stream detouring around a rock.

And still she stood there, singing her strange song.

Somewhere in the fields there was silence, a dead horse with a ripped belly and a black ribbon of earth across the bright green grass.

None of us shall ever forget the taste of bitter honey.

Our mothers had got out the bee-hives and were putting them in order while we children were on the lookout for a stray swarm of bees that might come to rest on a tree. It could then be taken up and carried into a hive.

We searched for honey in the fields near the clay quarry. Everyone who cared to joined in these expeditions.

The bees built their hives in the clay. We would find an openings and would dig up the honeycombs with sticks and our bare hands. The honeycombs smelled of wax, flowers and sun and there was never any honey in them. But we never doubted that one day we would find honey, a lot of honey.

No matter that we sometimes had blotched faces where the bees had stung us, for they preferred death to being robbed of their honey.

This did not stop us, though.

We gathered again one Sunday when the sky was blue and cloudless.

Kapshuk was telling us that he and his mother

would not be living alone any more, for she had taken a man from a neighbouring village to be her husband. He was a one-legged cripple.

"I had beet soup with meat yesterday," he boasted.

We were all envious. The last time we had eaten meat had been at the cemetery and it had been stolen meat at that.

"Things will be much better at home now," Kapshuk added.

No one replied.

We still had a kilometre to go to the quarry when we saw a small figure on the horizon. We peered into the distance, trying to guess who it was.

When we came still closer we saw it was a soldier. Someone was returning home. Galka was singing.

"Shut up," Kapshuk said.

She stopped singing obediently.

The soldier was carrying a suitcase. He had on a pair of shiny new boots.

He was smiling at us. His face was sunburned, his teeth were white and the smile was joyous.

When he came abreast of us he saluted us smartly and continued on his way.

We stopped to look after him. Suddenly the happy soldier stopped dead in his tracks and turned around. He looked puzzled, worried.

He set his shiny new suitcase down on the dusty road and headed back towards us. He walked up to Galka.

"Darling, don't you recognise me?"

Her blank grey eyes stared at him in silence. She did not know what he was talking about.

He tried to put his arm around her, but she shoved him off and shouted.

"Go away! Go away!"

"Sweetheart, it's me, your husband, Semyon. Don't you recognise me?"

"Go away," she repeated in a frightened voice.

"When Galka got your death notice she got crazy," Kapshuk said.

"Crazy. . . ." Semyon repeated dully.

Galka was looking off into the green fields. Her lips twitched, her hands shook and she kept repeating, "Go away."

Then Semyon buried his face in his hands, shielding his eyes from us, but we knew he was crying, because the tears ran out between his fingers and dropped onto his tunic.

Kapshuk said:

"Come on, boys, let's go look for honey."

We started off, dragging our feet.

Galka joined us.

"Where are you going?" Kapshuk shouted. "Don't come with us!"

She stopped obediently. We set out again, though each of us knew in his heart that we would find nothing sweet in the honey-combs this time either.

Roman Ivanichuk

NO CLAIM TO KINSHIP

The summer apples in Todosi's orchard fell to the ground with a soft thud, while the bees swarmed in Fyodor's bee-garden. In silence Todosi gathered the red-cheeked apples, while Fyodor walked between his hives anxiously, hoping the bees would not settle on his neighbour's apple trees. What did the bees care? The queen bee would fly out with her colony and that would be the end of that. It was not that Todosi would prevent him from coming over and gathering the swarm, it was his own pride that held him back.

And all because the neighbours were not on speaking terms.

No one knew Todosi and Fyodor had quarrelled, nor would they believe such a thing was possible. Both of them were going on seventy, they had lived in peace and friendship for half a century. The time was not long past when they had worked together in the forest, felling trees. They would total up the logs and the piles of brushwood and, having received their wages, would return home on Saturdays. On the way they would recall the times when life had been easier and better, for they had been younger then. Old age is no joy.

And yet, each age has its own joys.

When Todosi's arms began to lose their strength, and he found his axe getting stuck in the tree, more and more often, he said to Fyodor:

"I guess I've done all the work I'm going to do. I've nothing to worry about, my grandson can take over now."

Somehow, it had seemed to Fyodor at the time that Todosi had wanted to slight him by speaking thus. So he had tossed aside his own axe and had replied with studied indifference:

"I guess it's time I began paying attention to my bees."

Then, for the very first time in his life, he had felt the helplessness and hopelessness of old age that he had always kept at bay now crashing down upon his chest. True, he had an excellent bee garden, but he had never had any children or grandchildren of his own.

He and his wife had lived a long and childless life, and, to be frank, this had never worried them. Perhaps they had never stopped to think about their childlessness because the grandson Todosi now spoke of with such pride was also their grandson. Yes, it was the truth. There was a time when Vasilko did not even know whom he loved more: Grandpa Todosi or Uncle Fyodor.

Little Vasilko, with a smudge on his face and an embroidered belt tied across his linen shirt would squeeze through the hole in the fence and watch in wonder, as the wise old bee-keeper, dressed in a sackcloth shirt with a net past over his face pottered about the hives. Uncle Fyodor would send a stream of smoke into a hive, talking to the bees all the while as if they could understand him; Uncle Fyodor gave them sugar syrup on rainy days and in good weather he would remove the heavy honey-combs with the dark fragrant liquid trickling through his fingers. Uncle Fyodor was so wise that even the bees respected him and never stung him.

Vasilko loved Uncle Fyodor even more than the honey, perhaps even more. . . .

But Vasilko grew up. He did not drop by as often, he would refuse a honey-comb, and then Fyodor would hear the voice of old age coming from somewheres beyond the nettles in the back yard: "Well, you've no grandson of your own. You don't have a grandson, do you?"

But even old age has its joys. Some people have grandsons, some have bee-gardens.

Now loneliness gripped Fyodor's heart as though it was a honey-comb squeezed tightly in his fist, and blood dripped from it like honey running through his fingers.

"When will Vasilko come home?" Fyodor asked.

"Not for some time. I went to see my daughter in the city last week and we saw him off. He's in officers' training school now."

This was so unexpected that Fyodor's moustache bristled.

"Why. . . . How come you didn't tell me? Why I'd have. . . . I'd have gone with you. Or at least. . . ."

"I guess I just forgot," Todosi replied indifferently.

How could he have forgotten? A feeling of resentment stirred in Fyodor's breast. He clenched the handle of his axe so fiercely the veins bulged on his arms. He had simply forgotten. "Perhaps, Todosi," he thought, "you were simply too selfish to share your joy with me?"

It was spring. The bees buzzed among the flowers and as Fyodor worked in his bee-garden he could not drive little Vasilko with his embroidered belt and cherry-stained hands and mouth from his mind.

Todosi peered over the fence.

"Come on out, Fyodor, and have a look at the world."

"You can't see everything, or discover everything there is anyway. A bee is like a drop of dew in which you can see the sun, or like a child who is the light of day for you."

"Well, yes. I guess that's true."

"Where were you, Todosi? You haven't been out the past few days."

"I went to visit my grandson. He's stationed nearby here."

Fyodor jumped up from the stump he had been sitting on and hobbled towards the fence.

"What's wrong, Todosi? Are you playing a joke on me? Why, I could have sent him a jar of honey? If you didn't want to say it was from me, you could have said it was your own. It would have been the truth, too. My bees have surely gathered a liter of honey from your acacia tree."

"I guess I didn't think of it," Todosi shrugged. He sounded surprised. "He'll be home on leave next summer and you can talk to him all you want then."

Hurt twined around Fyodor's heart like a snake. He had to force himself not to shout the words that ran through his mind: "Are Vasilko and I strangers? Why are you trying to keep him from me?"

From that moment on Fyodor began to hate his neighbour, his bee-garden, his old wife who was sitting on the threshold sunning herself, his old age and, Heaven preserve us, even Vasilko!

He leaned over the fence and hissed:

"Will your Vasilko be a recruit on KP for long yet?"

"Are you crazy? What do you mean? Vasilko's going to be an officer!"

"You don't say? You really want to make the village laugh, don't you? All you have to do is count up to three and he'll be an officer!"

"Wait and see. When he comes home next year he'll have two stars on his chevrons."

"Well! In case you didn't know, a measly corporal had two stars in the old Austrian army."

Todosi had not expected Fyodor to be so venomous. His anger rose. What followed was a recrimination so bitter that they hate to recall it to this day, but at the time neither one could hold back his tongue, and so the words flowed on like the muddy waters of spring.

"You're a measely corporal yourself, you old idiot! My Vasilko's going to be a regular officer, understand? An officer! And what the hell does he need your lousy honey for?! You cluck over that damn honey like a hen!"

"You clucked over it too, every Christmas, didn't you? And don't forget you got it from me!"

"I was only taking what was coming to me! It was gathered from my apple trees and acacia."

"Why don't you chop them down, if you're so greedy!"

"Don't think I won't!"

That very day Todosi sawed down the beautiful acacia tree that grew on the strip between their gardens.

It came crashing down into Fyodor's garden. A swarm of bees rose up from its fragrant branches.

"Now they can stuff themselves on it!"

"I hope you drop dead beside it!" Fyodor's wife shouted.

That very evening an enraged Fyodor dragged three young fir trees from the forest and planted them opposite Todosi's apple trees.

The next day both of them were mortified with shame. Todosi cursed himself and suffered, while hurt lay as a heavy stone on Fyodor's heart.

But a quarrel is a guarrel. It is not easy to be the first to seek a reconciliation.

And so Todosi's red-cheeked apples fell into Fyodor's garden and rotted in the grass. No one would pick them up.

Meanwhile, Fyodor's bees were about to swarm. Before you knew it, they'd be lost. If only they'd wait....

A swarm of bees rose from the farthest hive. "May you be struck by thunder!" Up they rose into the sky like a spiral and then alighted as softly as a puff of smoke on Todosi's apple tree.

"May you all perish!" Fyodor shouted. "I don't need you. What for?"

He cared for nothing now, neither for his bees, nor even for life itself.

That afternoon the village postman, who knew nothing of the quarrel, leaned over the fence between their gardens and shouted:

"Todosi! Fyodor! Guess what? Your Vasilko's coming home tomorrow. I've got a telegram here for you!"

Todosi looked across at Fyodor, wondering what they were to do. A tear trickled down Fyodor's wrinkled cheek.

Fyodor shielded his face with his hand and said softly to his wife so that his neighbour would not hear:

"Go wash the oak tub. I'm going to extract the honey."

But Todosi heard him. He understood. That night he crept out into the orchard, and though he had never kept bees, he managed to gather the sleepy swarm and carry it back to Fyodor's hive.

Nor could Fyodor sleep. He was up at the crack of dawn, chopped down the three fir trees and dragged them off into the ravine.

In the morning the neighbours stood in front of their houses in some embarrassment. Finally, they walked through their gates and down the road together to the bus station.

"So you say our Vosilko has two stars on his chevrons?" Fyodor finally asked.

"Yes, two stars," Todosi replied proudly.

THE TEDDY BEAR

The snow was turning dark in spots, the pussy willows were out. There was a wonderful smell of beech logs or alder shavings in the air, but where was it coming from? I felt vaguely disturbed. This sometimes happens when a thought which has just taken shape in your mind evades you.

When had it been like this? When had spring smelled like this before?

I run my fingers over the pussy willows on the branch, and there it is again, a sensation revealed for an instant and gone again, a picture flashing across your brain as you drop off to sleep.

The willow branch brushes against me, once again I run my hand over the pussy willows, they are so soft and furry, like a kitten's paws, like eiderdown, like . . . like?

What if I were to go inside and run my hand over some old object or book in my room?

However, once inside, even these wisps of memory evaporated.

The mail arrived. My wife handed me my letters. Business letters again. Today of all days I could do without them.

I slit open a white envelope with a blue edge and a glossy post-card fell into my hand. Hm, someone was wishing me a happy birthday. For some reason or other I felt pleased that my wife had not asked me who it was from, and went into my study.

"Happy birthday, Andreiko!
And many happy returns.
Teddy Bear."

And there was a return address.

It was from Martha. Goodness! How many years ago was it? I made straight for the kitchen. "Galina, guess who this is from?" I was going to say and had already opened the connecting door, ready to tell her about this half-forgotten story out of the past. It really was strange. Our daughter would be starting school in the autumn, our son was now big enough to mount his hobby horse alone, and "Can you imagine who sent me this card?" I was going to say. Instead, I surprised my wife by saying that I'd be leaving on business the next morning, and I'd be back in time for my birthday.

The next day I took leave of my family more warmly than usual. And then I was in the speeding train, with spring blowing in through the windows and willow branches covered with thousands of pussy willow teddy bears swaying back and forth.

What was I doing? Why was I on this train?

"Just because!" I shouted back to the voice of my conscience. "It's a trip to my youth, understand? And I have a right to my past, so shut up!"

I pressed the doorbell firmly, but the ring inside was hesitant and short. I attempted a sceptical smile, but my lips remained in a strained, hard line. I tried to appear nonchalant, but I felt an inner tension, as if I were a tightly coiled spring.

There was a sound of light footsteps behind the door. She was probably wearing slippers. I held my breath. The bolt shot back, hinges creaked. And the very same girl who had sat at the next desk in my senior year at school, the golden-haired Martha whose smile the boys fought for, the very same one who had whispered to me: "You're hurting my lips. Maybe that's not the right way to kiss?" now stood before me.

The very same girl. . . . But this was only for an instant. Confusion, then fear clouded her face and she changed again, or, rather, she became the person she now was. Our youth had flared up and died out in an instant.

"Andrei!" this strange woman exclaimed softly. "What. . . ."

"Hello, Martha."

She still stood there in the doorway, as if blocking the way into her sanctuary. Then her arms fell to her sides, while I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, not knowing how to begin.

"There was your address and. . . ."

"Why don't you. . . ."

A sudden burst of anger dispelled my embarrassment. "I didn't ask you to write your return address on a birthday card, and I never asked you to send me one anyway," I thought. "You've kept away all these years, why couldn't you have kept away now? Those capricious pranks of yours are out of place now, they don't go with the crow's feet at your eyes or the lines at your mouth, and if this is just another test you've thought up

for me, you might as well slam the door in my face."

"Why don't you come in?" she finally said, drawing me inside. Then she gazed at me, trying to read the story of my life in the grey hair at my temples and the wrinkles on my brow.

"You haven't changed a bit. Sit down."

"Ah, but I have. And so have you, Martha. Your once slim body has filled out, like a green cherry that is bursting with fragrant juice by July. Your awkward movements are graceful now, and quite different. You are charming, but it's not my old Martha, and it makes me sad, because I can't recall our youth now. You're a beautiful woman, a woman any man can lose his head over, but you're not my old Martha, and I'm not the same, either. And this sadness for our lost youth makes my heart heavy."

"Have I got very old?" she said, walking over to the couch and setting the teddy bear that hung from the wall in motion with a gentle push. "He hasn't aged at all. Do you remember him? And it seems funny for me to have called myself that after all these years, doesn't it?"

I said nothing, for it was true.

The teddy bear stared at us from round button-eyes, wondering why no one played with him any more, why no one tossed him into the air or patted him, or hugged him, wondering why he had become just a part of the furnishings when he had once been a favourite toy. He turned around on his cord and looked at me.

"I recognised you immediately, Andrei," he seemed to be saying. "Where were you all this time? What have you been doing?"

"How've you been, Andrei?" Martha asked.

"Not bad."

"But do you remember me?" Teddy Bear broke in again. "It was me who introduced you two. One evening, it was the same kind of spring it is now, you came over to the bonfire that the boys had made in the lot near your house and saw a blonde, curly-haired girl jumping over the fire with the boys. You stood in the dark shadows watching her, and then, when the fire went out you followed her and said: 'What's your name?' And she said, 'Martha. We've only just moved here. I'll be going to your school. It's my birthday tomorrow.' And so you bought me for her as a birthday gift, and then you began calling her Teddy Bear, too."

"Who is your husband, Martha?"

"He's an engineer. He's away on an expedition now."

"Stepan?"

"No."

The teddy bear turned on his cord again, and while the room was sunk in silence he began to speak again.

"And then Stepan came between you. He liked to boast about his father, who was a colonel. He was a good dancer, he was always polite and had good manners, too good, you thought. The girls liked him, but you were jealous and nicknamed him Stepan-Step-Off. You needn't have fretted. Martha was in love with you. But you invented a rival. You tormented the poor girl, you accused her, wouldn't speak to her, called her a flirt. She was often driven to tears, and then she'd hug me tightly. After a while she stopped caring for me and finally forgot all about me. And you didn't come around any more. I was very sad. Then I heard something that made me want to cry: Stepan-Step-Off told Martha to throw me out. He

said she was not a child any longer. She didn't do it, but she took me off the wall, where I'd been hanging over her bed, and hid me away in the chest."

"When did you divorce Stepan?"

"We were never married."

"I lay there in the drawer for a long, long time. And then the door of my prison opened and Martha's gentle hands lifted me out. She wept and was probably asking me to forgive her, though I was not angry with her. And then the third man appeared."

"Do you love your husband very much?"

Martha looked up in surprise.

"But this third one doesn't notice me at all. They often forget about me. Once in a while, though, Martha will take me down and smooth my fur and hug me. But where have you been all this time?"

"Where have you been all these years, Andrei?"

"Here and there. Everywhere. How did you find my address?"

"I just did."

"What for?"

"I don't know."

Meanwhile, the clock on the wall was ticking away stubbornly. The same old-fashioned wall-clock that had ticked off sixteen years from the day I first met her and was now starting on the seventeenth. Neither of us wanted to look at the clock. I kept looking at this beautiful, strange woman, so unlike my little Martha, a woman I could go on looking at forever.

"How much time do you have, Andrei? There's still an hour till the train leaves."

We had some wine. And made small talk. Both of us wished in our hearts that this hour would

finally end, the only thing that now stood between our meeting and our parting, but when it did draw to a close, instead of being relieved, we were both gripped by a fear of the inevitable.

I hurriedly began preparing to leave.

Martha was pale. She said in a barely audible voice:

"Must you go? It's so late."

"The train will be in shortly."

She turned to the wall, took down the teddy bear and handed it to me, saying:

"Take him with you."

Her trembling voice was filled with pleading and despair. I knew then that she wanted to rid herself of this memento once and for all, as of everything that was associated with it. Our past that lived on in her heart had no place in the present.

"Throw him out if you like."

She blocked the doorway, the teddy bear in her outstretched hand, so beautiful, so unfamiliar. The one thing in this house that was dear to me was this fuzzy toy bear. I ran my finger over his forehead and once again spring brushed by with its velvet pussy willows, I breathed in again, a last time, the air fragrant with beech logs, while a strange woman now stood before me. A woman I had never seen before, but one with whom I could fall madly in love.

And I remained.

I lay there on the couch. Martha was in the bedroom. My fuzzy teddy bear swayed gently overhead, my vanished youth. It had become a toy which might be tossed out and broken. Or preserved.

I had no thought for my wife or children. A lovely woman awaited me in the bedroom. No, it

was no Martha, this was another woman, one I had just met today.

I sat up abruptly. The teddy bear swung sharply, he shuddered, and in the darkness I could see his shiny button-eyes glitter.

"Wait! Close your eyes and look hard. Can you see? The campfire in the willow grove is dying down. Its sparks have risen towards the sky and hang overhead. Everyone has wandered away, but a slim shadow is etched sharply against the violet sky. You approach it with bated breath. It comes to life, shivers, runs away, to be farther from the others, from the all-seeing stars, to sink into your arms in the coolness of the night. Can you see it? Can you smell the melting snow on the dark meadows, can you feel the branch of pussy willows gently brushing against you? Don't trample this, you will both hate yourselves when you realise what it is you have destroyed forever."

I tore my hand from my eyes and wanted to rise again.

"Stop! Stepan-Step-Off hurt her. In the same way that you want to now."

"Shut up. She should have been mine long ago."

"Wait a minute. Close your eyes again."

And thus I lay on the couch until dawn, with my hand shielding my eyes and dreams of my distant youth passing before me.

In the morning I could hear Martha in the kitchen. I stood in the middle of the room, ready to go, feeling awkward and guilty, not knowing how to take my leave of her now.

"Come, let's have some tea," she said softly and a smile touched her lips.

I do not know whether it was this soft, calm smile or the first rays of the sun that made her face so gentle, so much younger. The old-fashioned

clock ticked away on the wall behind her. Suddenly I noticed that the hands were spinning backwards, returning the lost years to us with every sweep. Martha was becoming slimmer, the grey was disappearing from my hair. I approached her shyly, my fragile little Martha, and embraced her awkwardly.

"You're hurting my lips," she whispered. "Maybe that's not the right way to kiss, my dear, wonderful Andreiko."

The train thundered across the spring countryside, speeding me home from my distant journey. I could see the faces of my wife and children before me. Spring was beating against my breast like a mighty onrushing wave, and I drank in the smell of beech logs or alder shavings, while thousands of fuzzy teddy bears danced in the willows and smiled at me.

9–1715

Ivan Lye

A MAN OF STRONG WILL

It all happened in the course of a day and a night in September. Life had been manoeuvring the personages and events for many a long year to bring them all together on that day.

Petro Griniuk is the hero of this tale. He was a lonely old man from the Carpathian Mountains, a lumberjack and logger in his younger days. He had lived for sixty-six years and in all that time no one had ever said a good word about him. But they do now. Sometimes little enough, sometimes more than necessary. In a word, people speak of the event. It was all true, and the truth cannot be denied.

I will only quote four people on what took place on top of Mount Maricheika. These are the stories of Jozef Jarzycz, a captured lieutenant of the former Polish Army who cursed that "God damned dog", Petro Griniuk; of Samiilo Vorokhtai, a Mountenegrin hunter, who laughed his head off as he told his tale and swore he didn't know the half of it; of a woman from the Alpine meadows above the Cheremosh River; and of a Red Army soldier, the first Soviet man to cross the threshold of the observatory and shake Petro Griniuk's strong, gnarled hand.

This is the gist of their stories.

Petro Griniuk would probably have died unknown to the world, as silent and forgotten as a

lonely pine on a cliff, had he not taken a job as a watchman at the observatory on Mt. Maricheika in his later years. Time and misfortune have bent his once mighty shoulders while enriching his knowledge of mankind.

He only knew of "revolutionists" from what the personnel of the observatory said and, according to their stories, these revolutionary fellows were worse than bandits. Petro never offered an opinion of his own, nor did he try to join their conversations. He was a good watchman and had held his job for a good dozen years.

There is a gloomy-looking structure atop Mt. Maricheika, the highest of the Carpathian peaks. The round tower, faced with fieldstone, resembles an ancient minaret, while the entire structure might be mistaken for a mosque. However, it was a most modern structure inside, built to accommodate the pampered count Marchlewski who wished to feel as much at home here as he did in his many ancestrial castles. At the same time, it was an excellent blockhouse with modern machine-guns and even cannons. The building gripped the earth with its slanting wall, as if fearful that the round tower beside it would push it into the gorge. In the mornings clouds rising from the Cheremosh Valley drenched the blackened stones of the buildings and brushed against the sleek lines of the cornices, the cold edges of the walls and the flat roof.

Petro Griniuk was a hard worker. He did everything he was asked to efficiently but still did not fully realise what an asset he was to humanity in his humble capacity of observatory watchman. More and more often the "observers", as he called the astronomers, would go down to the valley singly or in groups, but they did not always

return. In time the observatory became nearly deserted. But Griniuk was not then lonely, though he was alone much of the time. He would climb up to the damp flat roof, then up the small wrought-iron tower, the highest structure on Mt. Maricheika, and from there he would express his scorn for all and sundry "observers".

"Get lost, all of you! What is it to me? I don't care if you never come back!"

He would look through the binoculars—he had learned their worth, as compared to his ageing eyesight—gazing at the Black Mountains fading away in the distance. Clouds drifted in and out among the snow-capped peaks, while a dream life hummed below. Thus would he live out his days, dreaming of plot of land, no matter how poor, of his own little meadow and a few head of sheep grazing on it. From his perch among the clouds Petro would gaze at the black masses of forest slashed by the winding Cheremosh as by a frozen bolt of lightning. Picking out an imagined meadow he would sigh and say:

"I think I hear shepherds' pipes. The people are busy working."

And for several days after his visit to the tower thoughts brought on by the life of the valley would be uppermost in his mind.

It was in just such a state as this that a stranger came upon him on the cliff. He was young and exhausted and said his name was Slavek. The very same Slavek who was known as a "revolutionist" for miles around. His fame had even reached the mountains, for Griniuk had heard the "observers" speaking of him. All this made him both fearful and attractive in Griniuk's eyes. There must be good reason why the landowners, the officers and the gendarmes were so mad at him, why they

had been trying their best to trap him, to take him away from the people and execute him. Men such as he had to be concealed from the police, and so Griniuk hid him in the storeroom beside his own cubbyhole.

Several days passed uneventfully. Slavek would emerge late at night to get a breath of air. He would find a sheltered spot and sit there for hours on end. In his capacity as watchman Petro Griniuk would go out on his rounds at this time and would often go down in search of Slavek to have a few words with him. The old man's thoughts were troubling him, and who could advise him better than the famed Slavek!

"Feeling blue, are you, Mr. Slavek? Why don't you go down? Your wife's there, and your two little children."

"Not yet. You can't imagine how things will be shaping up down there!"

"How? Everyone said it would be the end, and here you are talking as though something's just beginning."

Slavek sighed, rose and tried to use simple words.

"There's a war on. We're fighting the Germans. Perhaps you've heard about it, Comrade Griniuk."

"Comrade Griniuk" subconsciously removed his cap with his master's coat-of-arms. He knew how the "observers" had hated that word. He had never asked them why, but in his heart he had felt it was a good, a wonderful word.

"You say 'Comrade Griniuk', but you're probably thinking: what sort of a comrade is he to me? He's just an old good-for-nothing. True, I spent my life slaving for the landlord. But I'm grateful to my master, the astronomer, for taking me on here at Maricheika as a watchman. I can

live my life out here. And you say 'Comrade Griniuk'."

He smiled sadly, twisting his cap, crumpling the coat-of-arms and making the crossed bones on it crunch. The black sky was ablaze with stars, its peace descending upon and its mountain chill gripping the bald head with its tufts of grey. Still, Petro did not put his cap back on.

"Every working man is another working man's comrade."

"Ah, that's the truth. You do speak pretty, don't you?"

He had never heard anyone speak such words before. It was as if the cold mountain night were caressing his soul with its whisperings. Slavek spoke to Griniuk about things he had never heard of. There was so much he did not know, he was eager to hear more.

The police had arrested Slavek's wife. By threats and promises they were trying to make her reveal her husband's hiding place. They were spreading rumours that she would be executed if he did not give himself up. But the revolution needed him, the people needed him. He spoke openly of the Bolshevik's firm will and character.

"You'd be better off some place else with your head full of thoughts like that," Griniuk said.

It would be no problem for Slavek to escape across the border. All he'd have to do would be to climb down the mountain and head south. That would take him out of the clutches of the police for good. But then what? Who would help the people discover the truth about life if all the revolutionaries ran away from their own country?

The police had raised a hue and cry. They were hunting for Slavek with hounds in every

meadow. And there was a war on! The landlords and masters didn't know which way to run, like dogs that had been caught stealing in a strange yard.

Slavek told him about the war, about the Bolshevik Ukraine and Russia. Then Petro understood why the "observers" had been going down to the valley so often, why they had got their old uniforms that had smelled of camphor balls out of their trunks. Many of them had never come back up. That was war.

Griniuk's cubbyhole was as quiet and pure as a monk's cell. He was about to lie down after his night's rounds but instead of his usual prayer, he whispered softly several times:

"Comrade Griniuk."

He was genuinely surprised when the head astronomer, an Army captain, entered, armed with a smile and a Colt revolver. He examined the small room, still smiling, and waited patiently for the other officers and policemen to come up from below.

What could old Petro do? He could have slipped out, but he was told to stay. The captain must be playing a joke on an ignorant old man.

"It's your pleasure, Sir, but I have to go out."

"You can wait. You look like a man of strong will."

"As you say, Sir. You know best," Petro agreed from sheer force of habit.

Just then the other officers and policemen, accompanied by the young meteorologist, entered, interrupting the watchman's talk with the captain. The meteorologist was in a lather and no wonder: he had climbed down to the valley and had led the officers back up the mountain in a single night!

"Where is the bandit, the Bolshevik?" the captain asked, but his words were a command.

"Glory be to God! Whom do you mean, Sir?" the old man said, pretending ignorance. He squinted, sending little wrinkles up his forehead to soften the expression of his face.

The captain's eyes drilled into Petro as if he were a new star in a distant galaxy. The hand holding the Colt jerked. The old man lost all desire to play the innocent. He realised the officers were out for blood, that they knew all about his visitor in the storeroom adjoining the cubbyhole.

"Do you mean that man Slavek, Sir?" Griniuk asked naively.

This time a network of wrinkles covered his weatherbeaten face which seemed to have been etched by a wood carver. His eyes were two glittering slits and his nostrils twitched.

"You'll find him in the storeroom, Sir. He's probably sleeping, Slavek is. Yes, the bandit is sleeping."

Meanwhile, he was saying to himself: "Where is that strong will Comrade Slavek spoke of? But what can the strongest will do to help Slavek now? I told him to run away, to go beyond the Black Cheremosh to the loggers and wait for the Reds there. That is, if he didn't invent them. There's a strong will for you, for all the good it does."

Suddenly, the door to the storeroom burst open. Slavek darted out, and the surprised captors fell back in confusion. Someone fired a shot. There was the sound of broken glass falling. Then another shot. The captain grabbed Slavek as he was going through the window, but a swift blow to the nose threw the captain off as if he were a rubber toy. The captain screeched as he struck

his head against the copper-bound door jamb. He sank down to his haunches, then moaned and stretched out. The Colt fell from his hands as his brains spattered onto the floor.

The watchman's window overlooked a precipice. Slavek had disappeared through the window. Petro tried not to think of that death-leap. But there had been no cry, nor had anyone heard any stones rolling down into the gorge. It was as if a greedy monster swallowing a huge chunk had choked on it and was now silent.

The policemen rushed outside. The officers followed. Lieutenant Jozef Jarzycz came back in, grabbed the astounded watchman and shoved him into the arms of the police.

The policemen were chasing around the building like hounds that had lost the scent. They lay down to look over the side of the gorge, they found a worn shoe that had belonged to the man, they sniffed at the tracks on the stones. Twelve feet above was the broken window of the watchman's room. A shred of Slavek's clothing was caught on a protruding nail.

These happenings at the peaceful observatory shook Petro up completely. The policemen bound him, showing him around roughly as they did, but he was not the man they really wanted. They were discussing the best way to get the captain's body down the slope. Just then soldiers from the valley came running up with the news that the Reds were in Yaremcha. The people were pouring out to greet them, showing them the way the Poles were fleeing.

The officers were worried. They were not as keen on finding Slavek as before and merely glanced through the cellars which no human being had entered since the day the observatory had

been built. They had good reason to be worried, for they were still on top of Mt. Maricheika and it would take time to get down to the valley.

The handsome Lieutenant Jarzycz insisted that they bury the captain nearby and not burden themselves by carrying his body down.

"The lieutenant seems to have forgotten that the Bolsheviks will reach the top of Maricheika and will defile the captain's body. And then, we'll need time for the burial. And the bandit may well be hiding somewhere in these mouldy cellars."

The colonel's words carried great weight with the officers. They were now still more concerned. Suddenly, the lieutenant came up with a brilliant solution.

"We can lay the captain on the flat roof. Then we'll dynamite the walls and blow up the observatory together with his body and the cellars. The captain would have wished to die as a true Pole and would never have wanted this bastion of toil and science to fall into the hands of the Bolshevik commissars. And the Bolshevik won't escape, not even if he's hiding in the cellar."

This solution provided all the answers and was unanimously accepted. Anything, as long as they would not have to bother about the body. They had to get out quick to escape from the Red Army to Burkut, to Griniawa, any place. In their rush to escape from the Soviet troops they were ready to blow up the Earth itself, to shove it into outer space. For the landlord's soul whispered to him unerringly that never again would he set foot on this soil.

They stuffed sticks of dynamite frantically under three corners of the building and under the round, minaret-like tower.

Petro Griniuk followed one of the soldiers around on the end of his rope like a Gypsy bear on a chain. It was not difficult to see what the officers were planning to do to the observatory. The old man's heart ached. Would they really destroy it? There were so many strange and wonderful instruments in it, bought, as the people said, for the people's gold. And they must certainly be needed, if the government was willing to pay for them so dearly, even in wartime. The great refractor as the "observers" called the red machine, stood in the round tower. Old Petro had seen the stars and the Moon through it. Would they really destroy it?

But deep inside his brain the thought kept recurring: Slavek could not have disappeared so quickly. There was nowhere for him to seek shelter on the granite cliffs, not until the first bushes way down. That meant the precipice... or the cellars. Would they really blow it all up?

They were carrying the captain's body up to the flat roof. A strong desire to flee was whipping them on. They kept glancing at the colonel, saying:

"We'd better hurry, Sir. We have to reach the valley by evening and the Black Cheremosh by dawn if we're to get to Burkut."

"All right, Lieutenant. Blow it up."

"Yes, Sir!"

"Wait!" Griniuk shouted.

"What does he want?" The startled officers turned to look at the watchman.

"We'd better go off to the side. The stones that'll be blown up will come rolling down, and, if you excuse my saying so, they'll make a fine powder of you."

The officers exchanged glances. Then they stared at the building, as if weighing every stone

that would first fly up and would then come down upon their young heads.

"Untie the peasant. That's a sound piece of advice," the colonel said, shuddering inwardly at the thought of the averted disaster. "However, the observatory must be blown up. You, there! You can earn your pardon."

Griniuk, who had been on his knees in front of the colonel, froze. Earn his pardon? Had he been condemned to death? Submission and grief touched every wrinkle of his face. He waited in silent terror for his sentence.

The colonel was undecided. He stared long and hard at the observatory, as a foreign tourist would, enraptured by the sight of the magnificent structure atop the naked cliff. Griniuk was ready to forgive the colonel much for the spark of human appreciation in his eyes at the moment.

"So he's sorry to see it blown up."

But the officer seemed to have guessed his thoughts. He turned to Petro sharply and said:

"Well, do you want to live and earn some money to boot?"

"Oh, yes, Sir!"

And so the colonel magnanimously agreed to grant Petro his life if he blew up the observatory as soon as the officers had reached the valley.

"Blow it up?" Griniuk sounded truly surprised. "Why, as far as I'm concerned, you can turn the whole of Maricheika into a piggery, I wouldn't care. But then how can I save my own life? Do you think I could hide under that rock over there?" he wondered aloud. The colonel had never seen such sincerity before, not even in a babe.

The old man was hurriedly shown how to use the electric detonator. Griniuk listened attentively,

asking a question now and then and, finally, put both hands on the knife-switch and asked: "Then I just press down with all my might?" He seemed about to do so.

The officers scattered. One dropped behind a rock. The colonel raged:

"Stop! You crazy dog!"

Petro was jubilant. He had frightened the officers. He had the means now to settle the score with them for Slavek's death. He looked at the colonel in mock surprise, but did not remove his hands from the switch.

"Will you signal to me then, Sir, so's I'll know when to press down on this infernal machine."

"Don't, you idiot. You nearly killed my men. Wait till nightfall. Press it as soon as it gets dark. We'll lock all the cellar doors meanwhile. But don't you think of blowing the place up before then or letting that scum Slavek out of the cellar. I'll send a detachment of soldiers up in the morning with the lieutenant. Inspect the site, Lieutenant, and if the man has done as he has been told, give him twenty-five zlotys, for faithful service. If he hasn't, shoot him on the spot and proceed to carry out my orders."

And so they left, looking back at Griniuk now and then. He stood there as before, his hands on the switch of that terrible detonator.

Would the small stone ridge protect him if the observatory toppled over in that direction? Perhaps he had better find a safer spot? Or should he escape, like Slavek had done?

"Where will you go, silly Petro? There's only one path leading down to the valley. But what if Slavek didn't die. What if he's really hiding out in the cellars? The ghosts are nibbling at him

there and up here I'm all ready to blow his tired body to bits. This will earn me twenty-five zlotys and a pardon."

He looked around. He let go of the switch cautiously and examined the wires. A hellish force would run out of the little box and along the wires. Then the observatory would go up into the air, killing Slavek after all. It might even escape without warning. What if he cut the wires? He'd have to think about that. Find a nice quiet spot to protect his valuable life, have a last look at the beautiful world, at the meadow, at the beech and pine forests below.

Petro placed his knee on the box and yanked out one of the wires. He saw that if he unscrewed the copper nut the other wire would slip out easily. He removed the second wire and sighed deeply. Then the old man went off in search of a safe hiding place. He climbed up and down the ravines, scraped his hands, tore his bast slippers in his efforts to draw out the last hours of his own and Slavek's lives. At times, forgetting what he was about, he would sit down to rest and call softly:

"Comrade Slavek! Hey, Slavek!"

His head was spinning from the thoughts that crowded it.

"There's a war on, Comrade Griniuk," his parched lips whispered. "It's this damned war and all the destruction. The landlords are running away, they're destroying everything as they go. No wonder: they know it's not theirs, that's why they're taking their revenge on us, by leaving us rubble. Won't I have a chance to get even with them?"

Griniuk went inside. He walked from hall to hall like a true master of the house, moving a

chair here, covering an apparatus with a throw-cloth there, wiping a streaky window. It was still daylight. Petro stood outside the iron doors that led to the cellars, shouting and listening to the silence, calling out that he was all alone now. All was silent. A mournful echo reverberated through the cellars when he tried pounding on the locked iron doors with a rock.

He walked around the great refractor in the tower. He pottered about the intricate machinery, imitating the pompous astronomer. Now he was the master here. He could take an axe and smash those nickel-plated cogs, wheels and pulleys if he wanted to. He wouldn't even have to hit the polished glass hard.

Far down, below the great refractor, a mouse squeaked. Griniuk looked out. Twilight had descended on the mountain.

He climbed up to the flat roof through the top hatch and suddenly felt chilled to the bone. The captain's body brought him back to reality. Night was fast descending.

"I cut the wires, and it'll soon be night," Griniuk said aloud, pulling the edges of his jacket closer around his body.

But he was in no hurry to climb off the roof. He stood over the captain's body listening to the night take over the mountain. Like a river at flood-tide, it first enveloped the strip that was the Cheremosh, then the lovely little Lake Maricheika. The flame of day still blazed in the west, but below darkness was rising up, obscuring everything.

"Well then, Comrade Griniuk! It's time to blow the place up, it is. Let it blow then, Comrade Griniuk! The Bolsheviks down at Zhabye will hear the blast on Maricheika and

they'll thank you for your efforts, Comrade Griniuk! That they will! They'll say he served the Polish landlords faithfully all these years, wiping the dust from the great refractor three times a day, and look what he left the Bolsheviks, a pile of rubble. And there they are, sacrificing their honest lives to free you, Comrade Griniuk, from these vipers, to clear the region of rot and rid the people of war! Isn't it so? Well then, blow it up. Maybe Slavek really is down there, choking in the cellar slime. Aren't you the one he's dying for, didn't he tell you about the strong will of the Bolsheviks, sweetening your bitter soul, comforting you as you would a babe? Go on, blow it up."

Morning dawned to find him pressed against the wall, his clothes damp from the mist, his soul troubled by his thoughts. He straightened up with difficulty, trying to set his mind straight. Then he headed towards the detonator, kicking small stones from underfoot. The box was as damp as his clothing. The wires lay on the ground where he had dropped them the day before. It was getting light. The sun was about to rise beyond the mountains, from where men of strong will with red stars on their caps were advancing.

He picked up a wire, felt the end and stumbled up towards the building. It was as if he were being guided by some strange force. He dropped the wire and ran into the head astronomer's study. He grabbed the binoculars and hurried up to the roof. There, in a special niche near the entrance was the large Polish flag which he himself had wrapped around its stick so carefully. It was red, white and light blue and had a ferocious black eagle on it.

Griniuk wanted to have a last look at the meadows, now being awakened by the sun and the melodious pipes, at the sun-tipped peaks of

the Black Mountains, at the misty, winding Cheremosh. He trained the glasses patiently on each branch of the ancient beeches and lithe pines, he searched for the first sheep in the morning mist. No one interfered, he was free to look and admire and sigh as much as he wished.

Through the bushes below he could see armed horsemen coming up the familiar path to the summit. Yes, it was Lieutenant Jarzycz. He had a Colt in his hand, the same kind as the deceased captain had had, and was spurring his horse on unmercifully. Finally, he had to rein in. No horse could climb any higher. The lieutenant decided to take a short cut up, and while his men were hobbling their horses, the enraged officer climbed upward. It was Griniuk's death coming in search of him.

"I don't care if they kill me, those cursed executioners," he sighed hopelessly. "Let them blow it up themselves after I'm dead. Petro Griniuk also has a will of his own!"

He put down the binoculars and looked at the glass wall of the wrought-iron tower, at the flat roof and the corpse.

In a flash he was down on the roof, rolling the captain's body across the damp tar to the very edge. Below was a precipice, just the place for the captain.

He pushed the body through the railing and did not look after it or listen for the sound of its falling. Then he grabbed the flag from its niche, tore off the blue and white part with the black eagle, leaving a red strip. This he carried back up the tower. The red flag unfurled in the wind. Griniuk set the pole firmly in its socket. The flag fluttered, knocking off his cap with the cross-bones and feather.

Never before had the old man known such a solemn feeling. He sat down beneath the red banner, his head uncovered, looking down at the soldiers coming up the slope.

This is what Lieutenant Joseph Jarzycz recalled some time later:

"It was still a half-hour's climb to the observatory. To tell you the truth, it was a mad climb up those rocks. Suddenly, one of my men saw the Bolshevik flag flying from the observatory. We all stopped when he started shouting: 'We're too late, Sir! The Reds have taken the place!'

"As an officer of the Polish Army it is my duty to think of my men. I can't deny that I swore at his words. But that was only a reaction. Then I ordered them down again. 'To your horses, men!' I said. 'In the name of your country, about-face and down!' "

Petro Griniuk heard nothing of this, but he saw what was happening. He grabbed the flag and raised it high over his head. Now the red banner waved threateningly in the mountain wind. It was as if Petro Griniuk was chasing the horsemen with it, making them gallop downhill so frantically that they risked breaking their necks and those of their horses in their haste to escape the red flag and an alien land.

Towards evening the lonely old man went down to his cubbyhole. He was ready to drop from exhaustion. He could hear someone moving about behind the locked door.

"Mother of God, it's Slavek!"

"Open up, Comrade Griniuk! The rats locked the door when they took the body out. I couldn't go on hanging by my hands, so I had to crawl back in through the window when they all rushed out."

Petro Panch

TIKHON'S LETTER

As long as old Shvaiko was alive, he held his two sons in rein like a team of oxen. Although the elder son Tikhon had five children of his own, all the sheaves at the threshing floor were stacked together, and the grain was stored in one bin.

"Well," the old man would say each autumn, "this should last us till spring, and if you want more, go out and earn it."

Their house with its peaked cap of mouldy straw roofing peered blindly into the yard through three dim windows, the two others facing a crooked lane where high nettles thrived under a sunken wattle-fence.

Then one day the nettles were trampled, and the smell of incense mingled with that of freshly baked bread. Tikhon swore at his wife for wasting their best flour on pies for the wake, Gritsko swore at the neighbours for chopping down their young oak to make a cross, and old Shvaiko was dispatched to the graveyard in a coffin.

"Let's divide everything now," Tikhon said shortly after the funeral. "I want to know what I'm working for."

Gritsko looked at the ground and his worn boots and replied,

"All right."

The next morning Tikhon was chasing Gritsko with a pitchfork, followed by Gritsko's wife with a stick which she threw under Tikhon's feet. On the porch, like on a stranded icefloe, the entire Shvaiko brood of eight howled long and loud.

"What do you want with a house of your own, you good-for-nothing rotter?"

"And you're an adulterer, that's what you are!" Gritsko shouted from round the shed. "You're always stirring up trouble. You drove Father to his grave with all your talk of dividing up."

Yet eventually they did divide the property. By evening the straw had been pulled down from the roof and the ends of the poles stuck out like barrel staves. Now only one window faced the yard, and the door opened right into the street.

Gritsko moved his half of the house to the piece of land alloted him and squatted there like a beggar by the roadside.

"Now let's divide the land," he pressed his brother.

"Let's," Tikhon agreed and went to the neighbour for a pole.

This time it was Tikhon's turn to take to his heels, while Gritsko, armed with a spade, pursued him across their neighbour's rye. Tikhon's wife tore the skirt on Gritsko's wife, and when summer came, the potatoes Gritsko planted were overgrown with barley sown by Tikhon.

But a crop of barley from a small patch, even mixed with potato tops, won't last long. Nor did Tikhon hope it would. He spent the autumn going from one threshing floor to another, armed with his flail like a gun, earning a bit here and there.

"Can you come over and help tomorrow?" his neighbour asked one day.

"Sure I'll come," Tikhon retorted, shaking the

flail above his head. "I'm not be good at making speeches, but I know how to work."

"Why don't you ever go to the meetings, Tikhon? They say there's new committee."

"I have enough meetings at home, and a committee of my own, too, with seven votes altogether. And the only new thing they can think up at the village Soviet is how to squeeze some more out of us."

"There you go again! This committee is supposed to help people like us, understand? It's called the Mutual Aid Committee."

"I don't know about mutual aid, but they want me to pay a tax of five rubles just for the house."

"Aren't you on the poor peasants' list?"

"No. And I'm not joining any committees, not of my own free will. As long as I can use this here flail, they'd better leave me alone. I'm not like Gritsko who's gone crawling to them."

"But how are you going to last the winter?"

This was a problem Tikhon did not like lingering on, and so he drawled reluctantly,

"We'll manage somehow, if only things are done right. Why do you think I knocked Gritsko about? Because he wouldn't do right by me. I can't stand cheating."

When snow covered the ground with a white sheet, Tikhon piled the fallen leaves and manure along the walls of his house and felt at a loss for something else to do.

"Why don't you bring a newspaper home?" he once said to his boy Sergei. "Ask the teacher for one, I'll roll some cigarettes from it."

The next day Sergei brought home a newspaper. Tikhon tore off a piece and rolled himself a cigarette, giving the rest to Sergei.

"Read something to me."

Hot and flustered with the effort, Sergei read the headlines first.

"'Bulletin on Lenin's Condition....'"

"They've driven a good man to sickness," Tikhon commented. "It's always like that. If a man stands for right everybody's at his throat."

Sergei put the paper down and said,

"Our teacher knows Lenin, too. He wrote him a letter."

"I bet it's about his wages." Tikhon thought awhile and added, "He's right, too. You'll never get your rights from these bastards of ours. Read on."

"'Seeds for the Peasants,'" Sergei began another article. "'All members of Poor Peasants' Committees and Mutual Aid Committees will be given seed grain for sowing....'"

"What? Read that again!"

Sergei read the lines again. Tikhon grabbed the newspaper and brandished it as though wishing to shake the letters off it.

"What about us? Aren't we as good peasants as those in the Committees? Or do we pray to a different god?"

Just then his neighbour dropped in.

"What are you yelling about? I thought someone was murdering you."

"Well, they are! All those bastards who spend their time at meetings will be given seed grain, but nobody cares about my children living off potatoes!"

"What did I tell you? You said Gritsko was a fool for crawling to the Committee, but didn't you see him come back home with a horse?"

Tikhon jumped up in his astonishment.

"Did they give Gritsko a horse? Is that right, I ask you? He chopped down my last oak, and

then they go and give him a horse! Oh no, I'll show these committees! I know somebody who can do it."

The neighbour tore himself a strip of the newspaper, too, and went home. Tikhon tossed the rest onto the stove-shelf and began pacing up and down.

For a week after that Tikhon was lost in thought. At last he said to Sergei,

"Go find a good sheet of paper and write down everything I say. See you write it clear. Did you find the paper? Start writing.

" 'To the Head Chief Comrade Lenin.' "

Sergei wrote diligently, his tongue stuck out with concentration.

" 'I, a peasant of the village of Mikitovka Tikhon Shvaiko, am writing to you about the wrongdoings in our village. You are a fair man, and this mutual aid committee of ours has been giving away horses and grain right and left. They even gave a horse to Gritsko. This is wrong, because even if he is on the committee, I have seven mouths to feed, and though I don't belong to any committees, I'm for what's right and I can't put up with wrongdoings. And please let me know how your health is.' "

Sergei pasted down the envelope flap with chewed bread and addressed it: "Moscow, Communist Soviet. For Comrade Lenin personally."

"And now write an application to this here Committee. 'Seeing as I need seed grain as much as anybody, and I'm a poor peasant too, please, write my name down, so that I get the grain and everything else that is coming to me. But I'll still go on baptising my children, for even though God has helped me as much as spectacles help a blind man, the Good Book says that God is above all.' "

On Sunday Tikhon put the letter and the application under his hat and set out. He mailed the letter at the post office and then took his application to the village Soviet.

He did not tell a soul about the letter and warned Sergei,

"Keep mum about it. We'll show them all yet."

Three days later he went to the village Soviet again.

"Well, what's happening in the world?" he asked with a sly grin. "Do they write to you, too?" and he nodded in the direction where he imagined Moscow lay.

The secretary, busy with his papers, did not deign to reply.

As time went by Tikhon's visits to the Soviet grew more frequent. "They surely will send some kind of an answer," he thought. "Or did Sergei write it so bad they can't read it?"

But the secretary remained obtuse to Tikhon's nods and winks, and generally declined to enter into conversation with him.

Then one day in January his neighbour met him on his way to the village Soviet.

"Have you heard, Tikhon?" he asked in a low voice, as though in the presence of a dead man. "They say Lenin is dead."

"Who said so?"

"It's true. See, they're calling a meeting."

"God rest his soul," said Tikhon, crossing himself and feeling the hair on his head rising under his hat. He made for the Soviet at a run, right across the snowdrifts.

"This is the end of me," he was thinking desperately, his legs getting entangled in the flapping coat skirts. "I'll never make it till the new crop and there's no getting my rights now.

He was the only one who could fix them, and now he's dead." Then he thought, "But maybe they'll still get an answer."

The meeting had not yet started. Groups of peasants stood on the porch under a red flag with black edging and talked in low voices as though in expectation of a coffin to be brought out.

Tikhon entered the village Soviet. This time he asked no questions, nor did he nod towards where he thought Moscow was, but only looked at the secretary questioningly. The man, who was staring at a newspaper, looked up for a moment.

"There's a notice for you, Tikhon," he said, remembering.

Tikhon stood still. He felt as though he had been scalded.

"Yes, you can get your seed grain tomorrow."

Tikhon's heart gave a leap, a lump rose to his throat. His face twitched and his lips moved noiselessly, unable to utter a word. Finally he croaked,

"So you got it."

The secretary did not understand him and went back to his papers. Getting no answer, Tikhon raised his sad eyes to the black-edged portrait on the wall and said shakily,

"He saw that right was done, after all."

Then he tiptoed out onto the porch where the peasants were discussing the cruel death in subdued voices, as though they stood beside a coffin.

Leonid Pervomaisky

THE STORY OF MANKIND

The events of this story took place during those unforgettable days long ago when the slogan was: "Teach others as you learn".

"You're a cultured fellow," Oleksa said to me. "Your father's a book-binder, your house was always full of books and you have a good memory. You're just the one to deliver a few lectures on primitive culture."

As far as my memory was concerned, no matter how phenomenal it might have been, I could not recall a single line from books I had never read. I had always preferred Fenimore Cooper and the magazines "Round the World" and "Panorama" to primitive culture, and this was the first time I was faced with the subject as a serious theme.

I wondered heretically whether my comrades from the 4th Mill and the mechanical shops needed a lecture on the four basic rules of arithmetic more than one on primitive culture. I wanted to speak to Oleksa about it, but realised it was useless and I would not be able to talk my way out of this assignment, since no multiplication tables would shield me from the planned lectures on primitive culture.

The district library consisted of books confiscated from the estates of former landowners.

The requisitioned bookcases lined the walls and the bindings of the weighty tomes gleamed dully through the dusty panes of glass. Books that could not fit into the bookcases were piled on the windowsills and on the floor of the large room.

The library, which was never aired, smelled of dust, books and mice.

The dark-haired young librarian had tried to put this priceless collection in order, but her efforts were in vain. She had decided to begin by compiling a catalogue. She would wipe the dust off a book with a little rag, open it and discover that it was a fascinating novel. After she had read the first few lines she would be unable to put the book down until she had finished it. And since she loved to read and became emotionally involved in every romantic situation, assuming the part of each noble character in turn, siding with those who had been mistreated and indignant at those who were unjust, it would take her at least three days to finish a book. Thus, by the time she was ready to enter the third book in her catalogue the first two had already acquired a new layer of dust.

"Do you have anything on primitive culture?" I asked.

Her long lashes fluttered as she looked up at me in surprise and opened her catalogue.

I was out of luck from the very start: she had been writing with home-made elderberry ink. Her handwriting was rather illegible, while the ink had already faded and was rubbing off.

"Oh dear! I can't make anything out," she whispered in horror.

I bent over the catalogue to help her. A black silky lock tickled my cheek. I couldn't make a thing out in her catalogue.

"We'll have to look through the bookcases," I said with a sigh and moved away quickly.

"I'll help you."

That was when we first opened the windows of the book depository. It was spring, a soft wind entered the room and ruffled the sheets of paper on the table.

How wise this spring breeze was, for having entered the stuffy room where a dark-haired young girl was finding it all but impossible to manage a great feudal treasure. We were so thankful to it. Brimming with youth and armed with rags, we began dusting the leather bindings of the heavy volumes.

Our work proceeded slowly, however. You might even say it did not advance at all, for whenever we reached for the same book her sunburned hand stained by elderberry ink would touch mine. Naturally, this only lasted for an instant. We would resume our seats on the floor to discuss the tasks facing our youth organisation while I sadly boasted of my new assignment, a series of lectures on primitive culture. Then we would both sigh hopelessly and try to resume our work, but just then a lock of her hair would brush my lips. In the end each of us decided to tackle his own bookcase. For about ten minutes we were hard at work, but then we somehow found ourselves side by side at the same bookcase, smiling shyly as our hands met on the cover of a volume by Catherine II.

Catherine II, also known as Catherine the Great, never wrote anything about primitive culture. Her days were spent among her many courtiers as she played at being an "enlightened" monarch. And so we continued our search.

On the second day the girl said:

"The bourgeoisie was not interested in culture, it exploited the workers and lived like a parasite. We won't find anything here."

I disagreed, saying that bourgeois culture had been able to develop as a result of the blood and sweat of the exploited masses, after which she came to the catastrophic conclusion that if that was the case, bourgeois culture was actually proletarian culture.

That afternoon I met Oleksa. He reminded me that there were only three days left until my first lecture and asked to see my outline. I was staggered. After a fitful night I rushed to the library first thing in the morning. The dark-haired girl was waiting for me. I told her about the expected outline and we both became depressed.

We searched persistently for a book on primitive culture. Everything that had the faintest relation to this truly unimaginative and meagre epoch in the history of mankind was set aside on the windowsill, but in the end not a single one of these books proved of any help. Some were in German or French and the only word we could make out in the title was "culture". The other books were all about generals, grand dukes and tsars.

"What a bunch of toadies they were," we decided, having no use for such authors.

As is always the case, when all hope was lost we suddenly came upon nine volumes of an illustrated edition of "The Story of Mankind", hidden away in a dark corner of one of the bookshelves. We shrieked with joy.

The entire day was spent in looking at the pictures, of which there were hundreds in the nine large volumes. The breeze, which blew in

so encouragingly through the wide open window of the library, was no longer sufficient. We were fifteen years old and we wanted to study in the fresh air, not in a stuffy room where even a fresh spring breeze could not dispell the smell of mice.

We picked up the nine volumes and moved to the municipal park. I must say that no one had ever pressed those tomes so gently to their breast, no one had ever caressed the Morocco bindings nor looked upon the German names stamped in gold on the back with such enamoured eyes as we.

I spread my worn greatcoat on the fresh grass, we sat down side by side and began turning the pages, stopping to look at each drawing for much longer than the responsible and difficult task called for.

You cannot imagine how many bright pictures there were in those nine volumes. There were drawings in the text, clichés and photographs, there were photo-type inserts and, finally, there were tinted engravings separated from the text by sheets of the thinnest foolscap. Doubtlessly, there was much to attract the attention of two fifteen-year-old Komsomol members, especially since the series was printed in the finest type, making it very difficult to decide what one was to read in three days' time, even though a sunburned hand was helping me turn the pages.

Soon we were arguing about the foolscap. I argued that the engravings had been printed many years ago and the ink had long since dried —she could rub a page and see for herself, it wouldn't come off—and so there was really no reason for so much foolscap to go to waste. It should be torn out and presented to our smokers, I said, who were using bits of newspaper or old

office documents to roll their cigarettes, both of which, in my considered opinion, was bad for their health, so necessary to the revolution.

My dark-haired assistant was indignant at such a shameless attack upon library property. She insisted that what I lacked was culture, that I was terribly uncouth.

Then we recalled the lectures on culture and resumed leafing helplessly through the volumes.

Soon it was evening. We were hungry, it was time to head for home. We had become such fast friends in these few days you might have thought we had spent years together. We had come to know each other so well that if one of us thought of something, the other knew what it was. Holding hands, we headed towards the centre of town and met Oleksa on the way.

"Don't forget, there's only two days left. How's your outline? Is it ready?" he asked.

I didn't dare look him in the eye as I began going through my pockets, searching for the nonexistent outline. My assistant looked from me to Oleksa anxiously, expecting the worst.

"I was just going to show it to you," I mumbled, turning very red. "Hm! Where could it be? I don't know why they make so many pockets."

Luckily, Oleksa did not guess the true state of affairs. A few minutes later my girl and I, holding hands again, proceeded on our way. We laughed gaily at the incident, recalling every detail.

"What was it you said?" she giggled and I said, trying to sound serious,

"Maybe I forgot it at the dorm. After all, I couldn't have just lost it." And we laughed as we walked along. But something strange had come over us, making us turn silent in mid-sentence, glance at each other, then avert our eyes

quickly, sigh and change the conversation abruptly.

This is how carefree and irresponsible we were at the time when the Komsomol put forth the slogan "Teach others as you learn". It was my luck to have been one of the pioneers in this great campaign which in the years that followed was taken over by knowing, experienced men and women and became a mighty force in the nation's cultural advancement.

But these thoughts occurred to me much later. At the time, the spring breeze caught us up and carried us along like two bits of fluff, clouding our minds and wills, whirling us about, the spring breeze of our youth, so carefree and heady.

The fire of youth was in our eyes on the day scheduled for my first lecture. We ran back to the park to a fragrant dell where we found a quiet nook under an old oak whose heavy gnarled branches dipped close to the ground. This little hollow crossed the entire park. A spring as clear as our youth and as fresh as our recollections of it rippled over the stones on the bottom.

It was no use. We could not read. The bright spring sun splashed down through the branches, the grass grew thick in the dell. A dark-haired girl sat beside me, her hand lay in mine. We hardly spoke. I do not think we exchanged a dozen words that day. Suddenly, we realised it was twilight.

"What about your lecture? It's tonight!" she whispered fearfully.

How my heart pounded! Then it seemed to have suddenly stopped and then it began to thump again, faster and faster, even faster than I was now turning the pages of "The Story of Mankind" in the futile hope of remembering just

anything at all, even a single word I could begin my lecture with. Twilight was creeping up from the dell. The little stream seemed to be laughing at me. I knew that the members of the study circle, my comrades from the 4th Mill and mechanical shops, were waiting for me, though I had completely forgotten about them. In fact, I had not once thought of them during all of the past days. I deserved to be publicly admonished and was ready to accept my punishment.

My dark-haired friend closed the book, lifting my hand from the picture on which it lay: a view of the city of Benares on the Ganges River. The beautiful buildings were drenched in sunlight, a stairway led down to the water, women in gleaming white robes sat on the steps, while bronzed, athletic-looking Hindus bathed in the river. There were pyres burning on the shore.

"Go," she said in a voice that one hears only once in one's lifetime. She tucked the volume I had been looking at under my arm. "Go," she whispered and kissed my lips.

Then she vanished. How quickly she had gone, scooping up the other eight volumes. I did not even notice which way she went.

How confident I felt at that moment, how quickly I ran towards the District Committee, pressing my volume of "The Story of Mankind" to my breast! What joy blazed in my eyes as I dashed into the room where my comrades from the 4th Mill and the mechanical shops were waiting for me.

"Well! You're actually on time! We thought you'd be late," Oleksa exclaimed.

He did not mention my outline. Now all I had to do was walk up to the desk, put down "The Story of Mankind" and become utterly confused.

My comrades, and there were about twenty of them, were moving up their chairs, settling back comfortably, clearing their throats, taking out pencils and notebooks.

Where was my confidence, my will-power, my unswerving faith in my lucky star which had so often seen me through more hazardous adventures than the adventure of mankind!

I was at a loss and did not know where to begin. I could not find a single word that would willingly leave my mouth. All the words I knew were up in arms against me, crowding my brain, while only two of them, "primitive culture", rose up out of the total confusion. These were the two words I knew nothing about at all. I looked up at the ceiling, then down at the floor, I inspected each of the walls, then looked out the windows and suddenly noticed my dark-haired friend approaching. She was carrying all the other eight volumes of "The Story of Mankind", and was bent double under the heavy weight. Suddenly a burning remembrance of my first kiss came over me, a kiss exchanged over a view of Benares on the Ganges, drenched by the gold of the Indian sun.

I opened "The Story of Mankind" decisively, found the page I wanted and held it up to my surprised class so that all could see.

"Here you see a picture of primitive culture. This is the Ganges River, and the city is the city of Benares. You can write it down, I know what I'm talking about. All of this is in India. India is a great peninsula in Asia, that's where the Indians live. They have a primitive culture. It's obvious. See these two men bathing in the river while a corpse is floating down stream? You can tell it's a corpse, because its eyes are closed. This man may have died of cholera, they often do in

India. He might even be the start of an epidemic."

Had I looked at Oleksa at that moment, I might have ended my lecture there and then. But I was staring at the door in anticipation, knowing that it would open at any moment and my girl would enter. Indeed, she did. This gave me new strength to continue.

"Now let's have a look at the picture again. . . ."

My audience turned their heads and looked at the engraving which I held up for each and every one of them to see.

"See these fires? They're burning a body. Did ever you hear of any cultured people burning bodies? And that's not all. These Indians are burying their mother, but can you see any one of them weeping? You can't see a single tear here. They're a primitive people and they aren't even sorry."

A peal of uncontrollable laughter made me stop. It was my girl friend, rocking with mirth, the tears rolling down her face. She wiped them with the back of her hand and kept on laughing. But she was not alone. All my comrades had joined her, all the boys and girls from the 4th Mill and the mechanical shops were laughing and stamping their feet. Oleksa was even making funny noises that sounded like squeals.

I closed the book in resignation and walked over to the window. It was such a serious theme, but look at them laughing! They were a strange bunch. I could not understand them.

Then Oleksa rose.

"That's a cultured fellow for you," he said, trying not to laugh and tapping his pencil on the desk for silence. "How could I have known that this is what he'd do to the lecture?"

At the word "lecture" everyone burst out laughing again. The sound of it was like an explosion in the small room.

But I didn't feel like laughing. I slipped out of the room and hid in a nearby hayloft. No one ever went up there, so I could cry my heart out from shame and disgrace. Finally I fell asleep. I woke up feeling that someone was softly smoothing my hair. How had she known I was there?

"Forgive me for laughing," she whispered and we both climbed down from the hayloft.

The sun was just coming up as we walked across town holding hands. I saw her home, but did not dare return to the dorm and so went back to the hayloft where I fell blissfully asleep.

Ivan Senchenko

ONE'S NATIVE LAND

I discovered his name was Kirill when the cleaning woman spoke to him in the office the day I was there.

"Kirill, would you help me get this pail down," she said.

The pail was in the sink, under the tap.

Kirill hoisted it up and asked:

"Where do you want it?"

She was scrubbing the far end of the corridor and he carried it over for her.

"Too bad you married Ivan," he teased, "I'd have followed you to the end of the world!"

"Wait till Lyuba hears you!" she scolded.

"Ah, that'll be the end of me!"

"You're a stranger in these parts, aren't you?" he said, sitting down beside me and continued, "I know everyone hereabouts. Take your panama, for example. No one wears them here." He stuck his hand into his pocket and came up with a cap. He smoothed it out and, pointing to the visor, said, "See? It's twenty millimetres across the widest part. If I were to wear this cap in Yalta, for instance, I'd have a crowd around me in no time. But this is the style here." Kirill smoothed down his forelock and put the cap on. He really was a sight! The cap was a tiny little

affair perched on the top of his head. It seemed very much out of place with his blue silk jersey and his good trousers. "How does it look?"

"Strange."

Kirill shrugged.

"But it's stylish."

"Why do you keep your styles a secret in your pocket?"

Kirill smiled.

"I live with my mother, you see. And I took the cow out to pasture at dawn. The dew falls at sunrise, and so she made me take my cap. To tell you the truth, I'm not used to it yet, but that's what everyone's wearing here. When we were building the road across Chatyr-dag in the Crimea everyone there wore fuzzy white caps. And the bigger the visor, the better. The sun's fierce in those parts."

"Then you're not from Donetsk?"

"Sure I am. My grandad and great-grandad were miners here, just like me. I didn't know there was anything except mines till I was eighteen. Our mine's a new one, lots of space and air and machines. My father never dreamed of a mine like it." After a pause he continued: "See how things turn out. Children usually follow in their fathers' footsteps. I started thinking about the mine, the shafts, coal-cutters and pneumatic drills when I was eight. That pneumatic drill is something. A man works with one for a while and then looks at his muscles. On Sundays you see him walking the street and every muscle in his arms and shoulders bulges. What boy doesn't envy him? I did, too. And anyway, what sort of a creature are you if the only coal you ever saw was what was brought up? After the war there was a real shortage of men. They didn't

always keep strictly to the rules, there were even women working in the mines then. But I was a boy, and I was thirteen, nearly grown up! And so I started going down every day. That's where I grew up, in the mine, till I was eighteen and started going out with girls. And the girls in Donetsk are the best in the world. Honest, you'll never find any like ours. You look at one, she's a beauty! Then you look at another, and she's even better! It's probably because Donetsk is so high up. There are plains all around us, but we're on top of the hills. So that the winds from all four corners of the world converge here. The air is never stale, it's blown away by the winds, and they bring us the sweet smells of the Dnieper and Kuban steppes. When a girl grows up here her cheeks are always rosy."

"And yet you ran away from all this beauty, didn't you?" I said with a smile. "Way off to the Crimea, to build a road across the Chatyr-dag."

"That's the honest truth," he said. "I did." He smoothed out the cap with its twenty-millimetre visor, put it back in his pocket and pressed the bulge down carefully.

"You always read about a woman being at the bottom of every adventure. Well, those writers are right. That's how it all started. There was a Gypsy girl working in our mine, her name was Lyuba. She was a very special kind of girl, and her beauty was of a very special kind, too. She was the most beautiful Gypsy that was ever born. When Lyuba looked at you it was like fire going through you. There was always a crowd of fellows around her. And me, too, naturally. I was no worse than the rest of them. It was up to her to choose among us. Imagine, she chose me. One evening we went out on the green to dance. All

the boys kept together, waiting around. Then Lyuba came along. Her eyes were just like live coals. She didn't look at anyone, but headed straight towards me and said: 'Hello, Kirill. Let's dance.' You should have seen her dance! She couldn't stand a partner who dragged his feet. And she always asked for the fastest music. I was right there in step. I always loved to dance. I think if it weren't for the war, I might have been a dancer, because I've been the best dancer here for as long as I can remember. As soon as I hear that music there's a devil inside me that drives me on. And Lyuba was just the same. Can you imagine her dancing, and her such a beauty? It's enough to make you loose your head, let alone your heart! Well, I certainly did. Whatever Lyuba said, that's what I did, wherever she sent me, that's where I went. I was in a trance. And nothing made me happier than pleasing her. I'd see her home to the girls' dormitory in the evenings and stand there looking after her, and my eyes would kiss every blade of grass she stepped on. That went on for about six months. Then one day she said:

" 'Kirill, I don't know what's going to happen! My tribe is coming here.'

"And she told me that she had run away from the tribe when they were in Stavropol to escape from Vasily, one of the young Gypsies. He was terribly jealous and terrible in his wrath. She was to look at no one, he said, and speak to no one. She said his fist was made of iron: if he ever struck her it would have been the end of her. He never did touch her, but he beat up any fellow who dared look at her.

" 'I wish he was dead. Let's keep out of his sight,' she said. 'It'll either be you or him, and

I don't want to see you dead or a convict. Let's run away at night, so no one will know where we've gone. What do you say, Kirill?'

" 'I'll go to the end of the earth with you, Lyuba!' That's what I said.

"And what do you think? We ran off together in the middle of the night. We had it all planned. First we danced on the green, and everyone saw us dancing, then we parted and everyone saw her go off to the dormitory and me going off home. And then, when the town was asleep, we met at the station and hopped the first freight train. By morning we reached Druzhkovets, from there we went on to Lozovaya. That's where the roads cross: one to Poltava, the other right down to the Black Sea. Poltava didn't sound interesting at all. And neither Lyuba nor I had even been to the seashore. So we headed south. First to Alushta, then to Yalta, then to Simeiz and Alupka. It was a strange life. We were in paradise, but my heart was empty. I was used to working. When I'd finish my shift it was like I'd fill my soul with coal or gold or silver, I don't know what, but it was full, and life was wonderful. But this was like killing each day separately. So another day would go by, and we'd spend another day swimming in the sea. It wouldn't have been bad if this was our vacation, but we had both had our vacations that year.

"After a week I said to her: 'I don't care what you say, but I can't go on like this forever. If a man has two hands he should be doing something with them. We're not doing a thing. It makes me sick.' And d'you know what she said? She said, 'That's the way I feel. It's nice to be on the beach, but that's no life for two healthy people. I saw an ad near the cafeteria. They're

hiring construction workers for the road across the mountains. Let's sign up.'

"So off we went and signed up. That was some job, let me tell you. There was nothing but rock all around. And we had to build that road through it. If a pick and shovel couldn't do a job, you'd have a bulldozer, then a pneumatic drill. And if that didn't do it, we'd use dynamite or some other high explosive. Anything that would get at the rock. And did the chips fly! There was all that machinery on the road, and through it all were the voices of people. And the scenery was something, too. This was the Crimea, don't forget. There were the mountains, with the valleys in-between, and vineyards covering the slopes up and down each valley. The sun was scorching, and the winds rustled the leaves in the trees. You'll never find anything as beautiful as that anywhere else. In the evenings we'd go back to our camp, and cook our supper in the flickering lights of the campfires. There'd be an accordion, the girls would sing and there was my Lyuba among them like a precious diamond.

"We were working our way into the mountain ridge from the north, and when we reached the summit, there was the sea shining below us. It was a wonderful place! Sea and mountains, and a wide strip of coast. After work I'd sit on a cliff looking down at the sea. I never got tired of looking at it.

"And then, when we'd practically reached the sea and our contract was nearly up, I began to feel homesick for Donetsk. That really doesn't have anything to do with my story. I had no time to be homesick, because just about then Lyuba came up to me after work one day, looking

deathly pale. Her cheeks were sunken, she was terribly worried.

" 'Oh, Kirill, something awful's happened! Vasily must have some sixth sense. He's discovered that we're here and he's out looking for us. I saw him from the cab of my truck. I don't know what to do! It's certain death for one of you if you meet. And I can't live without you. Let's run away. Anywhere! There's a boat leaving for Odessa at midnight. The girls were in town and I told them to book two tickets for us. I asked them to be on the lookout, so that we don't meet him by accident. What do you say, Kirill?'

" 'I'll follow you to the end of the earth, Lyuba!' I said.

"We got our things together quietly and took the boat. Soon we were in Odessa. The sky there is very high, the land is flat and hot. Lyuba said:

" 'This hot city's no place for us. Moldavia's not far from here, and there are vineyards there and orchards, and the people eat corn pudding, but they cut it with a thread, not with a knife, did you know that? The people there are tall and dark and beautiful. We'll get lost among them and can live there happily. If we still love each other by next year, we can get married.'

"I liked what she said about Moldavia. Still, I said: 'Isn't Moldavia the home of the Gypsies? What if someone recognises you and tells that bandit? Then what?'

" 'I've thought about that. The tribes usually gather there in the autumn. Then they go off in all directions in the spring. They like the Donetsk Region especially. The people there get good pay, and that means there's money to be made in fortune-telling and all sorts of things. But as soon as the autumn rains begin, and those cold Donetsk

winds, the Gypsies begin to shiver in their tents. Then they have no choice, they have to set out for warmer places, like Moldavia, or along the Danube, or even as far as Rumania. That's why you won't find any Gypsies in Moldavia in the summer. And anyway, they never go into the countryside, they prefer the crowded towns. There's no money to be made in the wilderness. See, I've thought about it, too. Well, what do you say, Kirill?'

" 'I'll go anywhere, as long as it's with you.'

"We found out where the bus depot was, took the first bus for Moldavia, and never saw Odessa again. Moldavia is a wonderful place. The sea is what makes the Crimea what it is, but in Moldavia it's the vineyards and the green slopes. And the people there are good-looking, especially the girls. They build their houses the same as we do in the Ukraine. There was singing and dancing every evening at the state farm. As soon as the sun went down, Lyuba and I'd go sit on a hill with the farm buildings on one side and the village on the other, just as if they'd been brought over from the Ukraine. It was just like home. We got along well there and were beginning to learn the language. Any place you go in our country is grand. What else could we ask for? There we were, admiring all that beauty, and suddenly it was as if something snapped inside of me. And I got that terrible homesick feeling again."

Kirill looked out the window.

"Now what's so good about that rust-coloured bit of wasteland? Yellow clay, cracked by the sun. Or those lumps of rock that stick up out of the ground at every step. And no matter how far off you look, you'll see those rust-coloured table

lands without a sign of life, because all life is down in the valleys. It's an awfully monotonous scene, to say the least. But it has some magic power. I was so homesick then I didn't know what to do. And there was Lyuba trembling from fright again, talking about that same Gypsy, Vasily.

"It was like a curse. This time I saw him, too. He looked like a murderer all right with all that shaggy black hair and those shifty eyes. I'd never seen him before, but I recognised him immediately. I rushed over to the vineyard where Lyuba was working and said, 'Don't go back to the village, he's there.'

" 'What does he want of my life?' she wailed. Then she whispered. 'Let's run away, Kirill.'

"We left as soon as it was dark and crossed the Dniester River. The Ukraine stretched ahead of us. Which way should we go?

"Lyuba said we had never been in Poltava Region, that we never bathed in the Dnieper or wandered near Lake Svityaz. Perhaps we should head in that direction?

"So we went to Lake Svityaz in Volhyn Region. Those wild places are really beautiful, but as soon as I'd close my eyes I'd see my own Donetsk. So we left the lake region and moved to the Dnieper country. Soon we came to a big state farm. They grew tomatoes and cabbages there and pumped water from the Dnieper for the fields. The winds blowing from the Black Sea and Poltava are very soft. You stand in a field there and breathe deeply and suddenly you feel yourself getting stronger. The Crimea was beautiful, Moldavia was too, in a different way, but here, there was a kind of beauty you couldn't even measure. I was so taken by it that I couldn't see

anything else at first. And Lyuba liked it, too. We were working in the open, and there was a lot of work. You felt as if you were bathed in the sun and the smells of all the grasses. It was like a fairy-tale.

"Lyuba seemed to blossom. I had never seen her as beautiful as she was there on the Dnieper. Everywhere she went people turned to look at her. And I felt taller and stronger. No wonder, it was our native land! One day Lyuba and I were sitting on the high bank of the Dnieper. The osiers was in bloom then. It's a strange sort of plant. It only begins to smell when the sun warms it. It's bitter-sweet smell that makes your head spin. I put my arm around her and said: 'Drink in the air!'

"Below us was the Dnieper, and beyond it the steppes and the golden-white waves of wheat stretching off to the east. To the east, to my native Donetsk. That little drop of homesickness had been swelling inside me all the time. Now it burst, leaving an open sore in my heart. I could see all the old familiar places as clearly as if I were back home.

" 'What's the matter?' Lyuba asked, for I shuddered.

" 'I don't know. This is a really great place we're at, but my heart is back home, in our plain old dusty Donetsk. I can just see Mother's house, and the cock sitting on the fence, and the rose-bush under the window.'

"Lyuba became excited.

" 'Can you really see it?'

" 'Yes. Sometimes I feel so homesick I don't know what to do.'

"She sighed and put her head on my shoulder.

" 'I think all of us from Donetsk are like that.

You don't know how I miss my own Shcherbinovka. I even dream about it! I wish we could go home.'

"I sat up with a start.

" 'Wait a minute. What has Shcherbinovka to do with you? Aren't you a Gypsy from Stavropol?'

"She looked at me and smiled.

" 'I'm as much of a Gypsy as you are.'

" 'But what about that Gypsy who was following us? That hairy, wild-eyed man?'

" 'He's blacksmith at the state farm. He never left the farm in his life.'

" 'But what about the one back home, and the one in the Crimea?'

" 'Why do you have to know all that? Weren't we happy these two years? After all, people have all kinds of shortcomings, but if they don't cause anyone harm, it doesn't count.'

"And then it dawned on me that her head had been full of adventure stories and films and she had suddenly decided she was going to be a Gypsy. No one had ever been after her. She had made it all up.

"We talked it over and finally she said:

" 'I can't tell you how I wish I could go back to Shcherbinovka, Kirill. Let's go there. Please?'

"So we went. We came to the outlying mines, the first heaps of waste rock, the first shafts and cowpers. I could feel the blood racing through my veins. We were home, in the Donetsk Region! We went to Shcherbinovka. I then discovered that Lyuba was an orphan. She had lost her parents during the war. We stayed at the home of her distant relatives for a while, visited her childhood friends, went to parties, talked about

the past, and then came here, to my home, and went back to work at our own mine.

"But the main thing is that my mother and Lyuba get along fine. I love Lyuba and respect her, and as for my mother, well, I'm her son. I kept an eye on how things were going between them and decided that as soon as I noticed the first crack, we'd rent a place of our own, because one of the nicest things a man can have is a place where he can visit and feel at home. We could come and visit Mother, and she could visit us, and in that way we'd never lose our friendship and respect for each other. But it never came to that. They just seemed to take to each other. And that means a great deal. And our own Donetsk land is the best place to call home.

"You probably think all these rocks are awful. But they're like a song to me. Each rock is something special, there are no two alike. They're just plain rocks, but there are more colours in them than in precious stones. They're one colour in the morning and another at noon. And did you ever see them on a misty day in autumn? Or when it's raining? Or early in the spring, when the sun brings out the lichens and they burst into life? This land used to be wild fields covered with wild tulips and poppies. There were millions of them. But the wild tulip has a very sweet bulb and the children were always digging for them. Now those wild beauties are gone. But the poppies still grow near the rocks, in the crevices and crannies. It's not easy to find a poppy. You have to get up at dawn and listen for a bee or a wasp. They like to bathe in the red flower cups, dusting themselves with the pollen, carrying it off in their little baskets. You can see a black-and-yellow bumble bee from far off. If you follow it, it'll

take you where you want to go. A wild poppy only blooms from dawn to noon. At noon the bumble bee heads straight for it, plopping down on the black cushion inside. And the cup shudders and crumbles from the force of the impact. Then the petals fall to the ground, leaving a tiny dark seed box on a prickly silvery stem. So you see, there's beauty to be found in every corner of the world."

12-1715

Alexander Sizonenko

WATERMELONS

The melon patches were far from the village and it seemed to us that the watermelons were brought in from another country.

These days were real holidays for the children. They were holidays which few grown-ups attended, because the melons were picked at a time when the harvesting season was in full swing and the village was deserted save for us. And the dogs, naturally. And the roosters who tried to out-crow each other in the quiet, deserted village, as if they had been hired to sing.

We would sit around in the shade outside our houses, dozing to the sound of their crowing, feeling lonely without our mothers and sisters and stern fathers.

Sometimes a group of us would set out into the steppe, which beckoned to us, crowding the village and our souls from all sides. We could not resist the temptation. From childhood on man has always had a need to move about, to go places, he cannot stay put.

We would only get as far as the first ravine. When we climbed down and turned to look back, the village was nowheres to be seen. The trees and the roof-tops had vanished, as had our homes, doors, windows and ovens, in which our mothers baked bread and where we spent

winter evenings, listening to the endless stories of our kind grandmothers.

We would stop, thunderstruck. Then, exchanging frightened glances, we would turn back as if at a signal, for who knew but that the village might not vanish altogether. Then there would be no more grandmothers, mothers or fathers, and the whole world into which we had been born and had lived until now would suddenly disappear.

Running up the side of the ravine we would see that everything was in its proper place and would immediately become cheerful again, but for a long while after we could not forget how terrifying it had been to have suddenly lost our village. And we would not venture into the ravine again.

And then a wagon would appear from the very same ravine where our journeys ended, the ravine that marked the end of our knowledge of the great world. This was not a hay cart, but a real wagon. Moving along slowly, pulled by tired horses and driven by a stoop-shouldered driver, it seemed especially majestic.

The round speckled, coveted watermelons, the greatest treat of all steppe-born children, glistened moistly in the sun from afar. The wheels of the heavily laden wagon creaked. It moved along smoothly because it was a heavy load for the horses, but not because the driver was so careful.

Clippety-clop, the horses hooves beat the thick dust, raising it up in splashes along the road.

Clippety-clop, closer and closer. Drawn by some unseen force you'd rise up from the ground, eager and excited. The horses nodded their heads thoughtfully in rhythm to their steps, their tails twitched as they chased away the mean August flies. The end of the driver's whip bobbed, the

wheels creaked, grinding the fine dust finer still.

No longer did you see anything. Not a thing besides these wheels and those watermelons that beamed in the sun, calling to you so tantalisingly.

"Uncle, give me a watermelon!" You'd shout in desperation, dying of shame, yet brimming with hope.

You'd never even notice how and when you had run out into the road. There you stood up to your ankles in dust, dirty and tousled-headed, your eyes bright blue and your teeth a shinging white.

"What's the matter? No one to feed you at home?" the driver would reply with a sly smile. And he'd look down at you as though you were a colt or a calf, waiting to see what would come next.

And so you'd walk along beside the wagon wheel. It seemed tremendous, because you were so small. You'd watch the dust caught up by the wheel fall to the earth again, filtering through the spokes. You'd see the shining wheel, bone-dry and white, and you tried your best not to get crushed by it.

In our childhood in the steppe much effort went in to avoiding being run over. And yet, someone always was. Very few of us escaped being hit by a wheel, for there were so many wheels: there were wagons and carts, seeders and harrows and harvesters. Whichever way you looked, there were wheels. And who could ever resist hitching a ride? And how were you to escape falling off occasionally?

The huge wagon wheels kept turning in front of you sprinkling you with dust, but no power in the world was great enough to make you drop behind, for the silent people smiled down upon

you from the wagon sternly but with a hidden gentleness. And the watermelons smiled down, too, so beautiful and so close at hand. They blotted out everything else, you saw nothing besides them.

And so you hitched up your pants and fixed the one suspender that held the only piece of clothing on your naked body in place but was always ready to slip off your shoulder at the wrong time.

"Please give me a watermelon." This time your voice was pleading and not as loud.

If there was a boy or girl in the wagon beside the driver the father would say without turning:

"Give him one."

And so the boy or girl would give you the tiniest watermelon they could find. They would dig around for it, looking under the big ones until finally they would come upon one as small as a potato. You'd really feel like crying for having your hopes dashed so cruelly.

But the father would notice this injustice. To your great joy he would stop his son or daughter.

"No, not that one. Here, give him this one," and he would roll out a huge watermelon.

If there was no one else in the wagon except the driver he would pick out a big watermelon for you right from the start and hand it down. All the while he would be holding his whip in one hand, this terrible weapon than which there was no greater threat to any boy. But now his whip held no terror for you. It was raised over the watermelon by kindness and generosity and it swayed on the stick in rhythm to the motion of the wagon. If there was a bump in the road it might brush against your cheek and you would get a whiff of horses' sweat and dust.

"Watch out, don't get caught under the wheels," a stern voice would say as the driver bent over and two huge sunburned hands handed a round, cool, slippery watermelon down onto your head.

You accepted it as if it were a gift from the sky. It was too heavy for your small hands and you propped it up with your face. But even then you could not hold it, and it rolled down, so you stuck out your chest and stomach and embraced it as the greatest piece of luck that had fallen to you that whole summer, as a reward for the scorching, sun-drenched summer filled with dust and the smell of a thousand grasses.

And then, when you were a full-grown man and had been lucky enough to come out of a battle unscathed, or when you embraced your beloved, or did a job well, when you were especially successful, or had a bit of luck, you would recall those watermelons brought in from the untold reaches of the steppe and handed down by kind hands from a high wagon, from somewheres near the sky.

For happiness is always as big and as round and as slippery as those watermelons of your childhood in the steppe.

And your one thought is to grasp it tightly and hold onto it.

And not to get caught by the wheels.

THE OLD MAN

"Are you happy?" the director asked sternly. "You are happy," he said with conviction, and Larisa, freeing herself from her husband's embrace, smiled.

"You see through people, Sergei. How do you manage it?"

"There's nothing to it," Yurko, her husband the cameraman, said. "You've just arrived, which means we're happy. And no one is coming to see him."

Yurko was a good cameraman. Though he as yet had only two films to his credit, they had earned him fame. As a result, he was confident and independent.

He sat on the warm hood of the jeep, peeling an orange, and the bright tropical peels fell to the snow like bits of the sun.

"Well, well," the director said. "Hide your happiness for a while. We're doing Marichka's death scene today. You know, the woods on the crags, you're off to meet your lover, going through the heavy fog, with the shepherds shouting in the distance, sheep bleating and rifle shots. Then you call out and lose your footing."

"I know," Larisa replied. "I've been thinking of it all the time. I was reading my part in Moscow. But don't make me start living it ahead of time. Let me spend the morning with my husband just as I am."

"Well, well," the director repeated, for he had no wife. "How can I separate you? At least for the duration of the shooting?"

"You just can't." Yurko smiled. "Nothing will come of it, Sergei. I love her and she loves me. It won't hurt the picture. What do you say?"

"Well, well," the director sighed. "I want our picture to be one in which every scene is a blend of poetry and truth. That's all I want."

"Then off we go to concoct poetry and truth," Yurko added blithely.

"No," Larisa objected. "No. Let's walk across the pass and you can show me the shepherd."

"Well, well," said the director without raising his head.

He was a man of the Caucasus, olive-skinned, curly-haired and quick to take offense. His face was as noble and stern as the profiles on ancient silver coins. He was also the only one who wore no hat in the 30 degree frost. He had on a light jacket and an old pair of scuffed shoes, for he couldn't stand wearing felt boots or heavy clothing, and seemed not to notice the cold.

Larisa, who resembled a Gypsy, appeared very frail beside her athletic-looking husband, so broad-shouldered and bull-necked he looked like a monolith. Her smooth hair, so straight and coarse and shiny one might think she had plastered it down with butter according to the local Gutsul custom, could be seen under her bright kerchief. Her great shining eyes smouldered, her large white teeth sparkled. She was so airy, so light you knew she never had to pack for a trip, she was always on the road, as if she had not had a chance to settle on some definite spot of the earth yet.

"Come on, everyone," she said, heading towards the gate.

The peaks above Zhabii, in the very centre of the Carpathian Mountains, seemed to have moved apart, their forest-covered slopes, reaching up to the clear sky, looked shaggy. Lonely huts could be seen here and there on the snow-covered meadows. They seemed deserted, forsaken and melancholy, but the director dreamed of living in such a hut, as the local inhabitants, surrounded by mountains and majestic silence for all eternity.

Meanwhile, lumbermen were hurrying to work

along the snow-covered streets. Their boots creaked loudly on the snow; schoolchildren, their books in satchels on their backs, ran by, the small Gutsul horses, covered by striped woollen blankets, trotted by, pulling their light sleighs; the bells on their harnesses jingled. It was a strange new world, so unlike modern city life.

Sergei was stopped at every step.

"Dady said I should give you this kreutzer," a little blonde girl said, handing him a dark coin. "He said it's very old, from the time of some king, but I forgot what king it was."

"Franz Joseph," the director replied, looking at the copper coin as if it were a great treasure.

"Here are some buns for you," a snub-nosed schoolboy said, handing Sergei a neat steaming package that glistened with butter. "Mamma said you should eat them while they're still warm."

"Thank you," the director replied. "May we all have warm buns every morning of our life, my good man."

He opened the package and offered his companions the golden-brown fragrant buns, handing one to the little boy who bit off a piece and was on his way, running fast to catch up with his friends, while his satchel of books bobbed up and down on his back.

"Wait a minute, sir," said a grey-haired man in felt trousers and an unbuttoned sheepskin jacket that revealed an embroidered shirt. The man, who had evidently come a long way from beyond the mountain pass, was crossing the street slowly. "I have some news for you. Remember you asked me about a minstrel. Well, I've been told there's just such a man beyond Kosovo, about eighty kilometres from here. He's as old and as skinny as a fence pole, but he's the best minstrel

in these parts. Just the man you want. He's the one who played at my wedding."

"Yes, just the man I'm looking for," Sergei replied, pulling out a pad and writing down the minstrel's address. "Thank you."

"God be with you," the old man said with a bow and continued on his way.

There was not a trace of a footprint anywheres. No animal had passed during the night, no person had gone by during the day. It was difficult to believe that anyone lived there. The cabin was made of stout dark logs.

"The old man always used to sit on the bench by the window waiting for someone to pass so he could bum a cigarette off him."

"It's too cold to sit by the window," Larisa said. "I wonder if there's a fire in the oven? He's probably lying under the covers so as not to freeze."

A metal plaque covered with enamel paint was attached to a coarse log above the massive door. The blue numbers "431" against a white background took up all the space on the plaque. Beside it was another of the same size: "Under State Protection and in the State Debts Registry of 1888". The lettering was in Polish. But it looked as shiny and new as if it had been hung up that very day.

"Everything in the mountains is made to last," Yurko said. "The cabin, and the sign over the door."

"And the memories," Sergei added and sighed.

"It's the air," Yurko said and laughed. "The air and the sky and the smell of the pines."

Sergei pushed open the door. Larisa entered behind him and saw the beams under the roof.

The beams, and the roof, and the entire wall to the left of the door that separated this part of the house from the living quarters were smoked black. Soot lay on the wood in a heavy uneven layer which made it resemble an aligator's skin.

"It's a smoked ham, that's what this place is," Yurko said. "It'll last another thousand years. No rot will ever get through to these logs."

"There's no ill without good," Sergei replied. "They didn't build chimneys in the old days to avoid paying extra taxes, but the smoke preserved the Gutsuls' huts for many generations."

"See, every cloud has its silver lining," Yurko added as he entered the room beyond. "Good day," he said, though he could not make anything out in the dim light that seeped through the frozen windows.

They saw a bench standing against one of the walls, a roughly hewn table by the window and a home-made wooden bed in the corner. And old man was sitting up in bed. He sat there silently, his great shoulders sagging. A quilted jacket was thrown over his shoulders. His grey matted hair hung down to his shoulders. His large eyes stared at the door warily, as if it were at once painful and necessary for him to see who it was that had entered.

"How do you do," Larisa said.

The old man was silent.

"He's nearly deaf and blind," Sergei whispered.

"Who are you?" the old man asked loudly. "Come closer."

"Glory be to God," Sergei replied, crossing the room quickly.

"Forever and ever, Amen," the old man said, coming to life. He blinked his large eyes, the deep

creases on his dark face came alive lighting up his face with the joy of recognition.

"Is that you, Sergei?"

"Yes."

"Is that Yurko with you?"

"Yes, it's me," the cameraman replied.

"And I've come along with them," Larisa said. "I've brought you some treats from Moscow."

She handed the old man several large oranges and put a little package beside the box in which he had his tobacco, cigarette paper and matches, all close at hand.

"Did you bring any cigarettes?" the old man asked after a pause, while they stood around looking at him.

He set the oranges aside, displaying no further interest in them.

"What do you need cigarettes for?" Sergei asked.

"What for?" the old man muttered grouchily. "I can take a few puffs and have a good cough. Then I can breathe easier."

Yurko sat down on the bench by the window. The sun shone in on his back and the panes, covered with hoar-frost, suddenly became rosy-blue.

"Will you sell the pouch?" Sergei asked. "Have you made up your mind yet?"

"No," the old man said. "It was handed down to me from my grandfather. They'll bury me with it."

The pouch in question was made of wire braided in an intricade design. It hung over the bed, shiny and as beautiful as the scales of chain mail. The old man turned his head to look at it.

"It's miracle, that's what it is," Larisa said, following his gaze. "Do you want to take along your pouch, your steed and your wife?"
"No," he replied. "My wife died many years ago and I never had a horse. I'll just take my pouch and my fighting axe. That's all."
"Have you any children?" Larisa asked, looking at the old man intently. She was bothered by the fact that there were no footprints outside the cabin or within any reasonable distance of it. Did no one ever pass here?
"God never gave me children," the old man said, but there was no regret in his voice.
"How old are you, Grandfather?" she asked.
"I was born in 1870. Why do you ask?"
"For no special reason."
"Ah," the old man said, gazing intently at Larisa as if he were about to ask her something, though he did not.
"Who cooks for you?"
"People do. When they pass on their way to the farm someone stops by and makes the stove and cooks me something. I don't need much."
"Do they stop by often?"
"Not very."
Sergei sat down beside Yurko. Larisa remained standing by the bed and though she felt uncomfortable at having turned her back towards them she could not move away from the old man. As she stood there looking at him a very tender feeling rose in her breast.
After a long pause the old man said:
"They don't drop by too often, but I can make the stove myself sometimes." He threw the blanket off his feet and was about to rise but changed his mind. He felt around for the blanket and covered his legs again. They were as long and as straight

and powerful as the pines that grew in the forest beyond his cabin.

"We'd better be going," Sergei said, looking at his watch.

"Are you going to work?" the old man asked.

"Yes."

"It's good when you have a good job and can work." This was the only sentence the old man had uttered in which there was a trace of sadness, or was it envy? But there it was.

"Well then, off you go. But leave me some cigarettes. This tobacco has an awful smell. And it's not strong at all."

"Good-bye," Sergei said.

"Good-bye, children. And may your roads be easy, your fords shallow and your paths safe."

Larisa stopped at the threshold and looked back at the old man who'd now be alone again. She imagined how terrible it was for him to sit up in bed all day. And then all through the long night which would be followed by another day and another night, with no one around, nothing but the mountains and the forest. And the silence. And no one passing by the windows, opening the door and talking to him. It was as if someone had struck Larisa a blow to her very heart, for pain, compassion and pity welled up in it.

"We'll be back again, Grandfather," she promised.

"Ah," the old man said and shrugged. "Time will tell."

They looked at each other in silence.

"Never make any promises," he added.

"Good-bye," she said and offered the old man her hand.

He stretched his hand out hesitantly and it missed her hand, so that she put hers in his large,

dark palm, as if it were an offering, or a weapon against loneliness. She held his cold hand in hers for a long while. He raised his head, as if listening for a sound or trying to recall something.

"Why are you holding onto my hand like that? Do you want to tell me something?" he asked sternly.

"My father died a short time ago."

The old man pulled his hand away and felt in the box for a cigarette. There were four cigarettes showing up white against the dark tobacco and Larisa hurriedly handed him one, struck a match and held it up to him. The old man inhaled deeply. Then he inhaled again, but did not cough.

"Go," he said. "They're waiting for you."

"Were you a shepherd?" she asked, standing on the threshold.

"Yes," he replied and dragged on the cigarette again.

"And did you live in the mountains and the meadows all alone?"

"I wasn't alone. There were the sheep and the shepherds. What's the use of talking about it? There have always been shepherds in the Carpathian Mountains. I wasn't the only one." He dropped his head and was lost in thought.

Perhaps he was recalling the huts in which he had lived, making cheese, keeping the flame he had struck from a splinter in spring alive all summer and autumn. Those huts had long since rotted away and the flocks had died, giving birth to new flocks. But even now he could recall them all, each sheep in turn. And the ones he remembered best were not the meek, but those that kicked and bolted when you milked them and always tried to trample the grain. If there was a field in the mountains where grain was growing.

"Good-bye," Larisa said.

No, the old man had voiced no complaint. He said,

"Farewell and never make any promises. The world is big and there is a lot to be done."

Larisa left the cabin feeling depressed and tired. It was as if she had caused someone terrible harm. Yurko and Sergei were walking on along the stream. Their figures were two black spots against the snow.

"Hey!" Larisa called.

Their work awaited them beyond the pass, work, the mainstay of life.

Mikhail Stelmakh

NEW YEAR'S EVE

No doubt about it, it is silly to write plays in the fourth grade, but what can you do if it's bigger than you? The entire school was making fun of my writer's itch, I had been given several unkind nicknames, and some of my classmates had gone so far as to draw devils and thumbed noses on my writing. I was hurt, but I stood my ground and presented a devil-may-care face to the world. Now, when I went out during recess, I no longer left my ill-fated notebooks in my desk, I shoved them into my pockets. Naturally, this was most inconvenient, especially if there was a scuffle, but art demands some sacrifice.

Every evening, come rain or shine, I rushed over to the village reading room which had been opened two months before. There I read through every available play, no matter what the subject. The dramas and tragedies I liked best were the ones in which there was a lot of shooting. The librarian knew my weakness. Sometimes he'd greet me with the words:

"Mikhailo! I've got a new play with shooting in it!"

"Is there a lot of shooting?" I'd ask anxiously.

"There's some in every scene and some backstage, that's the cannons!"

"That's for me!"

The librarian would laugh, making the wrinkles spread all around his eyes. He was a fine man. Sometimes, after all the other readers had gone, he would ask me to read him what I had written. He would then ponder over my play, rubbing the tip of his nose, and say how sorry he was I didn't write poems which he could have put in the wall newspaper for the whole village to read. But I was faithful to the theatre, for that seemed to be my fate.

The day before, turning pale and crimson by turns, I had handed Nastya Vasilyevna my third play. She had taken my notebooks carefully, leafing through the top one, and had asked:

Is there any shooting in it?"

"Lots!"

"That's good," my teacher had said, nodding approvingly, while I suddenly became a head taller. So there was some good about all my writing after all.

I lay crosswise on the oven bed. The wick lamp flickered before my eyes, the letters danced up and down; I couldn't read, all my thoughts were on my play. What would my teacher say? I had more doubts than hopes of the outcome.

The night was getting colder, the wind howled outside the window, nipping the frozen branches of the pear tree, making them moan and tinkle in turn. I might have put the pear tree in my play, machine-gunners beneath it, and a crescent moon, which was not to be seen now, peering through the branches.

I was so taken with my own thoughts that I did not hear my father return. He had been to see my teacher.

"I wonder why our dad looks as if there's

something buzzling inside of him?" Mother said and smiled.

Father glanced at me slyly, then at her and replied:

"You'll be buzzling yourself when you start getting ready to go to the theatre."

At the word "theatre" I pricked up my ears and stared at my father, while my arms and legs went numb. Was he teasing or really serious?

"Is another theatre group coming our way again?" Mother asked, picking up her spindle.

"No one's coming, it's right up here, hatching on our oven." Father looked up at me again. "It wrote some sort of play and they're going to put it on in school. That'll really be a comedy!"

At this I went numb all over from mingled joy and fear. Mother came to my defence.

"I'd never laugh at my child if he felt like scratching away on paper."

"A lot you know! The teacher told me your good-for-nothing is turning into a regular writer. Who'll take the cow out to pasture now?"

"Can't you be serious? What did she say about him?"

"Just what I told you: the school will put on the play and they'll charge five kopecks a ticket, but I didn't have the nerve to ask her if they'd let us in for free. What do you say, son, will they?"

"If you'll keep your jokes to yourself, they might," I said cautiously, for who could know how he would take it.

"Well!" Mother said. "Now there'll be two of you talking nonsense in this house!"

"You don't believe your husband, but he's brought you the plain, honest truth."

"Dad, is it really true? Did she really say

they'd, uh . . . put it on?" My voice rang with excitement.

"It looks like it. All the teachers read your scribbles today, they scratched out some and added some and finally decided that our village can't survive without its own writer any more. I'm sorry if I've been too familiar with you up till now, son," he said in a friendly, teasing voice and tugged my forelock. "Will you let Mother and me into your theatre?"

"Oh, Dad!" A wave of insane hope caught me up and carried me off into the deep end one both fears and eagers for.

"What are you so shy about?" Father asked, tugging again. "Maybe something will come of us, after all."

Just then the dog barked outside and the bolt shot back on the gate. Father went out, returning with Uncle Mikola, who was dressed in a long overcoat. He shook his clothes, brushed the snow from his boots and asked, glancing at me, if they'd let him in the theatre.

"So you know about it, too," I said unhappily.

"The whole village knows about it. There are two things you can't hide here: a cough and a play. So I came over to find out whether you're making fun of Uncle Mikola in it. What'll Aunt Lukeria say if you are?"

We all laughed, and I really was sorry then that I hadn't included any of Uncle Mikola's jokes. He twirled his grand moustaches and spoke to Father in earnest:

"Panas, do you want to get some fresh fish for New Year's Eve?"

"Let me go with you, Dad!" I pleaded.

"We can manage without you."

"Please?"

"We'll have to spend the whole day outside in the freezing cold. It'll make your bones rattle."

"I spend every day outside at the skating rink."

Dad looked first at Mother, then at Uncle Mikola and shrugged.

"What'll we do with him? Maybe we should take him, he'll nag the life out of us if we don't."

"Let him learn."

"Go get some straw for your bedding."

I was off the oven in a flash, stuck my bare feet into my boots, raced into the shed and felt around for some straw. Just then someone came up to the gate and yanked the string that was attached to the wooden latch.

"Who's there?" I shouted in my deepest voice.

"It's me, Mikhailo. Let me in," a familiar voice called out.

"Oh! Come on in, Uncle Sebastian!" I ran over to the gate, threw it open and led the chairman of the Poor Peasants' Committee into the house.

"We're going to Maidan-Kurilevsky tomorrow, Mikhailo."

"Tomorrow?" I couldn't believe my ears.

"Yes. Put on your warmest clothes."

"He was going fishing tomorrow."

"Oh, no, Dad. I'd rather go to Maidan-Kurilevsky. We'll get new books there!"

"It's up to you," my father said.

I was ready to dance: what luck! Suddenly all my disappointments, all those mean nicknames, all those devils and thumbed noses fell away from me like so much chaff in the wind.

Early the next morning Mother made a bowlful of buckwheat patties. Some were filled with wild pear, some with mashed beans, some with poppy-

seeds and some with currants. They were as big as a crescent moon, one was enough for a blacksmith. I threw three into my knapsack, listened patiently to all of Mother's instructions for the journey ahead, and ran out to meet Uncle Sebastian. He had harnessed his horse to a light sleigh and was waiting for me.

"What's that in your sack?"

"Buckwheat patties, for you and for me. Here, try one."

"Did you try one yet?"

"No."

"Well then, we'll start our journey with patties. Do we go inside or have them here?"

"Dad says it's tastier outside."

Uncle Sebastian chuckled and praised the patty. His fit into his hand, but I had to hold mine with both hands. He was nearly through with his when I had just reached the filling, I was so pleased that he liked my mother's cooking, and was so happy to be talking to him and seeing, in my mind's eye, the strange village that had the best library in the region.

Having finished my patty I tumbled into the straw-filled sleigh, Uncle Sebastian picked up the reins, and the horse carried us out into a vast, snow-filled world where the willows, silvery with hoarfrost, were misty shapes, where winds chilled the sun, where the river made the over-ripe rushes bob and sway, where some living creatures' sad voices could still be heard this late in the year.

We flew through the neighbouring village, past Grandpa Kornei's house and approached the terrible swamp that gave off acrid fumes even in winter time. Men used to hide out in the swamp as far back as the times of the Tatar raids.

"Mikhailo, do you want to see a miracle?" Uncle Sebastian said, turning his snow-powered face towards me.

"Yes!"

"We'll turn off to the left, then."

The sleigh bumped over the frozen bogs and soon we were in a grove brushed with hoarfrost. Uncle Sebastian reined in, jumped down and looked up expectantly. Yes, it was as if someone had hung a magic cloth above us: each frost-covered tree had a halo of sunshine in the shape of crimson garlands. I had never seen so many rowan berries before and stood there enchanted, taking in the frozen branches, that hung just above our heads, the shadows of each bunch of berries etched clearly on the snow.

"Like it?" Uncle Sebastian sounded like a conspirator.

"It's beautiful!" I pinched off several frozen berries. "How come there's so many berries?"

"How come?" Uncle Sebastian frowned. "The old folks say that this used to be a quagmire. Once, the Tatars raided a village nearby when there was a wedding on. All the girls that were at the wedding ran here to hide with the Tatars hot on their heels, because they used to sell beautiful girls into slavery. The girls ran into the swamp and drowned. Then this grove grew up on the spot. They say in the summer time you can still hear the girls' crying and moaning."

We rode out into a meadow beneath a canopy of berries, then back onto the road and onwards, while my troubled thoughts carried me back through the centuries. I could see the girls sinking in the mire in front of their enemies and the grove that sprouted from them. I could even hear the earth groan. No, the sound was a small mill

on a stream, its heavy, ice-laden wheel made the whole structure tremble. It was doing its job as a person would and was groaning as a person would.

"It's not far now. Are you very cold?"

"No."

"We'll get out and run a bit anyway."

Uncle Sebastian and I raced each other, he'd catch up with me, toss me into the air and catch me like a ball, while the clever horse cocked an eye at us understandingly and trotted along beside.

We finally reached Maidan-Kurilevsky, the river Zgar, the steep ravines and the red clay hills covered with white huts. We drove into the yard of the two-storey brick schoolhouse with the big windows. It was quiet, the children were at home now, and the only sound was that of pigeons cooing, a sure sign of warmer weather ahead.

I climbed the worn metal stairs with mixed feelings of fear and joy. Uncle Sebastian stopped outside the high doors and knocked cautiously.

"Come in!"

We entered a large room and greeted the middle-aged man in glasses whose grey hair reached down to his collar. Uncle Sebastian went over to him, but I stood stock still: across the room, to the left and right of me were oaken bookcases with thousands of volumes peering out at me from behind glass doors. You'd need a dozen wagons to cart them all away, and maybe even more than that! At first, I couldn't believe it was possible to have so many books in a single room. Think of the lucky people who could come and go here as they pleased. While I was busy reading the titles Uncle Sebastian and the librarian came over to me.

"Dmitro Onisimovich is a teacher," Uncle Sebastian said. "And this is Mikhailo."

"Thank you," I said by way of greeting and crushed my hat fiercely in my confusion.

The teacher and Uncle Sebastian exchanged glances and then the teacher said in a kindly voice:

"We lend out only two books at a time, Mikhailo. Which ones would you like? Or would you rather look around first?"

"Yes." I was busy thinking that I had better take the two biggest books they had.

Dmitro Onisimovich opened the glass doors and I ran over the titles on the bindings of the bigger books. Here was one for me, the one in the black binding.

"I'd like this one."

The teacher smiled and handed me the volume of Shakespeare's plays.

"I think you're a little young for this book, though it was written by the world's greatest dramatist."

"No, I'm not." I mumbled. "I like to read plays."

"That's very nice, I have very few readers who do. But I think you'd better wait another six or seven years."

"Is there any shooting?"

"What?"

"I said, is there any shooting or fighting in the plays?"

"Ah!" The teacher smiled into his moustache. "They fight to the death here, but there's no shooting. I don't think gunpowder was invented at the time."

"I'll take it, then. I like fighting," I said, trying to justify my choice.

"If you insist." He handed me the heavy volume. "But on one condition: when you return it you'll tell me all about what you've read. Agreed?"

"Yes."

"What else would you like? This one?" he said, pointing to one of the biggest books. He had apparently guessed my taste in reading.

"Yes, this is fine." I accepted the volume of Mamin-Sibiryak.

Uncle Sebastian picked two books he wanted. Both were smaller than mine. We thanked the teacher. In parting, he said:

"When you graduate from your village school, Mikhail, come to our school. I'll let you read all the books we have."

"Thank you, Dmitro Onisimovich." As I said good-bye I bowed to the old teacher. He put his hand, which smelled of books and bindings, on my head and blinked rapidly.

What a joy it was to fall into the sleigh! The book felt cold in my hands, kings and knights tumbled off the pages, fought and fell here in the snow where the air smelled of frozen rowan berries, where the windmills struggled against the twilight, calling on all good men to come and grind their corn.

"You'll ruin your eyes!" Uncle Sebastian said angrily.

I smiled, shut the book, and a moment later had it open again, just to have a glance at the warriors who were clothed in iron for some unknown reason.

The snowbound village greeted us with smoke from its chimneys, scattered lights and stars. A well sweep creaked and a New Year's song echoed it from across the way.

New Year's Eve, New Year's Eve.
Bring all good people happiness.

"Thank you, children, for visiting our house," a woman's voice replied.

Girls began to sing near the pond.

I recognised Lyuba's voice immediately, stood up in the sleigh and shouted:

New Year's singing.
Bells are ringing,
Birds are bringing
In the New Year.

"You'll get a sore throat, Lyuba!"

The girls burst out laughing. Then a figure detached itself from the group and raced towards us.

"Want a bun, Mikhailo?" Lyuba said, tumbling into the sleigh and handing me a New Year's bun.

"I brought you some rowan berries. Here."

"Do you want a bun, Uncle Sebastian? It's still warm."

"How can I resist if it's still warm?" he said and shrugged in mock wonder.

Lyuba was chattering a mile a minute:

"Uncle Mikola and your dad came back already."

"Did they catch anything?"

"A couple of pike and a whole sack of loaches. Uncle Mikola said they heaved and pulled and could barely pull in one of the pikes, it was so big. Its eyes were as big as saucers and its scales were like silver rubles."

This seemed so funny we all laughed.

"Come to our house!" I said to Uncle Sebastian. "We even have fresh fish!"

"How can I resist if it's fresh?" he said and squinted merrily as he knocked the frost from the horse's back with the reins.

The sleigh bells tinkled, and the ice on the pond sighed. The stars blinked steadily above us, soft lights flickered ahead and the voices of the carollers were carried back to us:

> New Year's Eve, New Year's Eve
> Bring all good people happiness.

How wonderful it was, how strange and joyous to be living in this world with its stars, its good people, its soft lights and New Year's Eves.

Mikhailo Tomchanii

THE STORK

The warm days of spring had set in. The stream that flowed by our village gurgled merrily; the water rushing from the Upper End of the village near the forest carried along broken pails, mended and re-mended pots and pans, sieves and tattered brooms, everything the villagers had carried out to the dump during the winter. The water flooded the meadows, because the ditch that had been dug through the hayfields was full of silt, as it was every year. The willows turned green over the stream, there was a piping of reed whistles in the village, geese cackled, greeting the spring, hens clucked loudly, while the fences were strung with long strips of cloth spun during the winter and now freshly washed and drying. The air was full of the smell of ashes, lime, manure, swamp fumes, wet wood, rotten splinters from the woodsheds, sodden straw, willows and nettles that grew along the fences. Storks began circling over the meadows, flying over the village, calling out loudly, as if greeting the villagers and their nests, heralding the advent of spring. Some of them were already wandering about the flooded meadows in their high red boots, prodding in the water with their long beaks.

Grandpa came out of the hut to look at the visitors and sun himself.

"The storks have brought spring on their wings from the warm countries," he said. "You haven't spotted ours yet, have you?"

A nest of branches as big as a wagon wheel crowned our chimney. Every year a pair of storks hatched their family in this nest.

"Don't you frighten them, boy. Don't you throw stones at them! If you tease them they'll set fire to the house and send us off like beggars into the world."

I looked at him doubtfully.

"Do storks have matches?"

"Haven't you ever heard of shepherd boys starting fires in the fields or pastures? A stork will bring a smouldering bit of wood in its beak and drop it on the roof, or it might strike a spark with its strong beak. You don't need much to put a thatched roof on fire. You must have seen it rap its beak against a stone."

Grandpa knows everything. He knows the answer to every question. Grandma calls him Almanac. Grandpa knows all the holidays, he knows why the swallows fly low and why they fly high. He knows all about the sky, just as if it were his own back yard. "Look over there," he'll say, "See the hen and her chicks walking across the sky. And there's the big wagon and the carts. There's the fish and there's the crab." Last year, as we were coming home with a cartload of hay, night fell while we were still on the road. I was lying on top of the hay, looking up at the sky, counting the stars. The wagon swayed, there was a warm smell of horses in the air while Grandpa pointed his whip at the sky, explaining how he could tell time without a watch, how he knew when it was midnight and even the hours towards dawn. Grandma was angry, she said he had

better stop pointing his whip up at the heavens if he didn't want his arm to whither away, but Grandpa muttered: "Do you think I'm pointing a finger at God, or pulling him by the legs?"

Grandpa and I are friends, because I want to know everything, too. It's as if we're playing a game: can you really answer every question I'll ask you?

"Grandpa, why does a stork stand on one foot?"

Grandpa looked up at the emtpy nest. He chuckled and said:

"Do you want him to pick up his other foot? He'll fall over if he does."

It seemed right, but somehow his answer did not satisfy me.

"Why do they fly away in the wintertime, Grandpa? Why do they build their nests on roofs?"

"Don't you know? Listen, then. Once upon a time the stork was a man. This was very, very long ago, when God had just made the world. Now one day God said to man: 'My boy, take this sack to the edge of the sea and throw it in. But don't you untie it, don't you look inside.' The man carried the sack away and since it was heavy, he sat down to rest. He sat there thinking: 'I wonder what it is I'm carrying?' But he was afraid to untie it. He could still hear God's words: 'Don't untie it, don't you look inside!' So he heaved it to his shoulder again and continued on his way. After a while he sat down to rest again. 'What is it I'm carrying?' he wondered. 'Here I am dragging this heavy load and I don't even know what's inside.'

"But he didn't want to sin, so he shouldered the sack again. He walked along whistling, so as

to resist temptation. But as soon as he got to the seashore he started thinking. 'After I throw this sack into the water somebody might ask me what it was I threw away and I won't even know what to say.' He turned and looked around. There was no one in sight. 'I'll untie the sack,' he thought, 'and have a peep inside. Then I'll tie it up again. Nobody will see what I've done and no one will ever find out.' So he untied the sack. Snakes and lizzards, and toads, and all sorts of vermin crawled out of the sack. The man wanted to gather them up and stuff them back in, but it was too late, they had crawled all over and hidden in the grass and the bushes.

"So the man brought God the empty sack and God said to him: 'I see that you have disobeyed me. From now on you will be a stork. You will have to gather up everything you let out of the sack. When you have gathered it all up again, I'll turn you back into a human being.'

"And so the stork has been gathering up everything he let out of the sack, but no matter how hard he works, he can't collect them all. Storks build their nests on roofs, close to people, because they were human beings themselves once upon a time. When the snakes and toads hide away in the ground during the winter the storks fly away to the warm countries. They keep on working there, so as they can turn back into people again some day."

"But why didn't God tell the man what was in the sack? Then he wouldn't have untied it."

"Shush, child!" Grandma said from where she was sweeping the porch. "God knows what He's doing. It's not for us to judge His deeds."

"No, He doesn't! Why did He make snakes then if they bite people?"

Grandma raised the broom to hit me, but I hid behind Grandpa.

"Everyone makes mistakes, boy," Grandpa said softly when Grandma had gone back into the house. "And God also made a mistake. Then He realised what sort of vermin He had created and so He had gathered it all up into a sack and told man: 'Take this away and throw it into the sea.' But man was impatient. He was too curious. He wanted to see for himself! But God didn't want anyone to find out that He had made a mistake."

Finally, a stork came to rest on our roof. It began making clacking sounds with its long beak.

"Where is his mate?" our neighbours asked each other. They sounded worried. "Is she still in the meadow?"

Evening came and the stork, lonely and sad, still stood watch over his nest. He kept clacking, as if he were complaining that he was now a widower. Several times he rose high into the sky. We could hear his cries. Perhaps he thought that his lost mate would respond to his call.

For four years the stork came back each spring, and each spring he was alone. But the fifth year....

Oh, what joy there was in our house and in every house on our street when on the fifth year our stork returned with a new mate! Grown-ups and children crowded round our house. "The widower has finally got married again!" they said. Because everyone in the village knew who should get married, which boy or girl was getting past the marrying age, who had been widowed and who should marry whom.

Everyone spoke of our widowed stork as if he were a human being. The old women were worried lest he remain a widower the rest of his life.

Some were impatient with him, while others praised him for not running after the first skirt that passed him by.

The young pair came to rest on our roof. They clacked their beaks, soared high into the sky, bathed in the blue heavens and in the rays of the spring sun. They waded across the flooded meadows beyond the village. Finally, they flew back to our roof. But now, no matter how our stork urged his young wife to fly up with him again, she stood over the nest, inspecting it from every angle. It was a sorry sight indeed, for during those four long years no woman had cared for it. It was full of holes, beaten by the rain and wind, as cheerless as any house kept by man with no woman to warm it.

The bride got down to work. She began gathering the small twigs that had been tossed about in the wind and wove them into place to mend the holes. Our stork, giddy with joy, rose into the air and zoomed over the village, but soon he returned, for it was no fun to fly about alone.

Meanwhile, his wife paid no attention to him. She was busy putting the nest in order. She tried to settle down in it several times, but got up again each time. Her husband seemed ashamed of himself for being so carefree. He shook his head, as if to shake off his giddiness. He realised now that the honeymoon was over and a new life with its everyday cares had begun. He was not angry with his wife. On the contrary, he looked at her with love and pride, as does a future father watching his young wife making booties and little shirts. He knew that in a short time he would become a father and would be responsible for feeding his fledgelings. He would teach them to

fly over the village, over the meadows and pastures, he would teach them to catch snakes and toads.

And so the sobered stork flew up and away. Soon he was back with a beak full of twigs, ready to help his wife mend the tattered nest. Thus, new life came to our house.

Grigor Tiutiunnik

THE FIRST BLOSSOM

"What are you getting all dressed up for, boy?" Grandpa Lavrin asked from where he was lying on his plank bed. He coughed derisively, as if he really knew what I was about. What if I had put on my new shirt and slicked down my cowlick? Couldn't I be going to a meeting?

It had got so dark in the room you couldn't see the cobwebs in the corners. The windowpanes had turned as blue as they do before a storm. The potatoes under the bench had sprouted, pleading to be planted.

It was time for me to go.

I took a bottle of cologne from the shelf and wet my handkerchief and then saw the dimple on Grandpa's cheek twitch. He was laughing. He really was a tease! And I knew why.

Before, as soon as twilight fell, he would start on a long story about the time he had been a prisoner-of-war in Austria during the First World War, of the pies they baked there and of how clean they kept the cowsheds. And in the winters, when the cold winds howled outside, I would spend my days on the high oven, sitting next to Grandpa, singing old hymns.

But things were different now. Now, I was.... Well, anyway, he himself said I was a grown lad. As I headed towards the door he called:

"When you marry that spitfire sour-grass will seem sweet to you."
"That's enough, Grandpa."
"Because that girl is made of a whirlwind blown up by devils!"
"It's just that she has a strong character," I replied calmly, my one thought being to get away as quickly as possible.
"Sure, sure," he mumbled. "The bars on a prison window are strong too, but who cares for them?"
That was too much. I slammed the door and was gone.
The night air smelled of young poplar leaves and warm manure from the vegetable beds mixed with last year's weeds and wet ashes. The fruit trees had dropped their blossoms and now the petals lay like a thick white carpet on the ground. Each day the wind blew the petals into the road, and if a car drove by at night they were drawn along it like a pink snowball all the way to the bridge, where they fell into the river.
A red glow lit up the sky in the steppe far beyond the orchards. At times it would drop to the horizon and then the street became dark and chill. Then it would flare up again, covering half of the sky, colouring the young poplars red. The tractor drivers were burning last year's straw.
I crossed the orchard to the edge of the village and headed towards the ravine. From afar I could see a small white shape. It was Sonya. She was waiting for me. My chest expanded of its own accord, my steps grew firmer, I felt as if I might fly. And yet, I seemed to have lost my voice.
"Sonya," I mumbled in a sickening voice. "Is that you?"

"No, it's not me," she replied and giggled. "It's a ghost."

She took my arm, pressing her warm firm breast against it.

"Come, I'll show you where there's snow," she cooed into my ear. "It's down there, in the ravine."

We started down the steep slope into the cold black chasm, supporting each other and grabbing at the wet prickly branches. The ravine smelled of old alder trees. Something crunched and cracked underfoot.

"See, it's ice," Sonya said looking up and brushing her hot lips against my chin. "And you didn't believe me."

The sky lit up again. It suddenly became so light in the ravine that I could see Sonya's eyes. They looked strange: frightened and laughing at the same time. My knees suddenly turned to water, something pulled my head down lower and lower.

"What if I kiss her?" I thought. "Will she slap my face? I've seen it happen so many times in the movies." At this my neck suddenly became rigid.

But Sonya was not laughing any more. Her eyes became angry slits. No I'd better try some other time.

There I stood like an idiot, not knowing what to say. Finally, she spoke.

"Nikolka, can you catch me if I fall? Can you hold me?"

"Sure!" I said, putting my arm round her thin waist. Suddenly, I lost my footing and realised with terrifying clarity and revulsion that we'd both tumble into the mud. She managed to wriggle out of my grip angrily, looking at me with scorn.

"My, aren't you strong."

"I slipped," I mumbled. "It's not my fault. It's slippery here."

Sonya turned away. A vision of Grandpa Lavrin laughing at me, his dimple dancing in his cheek, rose up before my eyes. Perhaps he had been right about that sour-grass.

This gave me new strength.

"Well," I said, "if that's the way it is, well then. . . ."

I grabbed hold of an overhanging bush and pulled myself up.

"Nikolka! What about me?"

The way she said it made my head spin and my heart pound like a hammer. I jumped down again, grabbed her angrily by the shoulders and planted a loud kiss on her cold and slippery kerchief.

"What a place to kiss me, in back of my ear," Sonya sighed. But now her laughter sounded gentle and submissive. "Let's go back. It's cold here."

I did not help her up, I practically carried her. I felt as strong as an ox. We looked back at where we had just been and could see the white snow.

"Isn't it strange," Sonya said. "The orchards are in bloom everywhere, but there's still snow here."

I said it was because the sun never reached there but that it would soon melt.

We walked down the road to the bench outside our gate. Sonya was shivering. She pressed close to my shoulder. I could feel her breath on my neck.

"Aren't you frozen?" she asked.

I clenched my teeth to keep them from chattering and said: "N-n-not a b-b-bit."

The flames shot up in the steppe. Wherever

the vegetable gardens had been ploughed the freshly turned earth was red, while in the furrows the fallen blossoms were as white as the snow in the ravine. The leaves in the orchards had just peeped through the buds. Tiny green droplets glistened like dew on the branches here and there: it was the beginning of the tiny apples.

"If I had beads like that I'd never take them off," Sonya said.

"We'll buy you some," I promised confidently. "As soon as I start working we'll buy you some."

"And I'll embroider your shirts. They'll be beautiful. Much nicer than any in the store."

Suddenly Sonya stopped, rose up on tip-toe and pulled my head down gently. For an instant I gazed into her flashing eyes and heard her shy whisper: "A hundred times better, dearest! A thousand times better!"

And then I heard no more and saw no more. We sat there on the bench under the poplars for a long while, embracing each other even when the night trucks began rolling past us towards Poltava and the drivers shouted encouragingly and shamelessly at us.

We parted far past midnight, walking home slowly, a sweet and burning thirst on our lips.

I stopped on the threshold for a moment, listening as Sonya closed her door softly in order not to waken her mother.

I heard a rustling in our orchard. Grandpa, dressed in a heavy sweater and carrying a pitchfork, appeared from behind the barn. Clouds of blue smoke were rising over the trees.

"Come on, lover boy, help me smoke the orchards before the young apples freeze."

I rushed towards the orchard, grabbing up armfuls of straw and twigs and started a fire near

the dividing line so that the smoke would also reach into Sonya's orchard.

"Not there! Closer to the barn!" Grandpa shouted.

"That's all right. If there's enough for others, there'll be enough for us," I replied, using his own words.

Meanwhile, I kept wondering what excuse I might find to go over to our neighbours' during the day, for I doubted that I would be able to survive until evening if I didn't.

SPRING MINT

An orange evening was settling over the meadows, flooded by the April high waters, enveloping the distant edges of the flaming clouds along the low banks. The farther the sun sank beyond the hills, the lower the fire became, the narrower the glittering strip of water by the willows, as if the waves were tucking it under the bank.

Andrii rose from the stump he was resting on after trudging through the mud in search of his boat. The water had receded during the day. The ridge of dry rushes, water-logged branches and empty shells it now lay on had still been submerged that morning. The boat was on the bank, covered with silt. The chain that bound it to the alder tree was taut: the water, in receding, had probably tried to drag it along, but had been unable to break the iron tether.

Andrii unwound the chain, leaving a red gash in the bark, and dragged the boat towards the water, the deep silt sucking at his high boots.

He sat down to rest on the bow at the edge of

the flood-lands. He was in no hurry to get home, though he was famished and had had a hard day in the fields, delivering straw to the cowsheds, helping unload the huge piles. He still smelled of the rotting malt of old straw, axle grease and dried sweat.

A village jutted up on the dry hill across the river, it was nearly surrounded by water as orange as the sky. He could hear a radio, cocks crowed, smoke curled low, adding a bitter smell of last year's vegetable tops to the sweet meadow air.

Andrii recognised his house, but there was no yearning for his own hearth that had until so recently drawn him home.

The day on which he had taken off his officer's uniform for good to become a tractor driver, was the day his mother-in-law had developed a keen hatred for him. She barely spoke to him now, and the house, as if sharing its mistress' thoughts, became hostile and cold in its silent scorn.

Now, whenever Andrii returned from work, his mother-in-law would be there waiting for him in the passageway to say:

"For goodness' sake, don't bring all that dirt into the house! We've just got through cleaning." Then she would sail past him into the yard, her shining teacher's merit badge, which looked just like a Scythian vase, carried proudly on her lapel.

Andrii would back up against the wall to let her pass and his blood boiled. He felt she was pressing him into a corner simply to humiliate him. Then he would lean against the door jamb and remove his shoes before entering the house.

Klava would rise lazily to greet him, stretching till her bones cracked and stealing a glance at herself in the mirror.

They ate in silence, as if there had been a quarrel.

"I can't understand the likes of you!" Andrii would mutter in the night as he dragged on his cigarette. "You're village folk, yet the airs you put on. . . ."

"The likes of you!" Klava snapped and turned to the wall, pouting. "If you don't like us the way we are, you can go find someone else."

At such times he hated everything about her: her slim, lithe waist, her voluptuous legs, and even her name, Klava—what a name!

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, after a grudged truce of their bodies, she would cry and complain that she missed their life in Vladivostok, the good old times the officers' wives had, and that her mother always referred to him as her ex-officer husband and called her a fool for not knowing the right man to marry.

Then Andrii would jump up, light a cigarette, and pace up and down, bumping into chairs and knocking them over, till his mother-in-law moaned from the adjoining room:

"For goodness' sake, you can't even get a night's sleep here."

It was getting darker in the west. Andrii shoved his boat into the water and was about to push off when he heard branches cracking in the alder grove and a breathless young girl ran out into the clearing.

"Take me across, Uncle!" she shouted. Then, as she came closer and recognised Andrii, her long lashes shyly put out the childish excitement in her eyes.

"Oh, it's you. I thought it was Uncle Porfilo."

She was obviously embarrassed. Andrii knew

she had not told the truth, for he had on his old Navy tunic and no one else in the village wore one. He recalled that he had seen the girl before, but she had been different then. It must have been the year before last, when he had been home on leave. He had walked through the village in his officer's uniform, and a group of schoolgirls had tagged along. The girls darted ahead to have a look at his medals, they whispered and giggled, and one of them said loud enough for him to hear:

"Look at Lesya, she's bewitched."

Andrii had turned to look and had seen the girl with the clear, shy eyes dressed in a long school uniform. Her eyes seemed to be saying: stop and see how pretty we are. It had been a momentary impression, he had forgotten all about it, but he had remembered those eyes.

The girl who now stood before him was not one you'd pass a cursory glance over. And yet, it was not fitting, especially for a married man, to admire her openly. She was carrying an armful of books though she was not dressed as a schoolgirl: she had on a man's pair of high rubber boots, a plain grey jacket and a flowered, tassled kerchief tied low on her forehead, as married women did.

This rankled. "Why, she's just a schoolgirl, and it seems she's married," he thought. "And she's wearing her husband's things."

"Get in," he muttered, surprised at his own burliness. He waded into the water.

She waited till he was seated, then shoved the boat hard and jumped in.

"Where were you so late?" Andrii asked to obliterate the stupid, uncalled-for hostility.

"At school. Then I went over to dig potatoes for Grandma."

"Is your name Lesya?"

She nodded. The eyes shaded by the kerchief flashed hotly, as a woman's eyes would.

"What grade are you in?"

"I'm a senior."

"What are you planning to do when you graduate?"

Lesya smiled bitterly, dipped her hand in the water and turned away.

"I don't know."

"What do your teachers suggest? Who's your home teacher?"

"Stepanida Trofimovna. Your mother-in-law," she added in a near whisper. "She said we should be livestock breeders, because you'll soon need a degree for that, too."

Andrii began rowing in angry spurts. Still, the oars did not pull at his arms, the boat cut through the water smoothly like a bird on motionless wings. It seemed as if the houses and orchards were drifting towards them.

"So that's how it is," he thought, "she's all for the girls going into the cowbarns. How noble of her!"

The sun's fire burnt down and went out beyond the horizon. It was that enchanted hour when the air becomes as clear as a spring, when the tiny oak saplings protruding from the flooded meadow acquired a new dimension and, reflected in the still waters, created an impression of great depth. The dew brought forth a heavy scent of frozen thistle, wilted chervil and rotted, wet hay stuck in the bushes from last year's mowing.

The black earth rising out of the water on the hillocks smelled of spring's eagerness to bring forth new life and of dead grasses, rotting tree trunks and young shoots, it smelled of the eternity and transiency of all being.

And among all these smells Andrii could not place one that reminded him so of his childhood, of his days as a shepherd when he had wandered about with a bottle of cold milk and a chunk of bread in his knapsack, of his first evening here in the meadows with Klava, of Trinity in his grandmother's house, whitewashed clean for the feast day, the floors sprinkled with prickly sedge, the smell that was part of his entire life, barring the years spent at sea.

Andrii stopped rowing, he threw back his shoulders and breathed in deeply several times and was silent, as if listening for a barely audible sound.

"It's mint," Lesya whispered. "It's the new mint."

Andrii felt that they had said the words together, Lesya out loud and he to himself.

"So you see. . . ." he said and stopped. He wanted to say that it was wrong, it was shameful, for people to put tag-names on things like "ex-officer", "livestock-breeder", "tractor driver", it was wrong to think in such categories and live like that when the earth smelled of last year's grasses and young mint, of eternity and of the fleeting moment.

He looked at her openly and boldly for the first time, sensing that he was doing this with a pure heart, and he did not recognise her. She had tied her kerchief differently, as the girls did, and she was transformed, as young and as virgin as the earth on the hillocks.

"Do you want to go for mint?" she said.

Once again Andrii caught the childish fire of excitement in her eyes.

"It's barely out of the earth," he replied in

some confusion, regretting his own refusal. "It's too young."

"It's bigger near the river-bed," she said timidly. "The banks are steep there, they weren't flooded this year."

Andrii pointed the bow towards where the river flowed darkly into the woods. Soon steep, eroded banks rose to both sides of them. Gnarled elm roots that creaked from the slightest touch hung down into the water like bulging veins.

Lesya jumped out of the boat and disappeared in the woods. There was the sound of branches cracking underfoot. Soon she returned with a small bunch of cold mint. It had only uncurled one leaf on each stem.

"It doesn't matter," she said, averting her eyes. "It'll grow quickly in a glass of water. It'll put out little white roots. Here, take some."

The boat drifted off into the middle of the river.

"Do you remember me?" she asked when he had buried his face in the little green shoots. The mint was cold and smelled of a bottle of milk in his knapsack in the meadow, of Trinity in Grandmother's house with its scattered prickly sedge.

"I remember you, too."

The current was carrying them towards the bay. He had forgotten all about the oars on the bottom of the boat, he was afraid to move, to frighten off her voice, as soft as the high-water, as pure as the breath of the earth on the hillocks in the floodlands. Once again he saw his boat straining at its chain, stranded on the bank, unable to overcome its iron tether.

Andrii could not sleep that night. The bright stars looked down into the room which smelled so strongly of spring mint.

Ostap Vishnya

OPEN SEASON

Actually, the hunting season opens twice a year: duck-hunting opens on August 1st and game-hunting on November 1st. However, August 1st, coming as it does after a long intermission, has traditionally come to be considered the real day which ushers in the hunting season. It is then that you take up your gun and can both replenish your larder, so to speak, and enjoy the countryside as a nature-lover and sportsman.

So you see, hunting is not an idle pastime, but a very serious undertaking, especially for people like us.

The hunting season.... How much worry and care it entails until everything is finally in order: gun and cartridges, clothing and knapsack. In a word, all you will need for really successful hunting.

Now the question is: where to go?

And whom to go with?

How can you ever decide upon the right place to go if first someone says to you:

"There are thousands of ducks on the lakes at Borispol! Believe it or not, but they cover the entire surface, blotting out the water completely. Why, they're practically choking each other to death there! A young woman I know said that her father-in-law's cousin said that his wife had it

from her aunt, that she could not find a bit of clear water to soak the hemp, that's how packed they are there! Let's go! What do you say?"

"Fine! But I don't think I'll have enough cartridges."

"You don't need many. Last year you could bag twenty-four ducks with a single shot. Five shots means a hundred and twenty ducks. And there's nothing but mallards there. Heavy things, you won't be able to carry off more than a hundred and twenty anyway."

Then the next day somebody else says: "Where are you going for the first day's shooting?"

"I was thinking of going to Borispol."

"What? I've never heard of ducks swimming without water."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, all the lakes there have gone dry! No one's heard a duck quack there since last year. A couple of flocks flew by last spring, but after circling around they headed for Nosovka. You know where that is, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's where all the ducks headed last spring. It's really a menace: they've overrun the sunflower fields, there's no grass in the meadows, no place for it to grow, what with nests covering every inch of ground. If you're going anywhere, that's the place to go."

"Let's go to Nosovka then!"

But on the following day someone else says:

"Hello: All set?"

"Yes."

"Going to Yagotin?"

"No. I'm going to Nosovka."

"Whatever for? Frogs?"

"Which frogs?"

"That's all you'll find in Nosovka. If you're going for ducks, the only place to go is Yagotin. That's where the ducks are."

Etc, etc., etc.

"But who am I going with?"

"Oh, dear!"

Are there no hunters who love the quiet evening by a lake, the soft rustling of the reeds, to whom the whoop of a bittern in a swamp is music to his ears, whose heart misses a beat at the sound of a soft splash in the lake. Then, when all the stories have been told and you are resting beneath a willow or a haystack, there will come a moment of absolute silence. And it will suddenly be broken by voices singing a haunting song.

Why is there not a man among them with whom you can go hunting on the first day of the season?

Say you go with Ivan Petrovich.

As you sit on the grass beneath a weeping willow he'll start telling you about his famous retriever—there are no dogs like that nowadays!—who once pointed when he found a woodcock in a nut grove and no amount of whistling or coaxing could make him drop his stance. Ivan Petrovich was forced to leave him behind in the forest, as night had fallen. Urgent business took him to another city the very next morning, from where he did not return until a year had elapsed. The first thing he did upon his return was to go to the forest.

"And there was the skeleton of my retriever, and his front paw was curled, his tail was extended, he was pointing! That was a dog for you. I've never seen another one like him in my life."

Now if you go with Pyotr Ivanovich, he'll tell you that he really prefers hunting game, that

water fowl are just tidbits. Pyotr Ivanovich never hunts without his beagle bitch Flute. Ah, that's a hound for you! Why, she would keep on the trail of a wolf for two months running. True, she was frightened at first, and after bumping into a wolf for the first time she turned "as pale as a ghost".

"I remember the time there were fourteen wolves chasing Flute and me!"

"Fourteen?"

"Upon my word! Ask Flute if you don't believe me! And both were as grey as grey could be."

Phillip Fyodorovich now will tell you about the near-sighted old bookkeeper, an avid hunter and the butt of all the practical jokes thought up by the crowd he always hunted with.

He'll tell you about the hare the bookkeeper took a pot at, but which raced up the nearest telephone pole, yowling "Meow!", which made the poor man drop his gun and head for home at top speed.

"It was me who put a rabbit-skin on the cat and set it on the road, knowing the old man would soon be passing by.

"And that's not all," he hastens to add. "Once we tied a note on a dead hare with the words 'What did you do it for?' on it. We hid it under a bush and headed the old man towards it. You can imagine what a riot that was!"

Then there was the story told by an old fellow about the time he was a young man and didn't own a gun, but always came home with a full bag of ducks.

"How did you manage that?"

"It was easy. There are always ducks in the mouth of the river. I'd swim to the island and hide in the reeds, because I knew that a hunter would

come along sooner or later to shoot the sitting ducks. Sure enough, I'd see one creeping up. Bang! Then I'd scream 'Help!' from where I was hiding, and he'd be off in a flash, thinking he'd hit someone. Then I'd strip, go in after the ducks and head for home with a full bag."

A star fell. A water rat tumbled into the water. A mallard quacked in his sleep. A little bird chirped. A train whistled in the distance.

As you lie there your thoughts take you to your fellow-hunters all over the world: in the Arctic and Antarctic, those hunting whales, those hunting squirrel and bear in the taiga, hunting foxes in the tundra and sea lions in the Arctic Ocean. Dawn is breaking. The first shots ring out. The hunting season has begun.

THE BEAR

1

The only bears you'll find in the Ukraine are in zoos. That is why a hunter never has to fear going into the woods for woodcocks, hares or foxes.

If there were bears in them many a hunter would have to sell his gun, since our hunters are meek, sensitive fellows, while a bear is a huge beast that roars and can scare a man to death.

A friend of mine who's an avid hunter once got a telegramme from the north saying: "Found and encircled three bear dens, come out immediately". He read it over several times and said:

"You can do as you please, but I, for one, am not going. I prefer sniping. Snipes are nice little birds that don't growl and can't scalp you, where-

as a bear is big and shaggy and there's so much snow there you can't make a quick getaway. No, I'm not going."

And so we did not go.

There are brown bears and grey bears and polar bears.

Brown bears are to be found in the forests, starting with Bryansk Region and further north.

Grey bears are called Grizzlies and, thank goodness, are to be found at the other end of the world.

Polar bears live in the northern seas and oceans, which means it's too far and too cold to go after them.

And yet, the glory of bagging a bear is so great that every hunter dreams of it, even though in theory only.

In the first place, there's the famous bear steak and bear stew. Then there's the bearskin.

Say there's a big shaggy bearskin on the floor of your study.

Say you're sitting on the couch and a couple of your friends are sitting opposite.

"I killed this bear myself," you say casually.

Your friends, as any friends would do in a like situation, exchange glances and one of them is sure to snicker.

You pay no attention, but go on to tell them how you did it. As soon as the bear dashed out of his den you fired at him, but only wounded him. He became enraged and rushed at you, but you kept calm, grabbed a forked pole and whacked the beast so hard the pole broke! Then you grabbed another pole and rammed it at his chest, but it, too, cracked from the terrific impact. Then you grabbed a third pole. By then the beast was breathing in your face. The third pole. . . .

Just then your wife enters and says:
"Tea is on the table, everyone!"
On the way into the dining room your best friend says to your wife:
"It's a good thing you came in when you did, he was just about to break a fourth pole!"
Ah, the trials a man goes through, and all for the sake of the truth!

2

My good friend S., though he is not a hunter, told me the following way to trap a bear.
I have never tried it, but it does seem like a very practical way of getting yourself a bearskin and a sack of bear meat, the more so since there is no danger involved, and the hunter does not have to risk his life at all.
It all boils down to the fact that grown bears are very keen on mathematics.
As soon as you come upon a place that you have been told is a bear's hunting grounds, you write the following on a large piece of plywood:

$$2 \times 2 = 5$$

Then you nail the plywood to a tree where the bear will be sure to see it when he happens to pass by. It has to be nailed at the animal's eye level, so he is sure to see it.
The best time of the day to do this is in the daytime, when the bear is resting.
As soon as you are through with the job hurry home, hitch your horse to a wagon and head back for the spot. But don't drive up too close. Leave the horse and wagon in a ravine or behind a

haystack, then proceed to the spot, climb the tree and wait.

Aha, here he comes!

There is a cracking of twigs and various other rustlings and noises.

Don't be nervous, just sit there and wait.

The bear finally comes upon the sum you have written.

Men who have had occasion to hunt a bear this way say that as soon as he sees what you have written, namely:

$2 \times 2 = 5$, he stops in amazement.

Then he takes a step back, peers at the numbers, walks up closer, rubs his eyes with his paw, stares at the numbers again, and, becoming convinced that it really says $2 \times 2 = 5$, he begins beating his head against the trunk.

This goes on for quite some time. Now, while his head is cracking and breaking, you climb down softly and go up to him. By that time he is dead, having died of beating his brains out over an incorrect sum.

Then you go for your wagon, drive up to the tree, hoist the bear into it and set out for home.

Some hunters, unwilling to reveal the secret of this method, then plunge a dagger into the dead animal's heart.

"There I was, driving through the woods, when a bear attacked me," they'll say. "But I went right at him and plunged my dagger into his heart right up to the hilt! Here, have a look!"

And he'll show you his dagger, stained with the bear's blood.

I feel that's dishonest. There's no use lying about the way you got your bear. The old hunter's

adage: "The truth and nothing but the truth!" should be your guide.

I want to repeat that I myself never tried this method, but they say it never fails.

Why don't you try it next time? After all, a piece of plywood is cheap enough and a bearskin is a rare prize.

Then again, there's the meat.

3

Ah, it's good to be lying on a bearskin on the couch in your study and say casually:

"I killed it myself. I honestly did!"

Yuri Yanovsky

A QUESTION OF DYNASTY

The main character was only two years old, and his tender age made it possible for his grandfather to feel less constrained in the adventure which was later to be the subject of all the talk. Indeed, why should a "proud eagle of the blast furance heights" (the old man was especially pleased at these words about him in the factory newspaper) have to listen to a bunch of women, even though they happened to be his own wife and daughter-in-law? Why should they be the ones to judge what a child should see or should not see, what he was to avoid and even judge the air he was to breathe? Luckily, the child's father was away on business at the time, which made an argument an impossibility. The old man's son would always belittle the state of affairs in the blast-furnace industry enraging his old father with criticisms of the medieval smelting methods still being used in our atomic age.

The boy's grandfather, Grigory Sidorovich, a master-smelter, started out by kidnapping his own grandson, Grigory Junior. He was called Junior to distinguish him from his father, Grigory Senior. The kidnapping took place under difficult and risky circumstances, for the boy's every step was carefully guarded by the women of the family, since he was the first male grandchild.

The crime took place as his daughter-in-law hurried to the appointed meeting place outside the cinema, where she found neither father-in-law, nor son. Their arrangements had been very clear: Grigory Sidorovich, who was taking part in the demonstration, would carry the boy past the grandstand, leave the column of marchers and wait for her outside the cinema. It was November and the weather was unreliable, with frequent gusts of cold wind and snow flurries. The young woman's terror increased as she approached home. Once there it turned into panic: her baby was not at home! No doubt the stubborn old man had dragged the child off just to be alone with him.

The boy had watched his grandfather fill a small bottle with milk and hide it in the pocket of his good coat before they had left the house. He had also wrapped up a bun and an apple and put them in his other pocket. Then he had handed his grandson a long candy in a shiny red-fringed wrapper. Surely, this was forbidden fruit. But Grandfather had promised the women that it would not be eaten.

"Well, Grigory," Grandfather said, "pipe all hands on deck."

Grigory Junior loved his grandfather. This feeling was so overwhelming that his poor mother had become terribly jealous of the old man. She considered it the height of injustice when her baby, whose every hair and breath belonged to her, suddenly stretched forth his hands to embrace the old man's wrinkled neck and then kissed him. Men were so awful, so careless. They never thought twice of holding out an unwashed hand to a child, or of bending over a carriage in their dirty work-clothes. Oh, how many scenes there had been on this account!

The child loved his grandfather quite differently than he did the rest of his family, including his mother. His grandfather never talked baby talk to him, but spoke to him more seriously and gravely than he did to many an adult. If the boy balked at something and his mother or grandmother scolded, he would never yield an inch, but if they threatened to "tell Grandpa" there was no question of immediate obedience. But whenever Grigory Junior's mother became angry at him for some mischief he would head straight for his grandfather and complain loudly: "Grandpa, Mummy hit me!"

It was impossible to imagine his mother raising a finger against her darling child, but Grandfather would pick him up, sit him on his shoulder and set out to settle the matter.

"Why you tattle-tale!" his mother would say. "I really should have given you a spanking."

"No spanking," Junior would reply as he looked down upon her from the height of his grandfather's shoulder. "Friends!"

His mother, her heart melted by now, would kiss her sly little fox who had been well tutored by his grandfather, and peace would be restored. Thus did his love for his grandfather grow.

It should be noted that in the beginning Grigory Sidorovich had no intention of deceiving his daughter-in-law and kidnapping his grandson. He had merely intended to take the boy past the grandstand and then return him faithfully to his mother as arranged. That is why there is no telling how the old man found himself so far from the cinema and near the charge yard. Now what else could he do but enter, since he was there anyway?

Grigory Junior, waving the red candy that

matched his bright red hat with a pom-pom, was quite comfortable on his grandfather's arm. He stretched his hand politely towards the engineer of the small factory steam engine that was shooting out billows of steam and shouted:

"Toot-toot!"

"I thought you were at the demonstration, Grigory Sidorovich," the old engineer said. "My whole family's gone to the parade."

"Well, you see, I decided to show my grandson our furnace."

"What for? Maybe he'll be one for book-learning."

"He might. That's all my son talks about. 'I won't let the boy follow in his father's and grandfather's footsteps!' he says. Imagine that!"

"Well, you can't say Grigory Junior doesn't love his granddad."

"Not to hear my son talk, you wouldn't think so."

A large snowflake settled on the child's mitten.

"Grandpa, a fly!"

Then the boy shut his eyes tight at the sound of the engine's shrill whistle. He had been taught to share his things with others and now offered the engineer his candy, saying:

"Here! For you!"

His generosity was well rewarded, for he was allowed to pull the whistle chain all by himself as his grandfather stealthily wiped away a happy tear.

"Toot-toot!" Grigory Junior shouted and waved as the little engine began to move off, as if in response to his gesture.

Now they headed towards the blast furnaces.

There was the spot where Grigory Sidorovich had lay in ambush with his rifle in 1917, keeping

the factory gates in his gunsight. His comrades, all Red Guardsmen, were lighting up cigarettes as they crouched behind a wagon loaded with ore. Shots rang out from all sides: a vagrant band of whiteguard officers had decided to support the Provisional Government which had already been arrested by the workers of Petrograd. Now the officers threw their main forces against the factory, for it was the centre of resistance and struggle in the town. The workers were sending ammunition and supplies to the Red Guard. The battle lasted for two days and two nights and ended as suddenly as it had begun. An armoured car, hastily constructed at the plant, headed down the main street, machine-guns rattling. The officers surrendered, marking the end of the October uprising in this town.

"Look, Grigory," the former Red Guardsman said as they passed the spot. "This is where your grandpa was wounded for the workers' cause. That was long before your time."

"Long before," the rosy-cheeked face beside him smiled.

"But you know what your daddy calls your grandpa? He says I'm a witch-doctor, a blast furnace witch-doctor!"

They continued on, getting closer and closer to the furnaces. Grigory Sidorovich did not think anything in the world was more magnificent than a blast furnace. The thirty-metre towers rose magestically beside the cowpers, trolleys crawled endlessly upwards. So far only one of the furnaces was in operation, the other had not yet been restored after the war. There were piles of limestone, ash, broken bricks, crushed trolleys, twisted beams piled about haphazardly by bombs. The furnace itself had tilted but had not fallen. It

stood there as a challenge contrary to every law of mechanics, unconquered, calling forth a desire to help it straighten up again.

The latest batch of molten cast-iron was cooling in the foundry. Workers were darting back and forth. The furnace roared in its usual workaday voice. Grigory Sidorovich had no need to look at the instruments to see how the smelting process was proceeding. The furnace was singing. He kept his eyes on his grandson, fearful lest he miss a single shade of emotion that flitted across the child's face. Grigory Junior wanted to be put down, for he had spied a pile of sand and a shovel. As the boy tried to lift the heavy shovel they were surrounded by a group of workers. They greeted the old master and shouted into his ear, for the roaring of the furnace drowned out all other sounds.

"Isn't it a bit soon for him to start, Grigory Sidorovich?"

"There's a good man for our shift!"

It was an unusual, a most pleasing sensation, incomparable to any other. A tiny being was digging in the sand, the furnace roared comfortingly nearby, while the low-lying clouds rose higher in fright as they passed over the furnaces. A light snow was falling.

Grigory Sidorovich had first come here half a century ago. He had never been able to recall that far-off day in any detail. But now he suddenly saw it all so clearly it made him catch his breath. There he was, a village boy, watching the live, molten iron that had just been let out of the furnace. The terrifying liquid gave off a shower of sparks as it rushed by his feet, breathing fire upon him. He had wanted to scream and had

probably screamed, but no one had heard his voice. Fifty years had gone by since then.

The boy dropped the shovel and walked over to the furnace. Any child would probably have done the same, but once again Grigory Sidorovich felt a tug at his heart and waited anxiously to see what the child would do next. He stopped, threw back his head and looked up at the black tower intently.

"That's just how your own boys looked at it, Grigory Sidorovich!" one of the men said.

His grandson stood there, gazing at the furnace. Then he looked at his grandfather and smiled. He said something, pointing upwards with his little finger. Grigory Sidorovich picked him up and began climbing the ladder to the platform. From there they could see the whole town, covered by a light sprinkling of the first pure snow of winter. The red banners and slogans of the festive November holiday were bright against the snow.

Suddenly Grigory Sidorovich realised what must be taking place at home that very moment. He shuddered. He must be getting old. He had intended to phone from the plant office and say that he and the boy would be back soon, but he had forgotten all about it. There'd certainly be a warm greeting awaiting him at home. Neither his wife nor his daughter-in-law would ever forgive him.

The furnace hummed in a gentle, mournful way. "Ju-u-u-ni-o-or!" the little steam engine's shrill whistle wailed. The buckets moved up, they were filled with blinding, scorching slag and suddenly the cold November day acquired a rosy hue. Then the buckets moved off.

"That's about it," the old man said. "You can take over starting right now, that's the way we

do it in our family! If you've no objection, we'll write it down for the record."

The child embraced his grandfather's neck tightly. He was fascinated by the roaring furnace. Then again, he had never been up so high before. The platform shook and shuddered, but the clash of metal, the whistles and clanging were all muffled by the furnace's deep rumble.

"He says I'm an ignorant witch-doctor!" the old man shouted. "He says 'I'm your son and I'm also a blast-furnace worker, but I don't pray to the furnace! As far as I'm concerned I wish it wasn't there!' Well, what do you want? I said, Orange-groves? And he says: 'I want it to be clean and quiet here, and beautiful, with lots of flowers all around. I want the ore to be smelted underground, by atomic energy, and then all I'd have to do would be to push a button.' That's what he wants! I'm not against progress, but why should he insult the furnace?"

"I hungry," the new-fledged blast-furnace worker shouted into his grandfather's ear.

Grigory Sidorovich pulled his heavy silver watch from his vest pocket and snapped open the lid. Yes, it was lunch-time. He climbed down quickly, found a quiet corner among the heavy mounds of iron, pulled a clean handkerchief from his pocket, spread it out, set the bottle of milk and the bun and apple on it. His grandson perched on his knee, picked up the bottle and drained it quickly. He did not have to be coaxed to eat as was sometimes the case at home. Then he had the bun and finished up with the apple.

After that the future blast-furnace worker fell shamefully asleep, his nose pressed hard against his grandfather's coat. The old man blew the snow-flakes that settled on his eyelashes off gently.

On the way home they met his frantic young mother running towards the factory. She looked at the sleeping child with anguish, fearing she would no longer recognise his face, that this was no longer her baby but a stranger, a grown man called up for military service, a man with whiskers, far removed from his mother's embraces.

To be frank, Grigory Sidorovich was more frightened by the sight of his daughter-in-law than he had been at the sight of his own wife in exactly the same situation many years before. He mumbled fiercely into his moustache to apprehend her anger, handed over her son, then turned and walked off quickly. The question of dynasty had been settled, and one day his grandson would resolve the dispute between his father and his grandfather. Now, however, the old man yearned for the company of his buddies, all former Red Guardsmen. They would meet to celebrate the November holiday, they would recall the past, sing their old fighting songs and, according to a time-honoured tradition, would pass around the brimming cup.

16–1715

Yuri Zbanatsky

THE STORM

The sun had dipped beyond the horizon, leaving a red streak in the western sky. Clear and blue, with a tint of gold, the sky shimmered in the calm waters of the river.

It was still and sultry. No reed rustled; the sedge hung motionlessly above the water; the surface was smooth. Now and then a quick little fish would dart up in a flash of silver, then tiny circles spread farther and farther until they disappeared completely before reaching the bank.

Petro could see the bridge through a narrow slit in the reeds. It was like a black caterpillar stretched across the quiet Irpen River about two hundred metres upstream. Enemy vehicles crossed the bridge, freight trains rumbled by heading east and west.

Anger gripped Petro's heart. There was the bridge ahead of him, yet he was helpless: the nazi soldiers kept careful watch from their pill-boxes, they had every bush and every bump in their gun-sights.

The third night fell. The small group of partisans waiting in ambush in the dense reeds were waiting for their chance. Their assignment was to blow up the bridge at any cost.

They sat there in alert silence, listening to every sound. Their bodies were water-logged, their skin had become covered with loose white

folds. That morning they had divided up their last biscuit.

Petro was waiting. One thing they would never do was return to their detachment without having carried out their assignment.

The nights were clear and moonlit. No sooner would the sun go down than the full bright moon rose in the sky, bathing in the blueness with not even a shadow of a cloud to cover it.

This bridge had been bothering both Petro and his commander for a long time. It would not be easy to destroy it, for the terrain was flat and heavily fortified. The nazis knew that if the partisans destroyed the bridge the railway line would be put out of commission indefinitely, if not for good. Then, again, the guards were experienced men, many of them knew the sting of partisan bullets first-hand. They were always on the alert, danger had made them quick and wary.

Petro's commander had summoned him and together they had discussed ways and means of blowing up the bridge. Although Petro was a bold, experienced commander of a demolition team, they could find no solution. It would be reckless to attack the bridge head on, for that would mean a great loss of life and yet might not bring success.

"Think it over, Petro. See if you can think of something unusual. One way or another, the bridge has to be destroyed this week."

One day followed another. Still Petro could think of nothing. He spent his days observing the bridge, he knew every approach and every pillbox by heart, but this knowledge was of no use to him.

Finally, he went back to his commanding officer. The excitement in his eyes betrayed him.

"Keep your fingers crossed, I'll be starting out tonight," Petro said solemnly, placing a barometer on his commander's desk. "It's pointing to Storm."

Petro's plan was discussed and approved.

The partisan group had been waiting in ambush for many long hours. Their nerves were taut, their fingers were on the triggers of their guns at every rustle or sound.

They were waiting for the storm, but there was no storm. Petro had time to think of many things during those long hours. A demolition man often has to wait in tense silence for hours on end.

Olya, a young girl with beautiful thick braids and burning eyes that looked out on the world with exaltation and trust, was beside Petro. She would often gaze at the youth. Then her grey eyes would become very gentle, for she could not hide her feelings. Indeed, there was no need to, for she was his betrothed.

They were both of the same age, they were both from the same village, though they had lived on different streets. Both had started school together, both had graduated on the same day. When Petro had first started to school he thought the street on which Olya lived was at the other end of the world. But when they were in their last year at school it seemed so close at hand, for his feet had worn a path there, by the fragrant lindens along the quiet river.

He recalled their graduation dance as a beautiful dream. It was held in their large classroom where they had learned so much and which was now brightly lit and festooned with beautiful flowers.

That was the evening they felt really grown-up. They laughed and danced and did not part

for a moment, for now they did not have to conceal their love.

They had decided to apply to the same institute and so never part.

Perhaps at the very time they were pledging their faith the first nazi bombs were falling on the sleeping cities of Minsk and Kiev. War had broken out.

Olya and Petro joined a partisan detachment. The dark forests and dense thickets became their home and military science their institute.

It would soon be dark. Petro's eyes never once left the bridge. His enemies were there. Perhaps tonight they would meet in mortal combat. He knew that one false step might mean his life, while the bridge would remain. But he had no right to die before he completed his assignment. Once again, for the hundredth time, he reviewed each step of the operation. He would close his eyes and see the broken bridge, the crumpled piles, the twisted girders hanging over the water.

"Will this night pass uneventfully too?" he wondered.

He raised his head. The rosy hue of twilight shimmered in the west. The sky was blue as far as the eye could see. The sun had just gone down, but the full glaring moon blazed in the middle of the sky as if it were mocking him. There was no scrap of cloud, no shadow in all of the heavens. A light mist was rising from the river.

Petro frowned.

"If only there was a wind," Olya whispered.

"I can't stand them scurrying back and forth, like that," he replied. "If only tonight. . . ."

And he looked at the bridge with such vehemence that if his eyes could shoot the nazi guard

stamping his feet in the middle of the bridge would certainly have fallen dead.

Boris, Petro's assistant, moved closer to them. "This can last for another week," he whispered. "Do you think the barometer was wrong?"

"The barometer isn't Goebbels, it doesn't lie," Petro muttered.

But there was an anxious twinge at his heart: could it have been wrong?

"I don't see there is any sense in waiting," Boris continued, rummaging about in his pocket and coming up with a pinch of wet black tobacco.

Petro could feel the blood rising to his face. He had never expected his friend to be like that.

"Are you ready to go back?"

Boris did not seem to have noticed Petro's indignation. He sniffed the tobacco, took off his cap and spread it on the lining to dry. He'd have a smoke before the operation.

"What gave you that idea? I think we should do it tonight no matter what."

He sounded so confident that now Petro hesitated. Still, he did not give in to the tempting suggestion.

"No, we'll wait. There has to be a storm. We'll only have this one chance to blow it up."

Boris did not reply. He sighed miserably, "I'd give anything for a smoke now."

Petro did not smoke. "I'd rather have a good supper," he said.

Olya smiled. She turned away from the boys, searched for something and came up with a biscuit which she handed to Petro.

"This is the very last one."

"The last one was the very last one," Petro said and smiled. "I don't know how you can hold out. I would have eaten it long ago."

He broke the biscuit into three equal parts and handed two to Olya and Boris. Then he pulled a spoon from his boot top, spread the reeds apart cautiously, cleared the surface and dipped up a spoonful of river water.

"Delicious! There's enough for a regiment here. We're a bit short on biscuits, but there's plenty of soup."

And he began spooning the water, as if he were sitting in a meadow after the day's mowing, enjoying a pot of good chowder. Olya and Boris followed his example gayly.

They did not notice when the air had suddenly turned cold. The reeds began to sway, to nod their heads. The surface of the river became rippled. Then everything was still again.

Petro looked up. His hand stopped in mid-air and the water spilled out of his spoon.

A dark pillar had appeared on the far horizon, it seemed to be rising straight out of the water. It was growing quickly, spreading, and soon changed from a pillar to a huge dark wall that covered half of the sky.

"Well, comrades," Petro whispered excitedly, "everything's in order. Reinforcements have just arrived."

The partisans gazed at the clouds as if they were eagerly awaited guests. There were broad smiles on every face.

A bank of grey-fringed black clouds was quickly covering the sky. The clear evening was retreating as a stormy summer night descended upon the earth. Then a bright flash of lightning cleaved the black clouds like a sabre.

The long-awaited storm was approaching.

Now the moon, like a silver ball, rolled swiftly towards the smoking clouds, collided and was

engulfed by them. Its bright rays were like some momentary splashes. Then dark night fell upon the earth.

A rumbling sound was sweeping along the ground. The reeds trembled and swayed, the leaves on the willows fluttered. Then a gust of wind was upon them, bending the stalks to the very water, whistling madly, turning the green reeds into a flat blanket. The water churned and boiled.

Petro's storm was gaining strength.

The six of them, holding hands, stealthily approached the bridge. The water was up to their armpits, often it was as high as their necks.

A heavily laden freight train was crawling across the bridge.

Petro heard the familiar rumble above the storm. Instinctively he quickened his steps. If only he could blow up the bridge while the train was crossing it!

Suddenly the ground disappeared beneath his feet, and he went under.

At that very moment heavy machine-guns began rattling. Tracer bullets ripped across the sky, whistled overhead and churned up the water of the stormy Irpen.

"They've spotted us," Petro thought.

Flares soared into the sky, everything became as light as day. The partisans stood still, up to their necks in water among the reeds.

Luckily, the shooting soon stopped. It was only a regular guard drill to keep up the enemy's morale. The nazis would begin shooting several times during the night, and though the partisans had become used to this sudden gunfire, they were frightened by the possibility of having been discovered when they were so close to their goal.

Several minutes later they began advancing again. They walked slowly through the water. When they were quite near the bridge they heard the ferocious barking of a police dog.

They stopped again.

"This is it!" Petro thought. "That damn dog has caught our scent."

Desperate at the thought that the bridge would not be blown up, Petro was not thinking of death. How could he have overlooked the dogs!

There was a sound of loud voices on the bank, the strange guttural sounds of a foreign tongue. The dog was silent. Perhaps it had barked at a guard returning from his rounds, and now they were both inside the pill-box. But what if the dog was now creeping through the reeds, ready to sink its teeth into Petro's throat? The nazis would be right behind it, their guns at the ready.

He felt Olya's hand in his. She squeezed his fingers gently. He knew her every thought and feeling. Would there be no future for her, no future for them together? He pressed her hand tightly in reply.

The minutes dragged on. The storm howled and whistled above them. Petro looked up at the bridge, at the great black mass towering above them.

A few steps more and his arm gripped the round wet pile. He felt the slime on the wood. A moment later he began working deftly.

His heart was beating excitedly: his hour had struck! Petro attached both the mine he had been carrying and Olya's mine to the pile.

They could hear someone walking overhead.

Petro attached the fuse. He moved towards the next pile and discovered that his comrades were nowheres to be seen.

He was frantic. Each of them had a mine. Where were they? What had happened? Had they been frightened by the dog and retreated? Would the bridge still be standing tomorrow, a reliable communications link for the hated enemy?

"Wait for me here," he whispered to Olya and went to look for the others.

He moved on, peering into the darkness. The reeds bent and swayed, the river churned, streaks of lightning ripped across the black sky. But his friends were nowhere.

"Cowards," he cursed them in silent rage.

He stopped for a moment trying to decide upon a course of action. He would never destroy the bridge with two mines. At the best, traffic would be stopped for a day or so but their plan would have been revealed and they would not be able to repeat the operation.

He decided to turn back, remove the mines and return at the first opportunity.

Petro was terribly depressed. He walked along slowly, gritting his teeth in vexation and did not even feel the thud when he collided with someone. It was Olya.

"Hurry, the boys are over there!" she said.

Swimming from one pile to another Petro mined three spans and joined them by the fuse. Then he returned to the first pile where the others awaited him. All he had to do now was light the fuse. But Petro discovered that he had lost his lighter, and everyone's matches were wet. His mind worked feverishly. What was to be done? The only possible alternative was to detonate the mine by hand. That meant.... A cold shiver went down his spine. He knew he could do it. No matter what the cost, he would

stop the enemy from using the bridge. "If only I had a long cord." But there was no cord.

He ordered everyone back into the reeds, telling no one of his decision.

All Petro heard was the lapping of the water and the howling of the wind, and although he could see nothing, he knew that his friends were moving towards the shore. Never would he see them again.

He started when someone touched his hand. It was Olya.

"Go back, dear, go back!" he said.

Then she, too, disappeared in the darkness.

He was thinking hard. Did he really have to die? And all because of a single match? It seemed so silly. Why hadn't he taken some extra cord along? But couldn't he make a cord of his shirt?

Petro took it off quickly, ripped it into narrow strips and tied the ends to form a long rope.

A heavy vehicle rolled onto the bridge. The sound cheered him. He was glad he had blown up the bridge across the highway. Now every enemy vehicle had to detour across the railway bridge.

As Petro listened to the roaring motor and squinted against the sudden flash of lightning, he kept moving backward, playing out the cloth rope carefully. When the truck had reached the middle of the bridge he felt the end of the rope in his hand. He jerked it hard and dived into the water.

The night was shattered by a tremendous explosion that even drowned the sound of the storm.

Olya had been waiting for it. Still, when it finally came it was so unexpected that it nearly

toppled her into the water. She did not move. She was waiting for Petro.

Now flares soared into the sky again lighting everything within view. Bullets whizzed by, the rattling of machine-guns joined the thunder of the storm.

The churning river carried along great chunks of the shattered bridge. Suddenly Olya saw a head and an arm reach up from the water.

"Petro!" she cried and dashed into the waves.

Olya had grown up on the Desna River, she was an excellent swimmer. Soon she was able to drag Petro up onto the shore. The others rushed towards her.

Petro lay on the ground. Olya smoothed away the wet hair that covered his forehead and was frightened by the sight of blood on her hand.

"Petro! My darling!"

She tore open her first-aid kit and bandaged his head, then pressed her ear against his chest. His heart was beating. Slowly and very faintly, but it was beating.

He was alive.

Meanwhile, flares were bursting in the sky, lightning flashed and heavy machine-guns rattled madly, trying to outscream the howling storm. And the railway bridge loomed like a spectre, a broken monster towering above the river.

Semyon Zhurakhovich

THE HUNDREDTH DAY OF THE WAR

The September days suddenly became intolerably long. The endlessness of the nights was depressing; nights without a single light, without a single sound. Only the taps on the boots of the German patrols beat an even pace. The Germans had already been in Kiev for a full week.

Kiev saw the first gallows. Kiev heard explosions on Kreshchatic Street where raging flames devoured house after house.

Then there was this evil, incomprehensible order.

For failure to appear—execution. For concealment—execution.

Old Ganna immediately ran to her daughter-in-law and grandson. She already knew of the rumours that were creeping through the city. Some said that all the Jews were being taken to Belaya Tserkov. Others heard that in Syrets, the suburb of the city, at the old army camp, a ghetto would be formed. The old lady heard the strange word for the first time.

Little Lyovik nestled against his grandmother. Maryana stood up with difficulty, let down the blackout curtains and lit a candle. She unwittingly counted: there were still eight left.

"Don't think, Maryana. Don't think," Ganna

said hollowly. "There's been a lot of trouble in our life. We'll get through this, too."

She spent the night with Maryana. Neither slept.

All of that long black night Maryana repeated her mother-in-law's words, "Don't think, Maryana! Don't think!" and her head spun from her thoughts.

When Maryana finally threw off the heavy drowsiness of the night, Ganna was pottering about in the kitchen. Seeing Maryana, Ganna got up from the stool, as if she had been waiting for her, and immediately said that which seemed to her a way out of the dilemma in which they now found themselves, "Well Maryana, I've been thinking. Maybe it would be better to leave Lyovik with me? What do you think?"

Maryana glanced at her broad wrinkled face and was hardly able to restrain herself. "I vowed, not a single tear!" she reminded herself.

"No, Mamma," she shook her head, "That's impossible. They threatened execution for concealment."

"No one would betray a child."

"You told me your neighbour joined the German police."

"Ivanchuk? That swine?" There was doubt in her voice. But she couldn't believe that even a swine like Ivanchuk could betray a child.

"They'll kill you, and...." Maryana turned away. She scooped up a ladle of water, poured it into her hand and splashed it on her face. She felt better. Then she wiped her face with a towel and said more calmly, "I'll manage somehow."

Ganna was silent. After all, who is a child's first defender if not his mother? One mustn't encroach upon that divine right. Then she said

very simply, as if there was no question, "I'm going with you!" Before Maryana could answer she shouted angrily, "Don't contradict me. Keep quiet. You're too used to bossing your elders about."

Maryana gazed at Ganna.

"Well, what are you looking at me for? Do you want me to sit here like a mouse and admire my neighbour-policeman? What are you staring for? Should I make some porridge for the boy?"

"Yes," Maryana whispered.

Then they packed their things, exchanging small talk now and then. They helped each other on with their knapsacks. The old lady took the bag with provisions. Maryana held a purse under her arm with documents and money. With the other hand she led her son who, in turn, hugged his furry brown dog with bright glass eyes.

"Let's stop by my place," Ganna said. "I'll get a warm sweater. And, after all, I've lived there all my life."

From Tarasovskaya Street they turned down Pankovskaya, which curved sharply downhill, and walked along Saksagansky Street.

"Do you see that?" Ganna said softly, pointing to the sky.

Bluish-grey smoke interspersed with oily black strands wreathed over the hushed city. In the far-off hollow between the hills Kreshchatik Street was burning.

When they got to the boulevard Ganna said there was no need for them to drag everything up to her house. She would make the detour herself and they could wait. Ganna took off her sack and turned up the lane.

"Mummy, chestnuts!" Lyovik shouted. "Let me go!"

He ran to the tree, picked up several shining chestnuts and, stuffing them into the little pocket of his jacket, said, "One for me and one for you," sticking every other chestnut under his toy dog's nose.

Maryana looked down. Her eyes widened in surprise, "What's this?" Under her feet was broken glass. Noodles, buckwheat and something white, flour or starch, were scattered among scraps of paper. A white trail led off behind her. Maryana turned around and saw the broken windows and smashed door of the neighbourhood grocery store. Through a gaping hole of a window empty shelves could be seen. Crates, sacks, glass jars and paper had been smashed and ripped and thrown about. Everything had been turned inside-out and covered with flour.

Maryana was still staring at the wreck when Ganna returned. Ganna's face was clear and calm, "Well, wasn't I quick?" She held a quilted jacket under her arm. It was rolled up and tied with a string. Tucked under the string was an embroidered towel. Ganna untied the knapsack, put the jacket into it and said, "That's all. Let's go."

The fallen leaves rustled under their feet, but many still clung to the trees. Every chestnut leaf, still green in the centre, had a bronze border. Autumn had coloured all the maple leaves bronze.

Kiev autumn! An inimitable Kiev autumn! God, how little I wandered along these streets and gardens, Maryana thought. How little I admired the Dnieper, these expanses which have beckoned to me for as long as I can remember. Why didn't I run to them every free minute? Why did I walk barefoot in the grass so seldom? When this dam-

nable war ends—it must end sometime!—I will roam the whole of Kiev and all of its suburbs. I will greet every poplar and every chestnut as a friend. I will wander through the parks, not along the paths, but through the grass; and not only in the summer, but in the winter, too. I will go to Askold's Tomb and then down to the Dnieper, to the very Dnieper; and I won't be alone, no. Lyovik will be older and I'll begin to teach him to breathe in that beauty. . . .

Two German soldiers stood on the sidewalk holding lean wolf-hounds on leashes. The soldiers were young, clean-shaven, cheerful. They smiled, chewed on something and threw it to the dogs, who opened their mouths wide and snapped their teeth.

One of the soldiers shouted, "Weg!" The dogs pricked up their ears. Maryana felt Lyovik's hand tremble in hers and she pulled him behind her, "Don't be afraid, dear. Don't be afraid."

Ganna said quietly, "Let's walk faster."

Having gone a few steps further, Maryana heard some filthy swearing and looked across the street. She saw three men in civilian clothes. Instead of sub-machine guns, they had Russian rifles on their backs. They wore yellow and blue armbands with the word "Police" on them. With undisguised horror she looked at the traitors, standing there so confidently, although it seemed to her that rock and earth must open and swallow them.

"What are you gawking at?" one of them shouted with more swearing. "Didn't you hear him say 'Weg!' "

They walked faster. The little boy lifted his big black eyes and whispered, "Mummy, I'm scared."

Ganna answered them in her own way, " 'Vek!' May your own dogs tear you to pieces. May you writhe in pain. May your skin burn and blister, you scum. They've forgotten how to speak people's language. 'Vek, indeed!' "

"I'm tired," the little boy complained.

"Let's sit a while," Ganna said.

They walked over to some steps and sat down. The old lady took some meat pies wrapped in a handkerchief from her pocket and gave them to the child, "Here, Lyovik."

"One for me and one for Doggie," Lyovik said contentedly.

People passed them by, alone, in pairs, or whole families; with packages, hand carts piled high with suitcases and boxes, and baby carriages. Some of the carriages were filled with bundles. In others, babies slept or sat and whimpered. Maryana tried not to look at their faces, at their eyes. Still, she caught their glances, filled with fear of the unknown, pain and anguish.

What will happen? Where are they taking us? To Belaya Tserkov? Why to there? Oh, they're going to build a ghetto there for this endless stream of people. What a strange, terrifying word. What does it mean? Barbed wire, dogs, guards? Oh, God! And how long will it last?

A hard lump welled up in her throat and pressed threateningly, "I'll strangle you if you don't wash me away with tears." "Strangle me, if you will, I said, not a single tear!"

She glanced at Ganna and said quietly, "Mamma, go home."

"Can't you think of something better to say?" Ganna replied, shaking her head.

"Mamma. . . ."

"Be quiet. I don't want to listen to you."

Ganna stood up decisively. They walked on.

Both men and women looked at Maryana as she passed. That was not new to her. But if previously those glances held admiration alone, now there was sympathy, pity, alarm. This caused her heart to sink. She began to wonder about what misfortune, what disaster awaited her because fate had given her this beauty.

The glances embraced both her and her son, whom she now carried and who was so like her, except for his black eyes. While on Maryana's thin dark face, under black winged eyebrows and long lashes, her large thoughtful eyes burned with an unexpected blue flame.

The glances took in Ganna. This caused surprise and even curiosity, although it would seem that people being driven by fear and evil power could be moved by nothing save the thought of what awaited them. Surprise and curiosity were aroused by this woman who, it was clear as day, was a simple Ukrainian peasant with kind brown eyes and a wrinkled face that held promise of a pleasant, slightly cunning, compassionate smile.

But Ganna's face was severe. The wrinkles seemed deeper, her chapped, weather-beaten lips were drawn. She stooped, but not only from the weight of the knapsack—it wasn't all that heavy! Like all mothers, she carried on her shoulders the heaviest, the most grievous of all burdens, the burden of war.

She was unaccustomed to tenderness. Life had not been kind to her. On the first day of the war Mikhailo, her eldest son, had left for the front. Furtively wiping a tear, she had hugged him and said, almost angrily, "You watch out now!" Mikhailo had laughed. He was used to hearing that "You watch out now!" since he was a child.

If he went skating or swimming or, later, out with a girl, his mother always saw him off with that angry, concerned, "You watch out now!" Luckily Mikhailo had sent his wife and little girl to the Urals, farther from grief. Then Olga left. But that was female business. Here you could even cry. Still, Ganna had scolded her daughter through tears, "Mind your own business, or I'll give it to you!" Olga had cried like a child, but had stubbornly insisted, "You can't give it. We've got to fight for it."

"Well, be quiet if you're so smart!"

Ganna's thoughts jumped to Maryana. Silently, Ganna made a sacred vow to her conscience and the world, that nowhere and never would she leave Maryana and little Lyovik, no matter where misfortune took them.

She was not used to tenderness. Life had beaten and battered her. But now she longed to hug them both, to caress them, to say those tender and kind words that were always concealed in her heart.

She recalled how six years ago they had sat together at Oleksa's wedding: two mothers, two toilers, a Ukrainian mother Ganna, and a Jewish mother, Anya; how they had sang the songs they both knew and held so dear; how, swallowing a bitter tear, they thought of their husbands who had not lived to see that day. Oleksa's father, the metal worker, Grigory Zubar, had died in the last battle against the Makhno bands. Maryana's father, the tailor, Boris Dunayevsky, was shot by Denikin's soldiers. They were both left widows, a nurse and a dressmaker. With too little sleep and too little to eat they had raised and educated their children and made good people of them.

At first Ganna did not feel that she had gained a daughter. The young people had their own life. Then Lyovik was born and she became attached to Maryana with her whole soul, although she never mentioned it. Then the old dressmaker died. There remained one mother, Ganna.

"This is Lukyanovka already!" Maryana thought. "How green everything is. What lovely paths. I've never been here, but I'll come back. I will! Oh, what marvelous asters in front of that little house: white, pink and violet! Those are autumn flowers already."

They were now walking in the midst of a crowd. In front and behind people were plodding on. They were conversing quietly, listening to something.

The human stream moved along a tall brick wall which seemed to have no end. Maryana began listening, too. Somewhere far beyond the wall she seemed to hear the monotonous purring of a sewing machine. She knew the sound well.

"Where are we?" she asked an old man who walked alone and empty-handed. For some reason she spoke in a whisper.

He looked at her with wide-open eyes. His gaze sent a chill down Maryana's spine. He answered in Jewish, "Don't you know? This is the cemetery, the Jewish cemetery."

"Is the ghetto going to be here?" the thought flashed through her mind. "The walls are here already. They're capable of anything."

Without turning around, so as not to show the terror that had seized her, Maryana said calmly, "Mamma, go home."

"What, again!" Ganna glanced at her.

"Mamma, it will be difficult here."

"I've seen worse."

"Mamma. . . ."

"Be quiet. Don't think."

("Don't think, Maryana. Don't think.")

The wall turned off but the people kept on walking straight ahead. To the left and right, every twenty or thirty steps, two or tree German soldiers stood with sub-machine guns resting against their stomachs. "Schneller! Schneller!" they shouted at those who lagged. Several of the soldiers were holding police dogs on leashes. The panting animals watched everyone keenly. Here and there were men in civilian clothes with rifles.

"Mummy, we've been walking so long," Lyovik suddenly said loudly. "I want to go home."

"We'll be home soon," Maryana answered patiently.

Those words cut Ganna's heart. She held out her hands, "Give him to me, I'll carry him a while."

"He's too heavy for you."

"I've carried more."

She spoke the words, "I've seen worse," "I've carried more" sincerely confident that indeed nothing worse or more difficult than that she had been through could happen. And when she hugged little Lyovik to her breast that confidence became even stronger. "Nothing is too terrible as long as we love each other!"

She walked with even steps, feeling with her whole being the comforting warmth of the child's body. She no longer glanced at the hateful faces of the nazi soldiers and the policemen. But she suddenly saw Ivanchuk, her neighbour, among them. Her eyes blazed until she finally turned away.

He noticed her, too, shrugged and craned his neck, unable to believe his eyes. Then he took two steps forward.

"Have you gone mad, woman? Where do you think you're going?"

"Where all the others are going," Ganna replied without looking at him. "Leave me alone."

He pulled at her sleeve. Ganna stopped. Maryana stopped, too.

"Who's that?" he said, fixing his eyes on Maryana, "Your daughter-in-law?"

"My daughter."

"You're lying. I know your daughter. That's your son's...."

"She's my daughter. I said, leave me alone."

"So you've gotten mixed up with the Yids. Go home, or...."

"Don't bother me. What do you care?" Ganna said, looking at him with hatred.

"You're mad, woman," he spat the words out. "Go on! Go ahead! They're shooting everyone and they won't spare you."

He waved his hand in the direction from which the rattling could be heard clearly by now, and walked away.

Ganna and Maryana looked at one another, each trying not to show the other her terror and despair. Maryana was the first to gain control of herself. Her darkened eyes continued to burn on her deathly pale face as she held her breath, trying not to scream and frighten her son.

"The baby.... We must save the baby," Ganna whispered.

Maryana stared at her.

"Maryana, dear, what's the matter? We've got to save the baby."

Maryana shuddered, embraced Ganna and the child convulsively sobbed, kissed them and pushed them away. Then she moved forward without looking behind.

"Mummy!" Lyovik screamed. "Mummy, I want to go with you!"

Maryana swayed. She bit her lip till it bled and dragged her numb legs. But then she heard Ganna's desperate cry, "Let go, you murderer! Leave me alone!" A piercing cry "Mummy!" cut the air and nearly knocked her off her feet. Maryana had not yet come to her senses when she found herself beside Ganna. Ivanchuk had torn the boy from the old woman's arms.

"So you want to save the Yid? Get out of here, you old idiot, while your head's still in place, or they'll throw you into Babi Yar and no one will ever collect the pieces."

Maryana grabbed her son. He hid his face on her bosom.

"Murderers! Bandits!" Ganna raged. But seeing that nazi soldiers were approaching them, she pulled Maryana aside and they became lost in the river of people that walked and walked without end, still not knowing how the journey and the day would end.

Maryana saw everything that followed through a haze: the faces, carts, sacks, suitcases, beards, eyes filled with terror, tousled hair, backs, some straight, some bent, and more backs, and the stony silence. Only once in a while a groan would escape, or a sigh, or someone's laboured breathing. She didn't hear a thing. But the voice of a little girl being led by a young woman with a grey streak in her hair broke through her deafness. "Mummy, what's a Yid?" the child asked clearly.

Those who walked nearby stared at her. The silence became still more oppressive. "It can't happen!" Maryana said to herself. "Let them kill me. I don't care. But they can't shoot so many people. The children at least, they won't touch them. If they kill me, Ganna will take him."

She walked on wooden legs. When she saw that people were throwing their bundles into a heap, leaving their carts and suitcases, she took off her knapsack and was about to walk away when a hand tore her purse from her. She had time to see it fly into the grass, where hundreds, thousands of purses, briefcases and packages already lay, containing money and valuables which they had been ordered to bring along. Documents, too, were flung there, thousands of passports, thrown into one pile.

"Mummy, I won't give them Doggy," Lyovik whispered, "I won't!"

With one hand he hugged her tightly around the neck and with the other he held the fuzzy toy dog whose head with its glass eyes peeked out from under his jacket. A lack of understanding of what was happening and what appeared to him to be the calm face of his mother kept him from crying. Maryana knew that if he were to see a single tear in her eyes he would begin to scream.

Ganna walked beside them, unable to believe her own eyes, and kept repeating, "He's lying. Ivanchuk's lying, the drunken swine. Don't you mind him, Maryana."

She was the first to notice a large group of people in front of them, perhaps a hundred and fifty or so, who were stripping naked, men and women together. Nazi soldiers were herding those

who had undressed with blows from their clubs. One woman seized a nazi by the throat and spat in his face. In an instant she disappeared under the soldiers' boots.

Realising what all of this meant, Ganna repeated her words over and over, if only to distract Maryana. But Maryana had already noticed the naked people and had stopped, "Let them kill me right here, I won't undress."

Then something happened that none of them could have anticipated, not Maryana, not Ganna and even less so the Gestapo Brigadenführer who was filled with a sense of importance and superiority, whose cold grey eyes were observing from afar how an "operation" was being performed by comparison with which St. Bartholomew's Day would appear pale and dim.

Kurt Greiwitz, a private of the Wermacht, was wounded in the head in the July battles near Kiev. After recovering, he was not sent back to his infantry division, but landed in the Sonderkommand and considered himself lucky. Since early morning of that day, he had been standing near the steep bank and, together with the other soldiers saw to it that the people, who were herded by rifles did not scatter or try to escape. If this happened Kurt Greiwitz sent a short round of fire from his sub-machine gun. If his bullets didn't cut the man down, the next soldier in the line would shoot him.

To the right a grove painted generously in autumn colours sprawled over the hill-side. Kurt Greiwitz kept looking away from the scene he was to supervise to glance at the grove. He saw the far slope of a deep ravine opposite. It was a pleasing sight. Beyond were the yellow fields and green gardens of a little village. It seemed to

Kurt Greiwitz that when he looked at that unfamiliar, yet in some way familiar scene, his head did not ache quite as much. It resembled his native Altendorf, and the little school where he once taught. There, near Dresden, it was also autumn, with bronze leaves and peaceful quiet. How he longed for that quiet!

His head was being squeezed between iron tongs. At times a streak of red blinded him. More and more often he raised his lowered eyes to look at the sun which blazed down so brightly.

Kurt Greiwitz had almost been convinced that Hitler, as foreordained by God, had freed him from the fancies of his conscience and from morality, in the name of the universal domination of the Aryan race. Nevertheless, this former teacher from Altendorf was fulfilling his high mission in the East with a heavy heart. During the sleepless nights in the hospital Kurt Greiwitz, contrary to orders, had allowed himself that which was strictly forbidden to all soldiers of the Führer: he had allowed himself to think. More dangerous, still, he started thinking about the war. From then on, every new day in this strange and alien country seemed longer and more difficult.

This, the one hundredth day of the war, would probably never end! It would go on and on for the rest of his life. To his very last breath he would see those palid faces, mouths rent in their final cry, eyes brimming over with terror. As long as he lived the desperate wails of the children, the moaning and curses would ring in his ears.

"Oh, how my head aches! The sun is blinding me. When will it set? When will this day end? Mein lieber Gott!"

Kurt Greiwitz looked around with foggy eyes. Suddenly, wonder of wonders, an apparition ap-

peared in front of him which he, it seemed to him then, had been waiting for all day. The apparition rose above the people, above death, and even outshone the sun. The Madonna, Raphael's Madonna, lovingly clasping Her son to her breast, was walking towards him. A brown shroud flowed to the ground from Her head and shoulders. But the Madonna did not walk on the ground. She walked on clouds which wreathed Her feet. "That's not dust," Kurt Greiwitz said to himself. "Those are clouds, transparent clouds."

How many times he had gone to Her, standing spellbound in the marble hall of the Dresden Gallery! Now She had come to him. There was pain and torment in Her eyes, but what majestic calm on Her pale face; how much strength in Her even step; what infinite love in the slender white arms embracing the infant! She peered into this terrible world with mute anxiety and silently, with Her eyes alone, asked: "What awaits my son?"

Oh, how his head ached. It was gripped in a scorching vice. Kurt Greiwitz rubbed his eyes. The Madonna kept on walking. It was not Saint Barbara beside Her, as in Raphael's painting, but an old woman with a stern wrinkled face full of unrevealed secrets. The Madonna was walking straight towards him! Overcoming pain and torment, She smiled at the infant, and everything glowed around Her. In a frenzy Kurt Greiwitz threw his sub-machine gun to the ground, lifted his arms and moved towards Her, crying, "Oh, Madonna!"

Maryana covered Lyovik's face with her palm, so that he could not see and would not be frightened. She glanced at Ganna in confusion and did not hear an officer shout a command to a

soldier. She heard the muffled crack. The soldier who stood transfixed before her on his knees suddenly dropped his head into the dusty grass. Maryana did not hear the second shot. She rocked slightly, and as Ganna grabbed the child from her, fell backwards with the same expression of calm on her beautiful face.

"Be damned, you murderers!" Ganna cried. "Be eternally damned!"

She kept walking towards the officer, shouting curses. He moved backward, firing shot after shot, but Ganna kept on walking, flinging her curses at him. Her dark, wrinkled hands, with the swollen veins, hands that had never been kissed in her life, were covered with blood. The blood of the dead child mingled with her own. Finally she stopped, glanced at her feet, as if choosing a spot, and without letting go of the child fell to her side.

Then other soldiers, who had not seen a Madonna that day, threw the corpses of the two women and Kurt Greiwitz into the ravine; then they hurled down the bloody body of the little boy who was still clutching the fuzzy toy dog in his dead arms.

It happened on the hundredth day of the war.

THE SINNER AND THE RIGHTEOUS WOMAN

It was Sunday, and though it was a cloudy day, still, it was spring, with the freshness of April wafting in from the Dnieper. The buds on the chestnut trees were ready to burst. And chestnut trees are synonymous with Kiev.

It was close to noon as I walked down one of

the narrow streets which lovers of Old Kiev admire so but which the people who live in the ancient houses that line the streets abhor.

I was walking along, lost in thought, and this in itself was a bad omen. No walk will ever be invigorating if you leave home dragging a heavy sack of thoughts. Cast it away!

It was probably because of the heavy sack that was weighing me down that I didn't notice the loud voice at first. Soon, however, it made me turn my head. A woman down the street was speaking loudly. There was no one beside her. I thought she was speaking to someone in one of the houses across the street, but the windows were all shut.

I continued on my way. A few minutes later I heard the same voice, much closer now. I turned again and, since the street was deserted, save for the woman and myself, I inquired:

"Are you speaking to me?"

The woman approached. She seemed to be about forty, somewhat plump, but well-built. Anger, embarrassment and aggravation succeeded each other on her face.

"Can you tell me. . . ." she stopped and looked up at me frankly, then averted her eyes. "I know it sounds strange, me talking to you like this, but you don't know me and I don't know you. That means you can judge honestly. Right? Now, can you tell me whose business is it if I did have a drink?"

I had no chance to reply. At any rate, the woman did not seem to expect an answer, for she continued heatedly:

"Don't I have a right to? But she says: 'For shame! You were drinking!' Well, what business is it of hers? I work hard enough."

At this she held out her strong and beautiful hands and there was a measure of pride in her eyes as she looked at them.

"Where do you work?" It was a simple ruse to change the conversation. "I'm a plasterer. Do you know where the new housing development is? Well, I've added my bit to it. I hate sloppy work. What I say is: if you're doing a job, do it well. And I earn good money."

Her stride was the firm stride of an athlete as she walked along beside me. Her silk dress clung to her firm body, the short-sleeved green sweater revealed her sunburned arms and neck. Her round face was also sunburned. She had youthful brown sparkling eyes, but they were sad; there were bitter lines in the corners of her mouth.

"She is forever nagging me. . . ."

"You seem to have a quarrelsome monther-in-law," I said lightly.

"Oh, I wouldn't have minded if it was a mother-in-law. She would have nagged a bit, but she'd have helped me with the children. No, I don't have a mother-in-law. God has given me a neighbour, who keeps preaching to me on how to live. Oh, how hard she tries! And she doesn't charge a penny for all the advice she heaps on me. She does it for the good of society." She laughed, and her throaty voice was beautiful and full of warmth that cannot but affect one. "I have my own trade union committee and my own live newspaper right at home. I never have a chance to slip up. God has looked after me well in giving me such a neighbour! It's her I was talking about. She's so pure and holy it makes you sick! I wonder what she'd say if she were in my shoes? I was only twenty-five when I was widowed with two babies to care for, and no one to help me. And

everything was in ruins. I was all alone in the world! But I brought up my children, I made good citizens of them. Why, my boy Vanya is one of the best electricians in the plant. He's in the army now. You should see the letters he writes me, you'd think he was a poet. He has a good head on his shoulders. I never have to worry about him. Sure, he was full of mischief, but do you think it's easy to bring up a boy without a father? Oh how Pure-and-Holy kept nagging me!

"What was I to do? It was wartime, I had to work, stand in queues for food, cook and wash. Sure, they were dirty sometimes. Sometimes they'd break a window and there'd be a whole to-do about it. I'd give them a licking whenever they needed it. But they grew up to be honest and hard-working. I married my daughter off recently. That's really not the way it happens nowadays. Do they ever bother to ask your permission? Before you know it, they've got married. She married a nice boy, though. He's a tower-crane operator. Tonya, that's my girl, is a kindergarten teacher. She's studying in the evenings. She wants to be a school-teacher. I know she will be. It's no fun to work in the daytime and study in the evenings for five years. But she'll make it, because she's known what duty is ever since she was a child. The baby, my youngest boy, is still at home. He's finishing school this year. He's good-natured and cheerful, he's the joy of my life."

I glanced sideways at the woman's smiling face and wondered if she had really only had a drop to drink, since she didn't seem to know how many children she had.

"I thought you said you had two children?"

"I did have two when I got my husband's death-notice," she said and paused. "But Yurasik was born after the war. Which means he was born out of wedlock. So what?" She turned sharply and looked into my eyes. I also stopped, for her glance seemed to have pushed against my chest. Her voice had changed. "After all, I'm only human. Don't think it was easy."

We walked on in silence.

"You can't imagine how many tears I shed then, but I'm happy now. The elder two have left home, but I still have my Yurasik. He's such a gentle boy. Well, Pure-and-Holy never stopped harping! She lectured me morning, noon and night. Sometimes I'd get so mad I felt I'd have five more babies just to spite her. So many years have passed, everyone's forgotten all about it, but not her. Oh, no, not her! It must have been ten years ago that I said to her: 'I don't care what you say to me, but don't you dare say a word to Yurasik. If you do I'll cut your tongue out!' That was all I said. But she hasn't said a word about him since. She knows I mean it." The woman laughed. "Don't think we're forever quarrelling. We're really good neighbours, we help each other out when we can. Everything would have been fine, if not for that passion she has for giving everyone free advice on how to live. She's so pure and holy! I said to her: 'Don't you compare yourself to me. You have a husband, you have a nice, secure life.' She doesn't work because she has a child, you see. Her girl's twelve already. I wonder how I managed? Why, Tonya would come home from school and start peeling potatoes and changing and feeding Yurasik. And she was twelve at the time. I never stick my nose into other people's business. If she doesn't

want to work, that's her affair. Let her take care of her house and her child, her time is all her own. She has a lot of free time, though, and the only way she spends it is by teaching everyone else how they ought to live.

"There are people whose greatest joy is to stamp into somebody's life and start moving things around inside as if it was their own pantry. Putting everything in order, you know, making things spick-and-span. I've seen a lot of that kind of cleanliness, where everything shines on the outside. But God forbid if you ever look inside! But I have nothing to hide, nothing to polish up to make it look better. Here I am, just as I am! I've been working every day of my life for twenty-five years. I'm not a young girl anymore, but I'm not ready to join the old ladies yet. If I found the right man I don't know as I wouldn't get married again. How old do you think I am?"

There was a twinkle in her eye as she looked at me. At that moment she seemed to have thrown off at least ten years. I hesitated, not knowing what to reply.

"I was forty-six on my last birthday," she said sadly and shook her head. "The years just fly by. Pure-and-Holy, she has her own way of counting. She was forty-two years in a row and now she's been forty-one three times running. That's a funny way of counting. But I've never said a word to her. What do I care if it makes her happy? I feel differently, though. I don't want to play hide-and-seek with my life. No matter which way you look at it, forty-six is forty-six. Sometimes you think life hasn't handed you too big a share of happiness, but then when you do get a drop of joy, you treasure it.

"Take today, for instance. You should have heard Yurasik laughing when he told me that funny story about his friends. It filled my whole morning with sunshine. Then I decided to go over and watch the people moving into the house we just completed. And I landed smack into the middle of two house-warming parties. The people were happy, and I felt good. I told them I hoped they would enjoy their new homes and that they'd never have to worry about the plaster coming down, because it'll hold as long as the house holds out. They made me join them at the table. There was singing and I had a glass of wine with them. These people aren't really anything to me. It was probably the first and last time I'll ever see them, but I feel as if they're all my kin."

A shy smile lit up her face. It appeared at once kindly and sad.

Now, when she fell silent, I fully appreciated the sound of her low, vibrant contralto. Each word she had uttered had had a special sound of its own, some louder, some softer, some nearly a whisper, though at times these whispered words were more forceful than a shout. Each of her words was backed up by some emotion, by thoughts that had perhaps been churning in her mind for many a sleepless night.

"I'm thirsty," she said. I glanced at her parched lips.

"There's a soft-drink stand nearby."

"Never mind," she said.

I recalled that there was an ice-cream pavilion in the square across the way with several tables set out under the trees. We headed there.

"Take a seat while I get the ice-cream."

"I'll come along with you."

"No," I protested. "This is your day off."

I carried our ice-cream and soft drinks over to the table.

"Thank you," she said and blushed. "This has turned out to be a really nice day."

We each had a glass of the drink and picked up our spoons.

"It's delicious! I've never had such tasty ice-cream. I've told you about myself. Now tell me about you."

"I'm a teacher."

"That's not an easy job. You've turned grey too soon."

After a pause she asked.

"Were you in the war?"

"Yes."

"The war ruined my life. Completely."

We were silent, but our silence was as relaxed as our talk had been.

A friend of mine passed and waved to me from afar.

"Don't forget, I'll be waiting for you this evening!" he called.

"Who is he?" the woman asked.

"An old friend of mine. A very fine person."

"I thought as much. I've learned to tell what people are like by looking at them. Women are different," she said, shaking her head. "Women can never be friends the way men are."

"Why not? I know many women who have been close friends all their lives."

"That's very rare. And anyway, it's different. I have a very dear friend, but if she'd have seen us here, she'd be at me until I told her who you were and how I came to meet you and all sorts of things. I bet your friend won't even ask you about me." Her eyes flashed and she laughed so

infectiously that I smiled, though I didn't know what she was laughing about. "What if Pure-and-Holy saw us? Goodness! Imagine, approaching a strange man in the street! And having an ice-cream with him in a square! I'm really sorry she can't see us. But I'll tell her! I won't leave out a thing. I can just see her throwing up her hands in horror. 'In the street! With a strange man!' "

Now I laughed with her. We finished our ice-cream and walked on.

Although it was a cloudy day, the bursting buds spoke of spring and the Dnieper. The high-water mark was expected to be especially high this year. I don't know why I suddenly thought of it, perhaps because the new housing project was located on the left bank where the flood waters spread very far.

"The water won't reach us," the woman said. "Though it's supposed to rise very high this year. Higher than it has been in many years."

I stopped on the corner of Vladimirskaya Street. She looked at me expectantly.

"Good-bye," I said. "I hope the rest of your day will be very pleasant."

"I hope so too," she replied seriously. "Today has been a very nice day."

She stopped as if in mid-sentence and then, deciding that nothing more should be said, she smiled warmly and offered me her hand. "Thank you. I've never had such delicious ice-cream."

The wise and yellowed books awaited me in the library, kind advisers in my historical research. But I was in no hurry. History could wait. After all, it was my day off too, wasn't it?

I walked along lightly not realising at first why my step was so springy until it dawned on

me that somewhere along the way I had dropped the heavy sack of thoughts that I had so foolishly carried out from the house that morning.

My one regret was that I had not called my friend over to join us at the table.

He and I would now have been walking along, looking at the cloudy sky and the chestnut buds, talking about the strange woman, who had suddenly become almost a friend, of all the good she had done and would still do in her lifetime and of the few joys that fate had given her. Perhaps we might even have mentioned her righteous neighbour. For whenever you speak of something significant, you invariably touch on the insignificant on the way.

Pavlo Zagrebelny

THE TEACHER

I heard this story late one evening, told to the accompaniment of a soft summer rain.

We were sitting on the porch of Zelyony Gai Station, 1,088 kilometres from Moscow on the Moscow-Simferopol Highway, making small talk as strangers thrown together usually do.

There were four of us at the table: a middle-aged agronomist waiting for a collective farm truck to pick him up, a pale young dark-haired man, and a fat and flabby man who had missed the Kharkov bus and I.

Three of us had supped on whatever was to be found at the local restaurant and were now enjoying our cigarettes, while the fat man was ploughing through a watermelon loudly. He kept choking on the seeds and spitting them out in all directions.

Suddenly, the lights went out. The waitresses brought in candles stuck in jars of barley, but they did not afford much light.

The night was dark, the rain pattered on the roof, in the little pool in the centre of the yard and on the asphalt path. It had been raining for quite a while, but the air was still heavy and close.

"It feels as though we've been covered by a quilt," the fat man said and called for the manager to complain about the lights.

We were silent. The young man tapped the table with his fingers, the agronomist settled back more comfortably and sighed. It was the sigh of a tired man who was fed up with his endless trips across the steppe and annoyed at having to sit around doing nothing, waiting for a farm truck or a dump truck to call for him. Perhaps he was even annoyed at being forced to spend so much of his time looking at chance service stations along the way, listening to the monotonous sound of the rain and the whistling of the hot steppe winds.

Someone was playing the piano upstairs and the strains of Chaikovsky's "Barcarolle" drifted down to us.

"It's beautiful music," the agronomist said after a while. "It's so beautiful and gentle, like the first flowers of spring. But I don't really understand music and have always regretted it. I understand flowers, but not music."

"If you want to understand music, eat a lot of radishes and black bread," the fat man said and laughed at his own wit. He choked on a seed again and spat it out, barely missing the young man's face.

The young man fended it off and said angrily:

"What do radishes and your flat jokes have to do with music? Never speak lightly of music, or of those who have dedicated their lives to it. I can tell you a story about it."

The rain pattered, the young man's eyes flashed in the gloom. I could not guess what he wanted to tell us about, or what it had to do with this soft light cast by the sharp tongues of flame, in an effort to dispel the darkness, or with the beautiful music drifting down from above, or with

the fat man now scraping around in the twelve-pound Kherson watermelon.

"I'll begin from the very beginning," the young man said and paused, as if to ask us whether he should continue or not.

"It all began in the South, in a little coastal town where the sea looks in at every window and the air is always filled with the smell of salt, iodine, seaweeds and fish. No one knew where Grigory Matveyevich Sobolenko came from, but everyone knew that he was not a native of the fishing town. They all recalled him as a music teacher in the local music school. Are we not all fated to live our lives unnoticed by others until we do something unusual?

"The people first noticed him when he became a music teacher. But they really sat up when rumour spread the word that he was going to marry Marina, the daughter of the old boatswain Drabin and the prettiest girl in town. No one could understand what she saw in the strange and awkward lanky fellow who wore thick glasses and knew about nothing except his violin.

"When the young people moved in to their first home their possessions consisted of a fibreboard suitcase, an ancient iron, a sagging wicker armchair, a bundle of sheet music and a violin. Marina's carefree life had ended. Now she had many responsibilities. She had to shop for food, prepare their meals, clean and dust and help her husband copy out music and the articles which he occasionally sent to 'Music and Revolution', a magazine published in Moscow.

"Grigory Matveyevich worked long hours at the music school, for the fishermen's sons were used to the great music of the ocean, not to the

sounds that escaped from the wooden depths of these fragile instruments. As yet, they showed no promise whatsoever. It was Grigory Matveyevich's cherished dream to see at least one of his pupils become a well-known musician, bringing fame to the little town. 'Each little town has a right to its own great man,' he liked to say.

"He held extra classes after hours, spent much time in the town library reading books on art and often returned home late at night. Marina was left to her own resources. When she felt especially sad and lonely she would move the armchair up to the window and look out at the sea. It pounded monotonously, gently, soothingly, and after a while she would feel better and drop off to sleep, lulled by the sound of the waves. Grigory would come home late, stamping loudly, rattling the pots on the stove as he searched for his cold dinner and speaking sharply to his sleepy wife:

" 'What surprises me is how you can sleep so much. Napoleon said a man should sleep four hours a day, a woman five, and a child six. Only complete idiots can sleep more than that!'

"Marina couldn't care less about what Napoleon had said. She was tired after the day's work and when Grigory awakened her from her first sweet sleep her head would begin to ache. However, she did not want to offend her husband and so sat there smiling sleepily at him, pressing her fingers to her temples to keep her eyes from closing.

" 'How could you ever have fallen in love with him? He's such a bore?' her girlfriends wondered.

" 'You just don't understand him,' she'd reply. 'He's such an unusual person!'

"After a while they had a son, as clear-eyed and clever as Marina. But the young mother was distraught: she had hoped that in time she and Grigory would start living a new, happy and carefree life, as sweet as a summer breeze, but everything was turning out quite differently. Grigory began working still longer hours, he'd be up half the night, and holidays and Sundays were as nothing to him.

" 'I can't understand it,' he'd say with genuine surprise. 'Don't they see how much time they're wasting? Fifty-two Sundays a year, a dozen holidays and half a dozen special occasions! How many books they could be reading instead, how much they could accomplish.'

"If they were invited out to a friend's house or to visit relatives Grigory would never dance or join the merriment. He'd stand off by himself in a corner looking morose, his lips pressed tightly together and glower at the assembly as if he were saying: 'What's the good of all of you?'

"At first Marina tried to draw her husband out, to distract him from his music, but he stubbornly resisted all her efforts.

" 'I wish you'd leave me alone,' he'd say. 'You can see that I have to work day and night. Why do you expect me to hop about like a goat? I'm a music teacher.'

" 'But a person's life shouldn't be all work,' Marina would protest timidly.

" 'I know of nothing else that interests me,' he would say and shrug.

"Her girlfriends were right: Sobolenko was really too much of a bore for a woman like Marina.

"Stepan Zhivodyor, a witty, devil-may-care navigator who showed up in their town from time

to time, was a far better match for her. He'd shout:

" 'Marina! Let's sail for Rio de Janeiro!'

" 'Ha, ha, ha!' Marina would laugh.

" 'Marina! Let's head for Buenos Aires!'

" 'Ha, ha, ha!'

" 'Marina, what about Bab el Mandeb?'

"And again her rollicking laughter could be heard in the soft twilight.

"Stepan knew a great many exotic names, enough to turn the head of a woman far more sophisticated than Marina. His powerful figure seemed a call to beautiful far-off cities, islands and seas, and in his words she heard a promise of a happiness supreme, of joy and well-being.

"One dark autumn night she ran off with Stepan Zhivodyor, leaving behind her clear-eyed young son, and a heartless note for her husband: 'Don't search for me. I'll never return.'

"How was she to know that a person's happiness does not lie in flitting about the world like a bit of eiderdown? Besides, Stepan was not a navigator on an ocean liner at all, he wasn't even on a coasting vessel, but was an ordinary boatswain on a fishing seiner which fished for the sharp-bellied red mullet that resembled dried grasshoppers.

"Grigory Matveyevich realised that he had been too impersonal in his relations with his wife, but it was too late for regrets now. He was ready to live alone and pledged to bring his son up to be a worthy man."

"Children should be brought up as Chekhov was," the fat man suddenly interrupted. "If you don't bring them up like Chekhov was, a child'll grow up to be a scoundrel and a thief, trust my words."

"Do you have any children?" the agronomist asked angrily.

"I never had occasion to marry," the fat man muttered. "As the Apostle Paul said, it is good to marry, but still better not to."

"Do go on," the agronomist said to the young man.

"Well, Grigory Matveyevich suffered terribly. His heart became as frozen as a river in winter. He threw himself into his work more passionately than ever and began teaching his son Yuri music. He believed it to be the most precious knowledge a man could acquire.

"However, there was one thing he had not taken into consideration. Once again there was a clash of wills. He had forgotten that you can't force a person to share your inclinations. His failure as a husband had taught him nothing.

"Yuri did not want to study music. He cursed his violin and the Berio method, according to which his father taught him. He just couldn't stand in front of his music-stand for hours on end, playing scales, while the sun blazed outside, the blue sea beckoned and all the other boys were fishing for black bullheads on the sandy white spits. He was not like his father at all. He was his mother's son, as lively, vivacious and temperamental as she. He hated to be home, and he often ran away from his violin, his scales and his boring exercises; the older he got the more frequently he tried to escape.

"One spring day when the ice on the little Kalchik River was breaking, a group of boys were playing near the waterfall. Their game was a simple one: half of them stood by the waterfall, sending large chunks of ice downstream, while those who were bolder pulled the ice out of the

water, thus proving their courage. Naturally, Yuri Sobolenko was among those who stood downstream. He had fished out more chunks of ice than anyone else and so, when a huge green chunk of ice slipped over the waterfall all the boys made way for Yuri, for he alone could fish it out of the rushing stream.

"Yuri bent over and grabbed an edge of the ice, but it slipped out of his hands and was carried off. He ran along the bank, bending over the water now and then, trying to catch it. He finally threw himself on it and the chunk stopped, it seemed to be drawn towards the shore. It was large and bulky, but suddenly it went under. The boy lost his balance, but no one heard his cry or the splash his small body made as he fell in, nor the crack of the large chunk of ice which broke in half and was now rushing towards the sea in two pieces, lost amidst the foam and waves. The noise of the waterfall drowned out all other sounds. Yuri's head appeared for a moment, he waved and was drawn under again, and then popped up again. His friends ran along the shore, shouting and waving their arms helplessly, but they could do nothing to help him. Once again his head appeared in the roaring river and then the boy disappeared. He was carried out to sea."

"How terrible," the agronomist said.

"Luckily," the young man continued, "some fishermen nearby heard the boys shouting and rushed to the rescue. When they pulled Yuri out he was more dead than alive.

"When Grigory Matveyevich was told of the accident he rushed out of the classroom, hatless and coatless, and ran home all the way across the town.

"For a whole week after that the music teacher's hands shook so badly he could not play.

"Everyone hoped that now he would not force Yuri to practise any more, but they were mistaken. Once again Yuri stood before his music-stand, sawing away on his violin, extracting sounds from it that had nothing in common with music.

"If anyone had asked him whether he intended to become a violinist he would have said: 'Never!' But his father was more far-sighted than his son. In time Yuri came to love music and showed definite talent. When he was sixteen he entered the conservatoire and many said he had a great future ahead of him.

"Don't tell me it's the story of your life?" the fat man said sarcastically.

"Have patience and hear the story out," the young man said and continued: "No one was surprised when Yuri volunteered for front-line duty at the outbreak of the war. After all, his father had been his teacher, he had always valued a person's readiness to fulfill his duty as a man and a citizen above all else.

"Grigory Matveyevich approved of his son's decision.

" 'Have you heard?' he said to his friends, 'My son has volunteered for the infantry! He's an excellent violinist, he has a rare talent, but he's gone off as a plain infantry man. That's something that should be appreciated.'

"And the old man's eyes shone with pride. He let everyone read his son's letters home, but he showed no one the letter in which Yuri's comrades wrote, telling his father that he had died a hero's death. That very same day Grigory Matveyevich disappeared from the town.

"Of what use to anyone could an old, near-sighted music teacher, lonely and unfortunate all his life, be in time of national calamity?

"Yet, some time later Grigory Matveyevich Sobolenko appeared at one of the front-line sectors. He was in uniform and held the rank of Senior Lieutenant. Soon everyone on this part of the front knew about the lanky man, so comical at first glance, who was awaited everywhere with joy and impatience. Sr. Lt. Sobolenko was in charge of an army orchestra.

"The orchestra often gave performances behind the lines, at artillery batteries and at tank divisions and infantry regiments. Its music inspired those who were exhausted by endless battles, it spoke to the young soldiers of the unknown beauties of first love and brought back memories of home to the older men.

"Sobolenko searched out the most talented soldiers from all parts of the front for his orchestra. Once again he stayed up nights, teaching his pupils. His fame as a conductor was compared to fame gained in battle.

"Sobolenko came upon a young village boy named Yuri Nechipurenko who had been adopted by an artillery regiment. He coaxed him to join the orchestra. Perhaps the thirteen-year-old boy reminded him of his own son, perhaps the old man had simply been impressed by the violin made of fir that the boy's father, a partisan, had bequeathed him and which he carried everywhere. After a while Grigory Matveyevich began singling Yuri out from among his other pupils, something he had never done before.

"However, the boy could not cope with his teacher's special attention. It was too much for him. Grigory Matveyevich began teaching him

the violin according to his own method, in comparison with which the Berio method, cursed by all pupils, everywhere, seemed a lark. Grigory Matveyevich was at Yuri day and night both during rehearsals and during concerts. He did not give the boy a moment's respite. This seemed all the more heartless here, at the front, where any stray mine or shell could kill both teacher and pupil at any time.

"But Grigory Matveyevich was a stern commander and no one dared to point out how wrong he was.

"There's no sense dragging the story on. Yuri Nechipurenko was not killed by a bullet or a shell, though they were often under direct fire and often gave performances with shells bursting nearby. He was not even wounded. Grigory Matveyevich, however, was wounded in the chest in April 1945 and went back to his native town to convalesce.

"When he was well again he became the head of the music school where he had once begun his career as a music teacher. Yuri Nechipureko, like so many of his pupils, went his own way in life."

"What a trite story," the fat man said. "What's so interesting about it? I'll bet that teacher of yours doesn't even have a single medal. Hero, indeed!"

"My dear fellow," the agronomist said, "no medal will make the sorts of you look any better. Why don't you just concentrate on your watermelon?"

"I've finished it already," the fat man said and laughed loudly.

"And now we come to the end of the story," the young man continued. "As I said, Grigory Matveyevich's pupils went their various ways in

life. Yuri Nechipurenko was probably the luckiest of them all. He became a famous violinist, he won many contests at home and abroad. He was kissed by the famous French violinist Jacques Thibaud, while his Polish friends called him a second Wieniavski. In a word, the pupil was now harvesting fame earned by his dedicated teacher."

"Each of us has had our own unforgettable teacher," the agronomist said with feeling.

"And then one day Yuri Nechipurenko arrived in the town where Grigory Matveyevich still lived. He was anxious to see his old teacher. Long before their meeting he had imagined how he would kiss the old man's bony hands. At the same time, he felt conscious-striken and awkward, for he was so young and had gained world fame, while none had come to his teacher, who was known only in the sleepy little coastal town.

"All his fears vanished the moment he saw Grigory Matveyevich. He was not the old man Yuri had expected to see. In fact, he even seemed younger, more vigorous, than he had been several years before. He was now far-sighted instead of being near-sighted, as is sometimes the case with elderly people, he no longer wore thick glasses, and his eyes had a young and happy sparkle to them.

" 'Well,' he said to Yuri, 'I'm proud of you, my boy. You may not think of me, but I still remember waking you at dawn and putting a bow into your tired hands. You're a famous musician now, but I'm still your teacher. I want you to play with me, perhaps for the very last time. We shall play for the people whom I have lived among all my life and let them be the judges as to who is the better musician. Do you agree?'

" 'Certainly,' Yuri replied. 'It will be as you say, Grigory Matveyevich.'
"Only a tenth of all those who wanted to get in crowded into the small local theatre.
"Nechipurenko played first, as Grigory Matveyevich wished it to be. He played as a well-known musician should play, no better and no worse, and he was applauded sincerely and loudly, as well-known musicians are usually applauded.
"When the last of the applause had died down Yuri left the stage and took the seat reserved for him in the first row, becoming one of the audience.
"His neighbour suggested in a whisper that when Grigory Matveyevich appeared he should rise and applaude in order that the audience could see the respect he had for his teacher.
"The curtain did not go up for a long while. When it finally did and Yuri rose quickly from his seat the sight that met his eyes made him gasp.
"There, standing eight-abreast, were five rows of very young musicians, forty boys and girls holding their violins. They wore white shirts and Young Pioneer's ties and stood quietly, looking at their teacher, Grigory Matveyevich, who had modestly stepped aside.
"Yuri heard a sound like a great sigh behind him: the audience had risen to its feet. In another moment the dead silence was rent by a stormy ovation.
"His teacher had won the contest without playing a single note.
"He had not wanted an easy victory. That had not been his way during all the difficult years.
"When silence was again restored Grigory Matveyevich raised his violin to his chin in a swift,

precise movement. In response, forty violins were pressed between tender pink chins and poppy-red ties. The greatest critic could not have found fault with these young musicians. Everything they did was as any great musician would have done it: the weight of their body fell on their left foot, the elbow of their left arm was opposite their heart, while the clef was kept down by their thumb to keep it from lying in their palm.

"Grigory Matveyevich nodded imperceptibly and forty bows, like forty white sabres, flashed through the air and came down on the strings. And the strings cried out, as if they were afraid the white sabres would cleave them in two, and then they laughed at their own strength and power and sang a song as beautiful and as endless as the sea.

"Yuri Nechipurenko had heard many famous quartets, sextets and groups of violinists, but never before had he seen anything like this.

"This was the greatest triumph of the old teacher's life, that triumph of human endeavour which we call immortality."

The young man fell silent. We could hear the cars on the highway in the distance.

The fat man had slipped away, as if he was afraid we might detain and force him to hear the end of the story about a man so unlike himself.

The agronomist gazed at the young man for some time and then said:

"I don't want to sound curious, but are you Yuri Nechipurenko by any chance?"

"It's really of no importance," the young man said and smiled. "It's quite sufficient that I am one of Grigory Matveyevich's pupils."

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Alexander Dovzhenko

(1894-1965)

The life and art of Dovzhenko is highly representative of the generation which reached maturity directly after the Great October Revolution. He came from a peasant family, from Chernigov Region, studied at Kiev University and at the Academy of Arts and worked for the People's Commissariat of Education and the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs. Dovzhenko combined his diplomatic duties in Berlin and Warsaw with the study of painting. In 1926 he entered the field of cinematography. The films "Earth", "Arsenal", "Shchors", "Poem of the Sea" and others have placed Dovzhenko among the masters of world cinematography. For his work in this field he was awarded the Lenin Prize.

Alexander Dovzhenko is also widely known as the author of short stories and plays. "Michurin", "Tale of the Flaming Years" and "Mother" are among his better known works.

"A Will to Live", which appears in the present collection, is about the Second World War, in which Dovzhenko participated as a war correspondent.

"The Enchanted Desna", presented here in an abridged form, is one of the most original literary works of our time. How accurate was the critic who observed that these "are not only autobiographical pages, but a narration of the spiritual and poetic forces which move the people as they break through to a new epoch; of that which artists take with them from their historical 'childhood' into the future, and that which they leave in the past".

Andrei Golovko

(b. 1897)

"The Red Kerchief", by Andrei Golovko (1924), is dedicated to the heroism of the revolution. The action takes place during that period of the Civil War when the Ukraine fell temporarily into the hands of the enemies of the revolution, headed by the whiteguard general Denikin. This story as all of Golovko's works, is filled with love for his people, and admiration for their courage and steadfastness.

Andrei Golovko is among the older generation of Ukrainian Soviet writers. His works are required classroom reading and have served to teach many generations of children the realities of the heroic revolutionary epoch.

Golovko, born into a peasant family near Poltava, grew up to become a school teacher. He participated in the Great October Revolution and the Civil War. His first book, "Precious Stones", a collection of poems, was published in 1919. Golovko subsequently devoted himself to prose. He has written short stories, and the novels "Weeds", "Mother" and "Artyom Garmash", which have been translated into many languages of the Soviet peoples and foreign languages.

Oles Gonchar

(b. 1918)

Oles Gonchar began writing after returning from the war, in which he had fought from its very first days, having joined a voluntary student battalion. His novels "The Standard-Bearers", "Man and Arms" and "Tronka", and his short stories "The Mountains Sing", "In the South", "Masha from Verkhovina" made his name a familiar one to millions of readers. His pen brings to life the breath of

the steppes, the fragrance of blossoming orchards, tinkling laughter and warm humour.

Mikhail Sholokhov, the outstanding Soviet writer of our time, said this of Gonchar: "He is a true and very able prose writer."

The author has been awarded the Lenin and Shevchenko prizes, his works have been translated into twenty languages of the peoples of the Soviet Union and into foreign tongues. Gonchar is the First Secretary of the Writers' Union of the Ukraine.

Yevgen Gutsalo

(b. 1937)

Yevgen Gutsalo belongs to the generation of Ukrainian writers that began publishing their works in the late 50s. His beautiful, sensitive stories have gained him great popularity.

Yevgen Gutsalo was born near Vinnitsa, the son of a teacher. He began writing poetry while studying at Nezhin Pedagogical Institute and, upon graduation, worked as a journalist on *Literaturnaya Ukraina* and as an editor for the Sovietsky Pisatel Publishing House, Kiev.

His first book of short stories, "Men Among Men" was published in 1962, bringing the young writer his first true recognition. "Gutsalo is kind, compassionate and intelligent," the poet Boris Slutsky wrote in a review in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (Moscow). "His talent is marked by a doubled, a tripled sense of perception. His keen appraisal of people and events is commendable."

In the years that followed the writer has published several other collections of short stories: "Apples from an Autumn Garden", "Bathed in Lovage" and "The Green Silk Kerchief".

Roman Ivanichuck

(b. 1929)

The Trans-Carpathian region, a mountainous area bordered by a narrow strip of plain, lies in the south-west of the Ukraine. Here, in the mountain villages, live the Gutsuls, lumberjacks and loggers, shepherds and potters.

Roman Ivanichuk's stories present a panorama of the new way of life that has come to this people. They are stories of the kindness and generosity of the human heart.

Ivanichuk was born in Stanislav Region. After working as a teacher he entered the Philology Department of Lvov University from which he graduated in 1957. His first story was published in 1954. This was followed by several collections of short stories: "Don't Chop Down the Ash Trees!", "The Prut Carries off the Ice", and "Poplar Storm". In the years between 1961 and 1967 the author worked on a trilogy entitled "At the Edge of the Road".

Ivan Lye

(b. 1895)

Ivan Lye belongs to the generation of Ukrainian writers that began publishing their first works in the 20s. His novel "Between the Hills" was the first epic work in contemporary Ukrainian literature.

At the suggestion of Maxim Gorky, with whom the writer often met, he wrote two historical novels: "Nalivaiko" and the trilogy "Khmelnitsky". The latter was awarded the Taras Shevchenko Prize, the highest Ukrainian literary award, in 1967.

Ivan Lye has published many collections of short stories ("The Ring of Escape", "When Two Must Part", etc.). "A Man of Strong Will", which appears in the present

collection, is set in 1939 at a time when the Western Ukraine, which came under the jurisdiction of Poland after World War I, was reunited with the Soviet Ukraine.

Petro Panch

(b. 1891)

In his forty-five years as a writer Petro Panch has created close to two hundred short stories and novels, sizeable contribution to Ukrainian Soviet literature.

Panch was born in Kharkov Region. He fought in World War I and in the Civil War. After being demobilised in 1921 he became a land surveyor. At this time his first short stories, essays and humourous pieces began appearing in newspapers and magazines. The best of them appeared in the collections "Straw Smoke" (1925) and "Mouseholes" (1926). In the thirties the author worked on his novels: "The Blue Trains", "Alexander Parkhomenko", "The Ukraine Seethed" and others, while continuing to write short stories. "I never ceased writing about themes suggested by my conscience and by life," he said.

The writer was awarded the Taras Shevchenko Prize in 1966 for a collection of short stories entitled "On the Bridge".

"Tikhon's Letter" (1926) is about the changes that were taking place in the Ukrainian villages shortly after the revolution.

Leonid Pervomaisky

(b. 1908)

Leonid Pervomaisky is a contemporary writer of keen insight, as is evident in "The Story of Mankind", included in this collection.

The author was born in Kharkov Region, the son of a book-binder. He worked as a librarian, then wrote for various newspapers and magazines, and worked at the Kiev Film Studios. His first story was printed in "*Krasny Yunosha*", (Red Youth) a Poltava newspaper, in 1924. His first collection of short stories, "Komsa", appeared in 1926 and "Bitter Apples", his first book of poems, in 1929.

Leonid Pervomaisky was a war correspondent for "*Pravda*" during the Second World War. He was awarded the State Prize for Literature for several collections of poetry.

"Wild Honey", an anti-fascist novel which has been translated into many languages, has been very popular both at home and abroad.

Ivan Senchenko
(b. 1901)

Ivan Senchenko was born in Poltava Region. He graduated from Kharkov Institute of Education in 1928. His first story appeared in 1922. Senchenko is the author of poetry, short stories and novels ("The Metal Workers", "The Red Gates", "On the Eve" and others). He has also written stories for children ("The Steam Mill", "Red Wolves", "Two Days in the Life of Zhenka and Lyovka" and others).

Many of the author's works are about the Donetsk Region, the largest industrial centre of the Ukraine. His series "Donetsk Stories", of which "One's Native Land" is one, was awarded a prize in 1960.

Ivan Senchenko is also a literary critic and a translator into Ukrainian of Russian classical and contemporary works.

Alexander Sizonenko

(b. 1923)

Sizonenko's first stories, "Stars Fall in August", "What You Live For", "The Sea Freezes at the Shore" and others appeared in 1948-1950 and gained the author wide acclaim. His novels "Shipbuilders" and "White Clouds", both about shipbuilders, are excellent character studies dealing with contemporary problems.

Alexander Sizonenko was born in Nikolayev. He worked as a fitter at the Nikolayev shipyards, then fought in the Second World War. Sizonenko was the commander of an assault group during the battle of Berlin.

"Watermelons" won the 1964 prize awarded by the magazine *Druzhba Narodov.*

Mikhail Stelmakh

(b. 1912)

Maxim Rylsky, the venerable Ukrainian poet, wrote. "Stelmakh entered prose armed with poetry. Qualities that are characteristic of Stelmakh the poet became an integral part of his prose. These characteristics are a love for the language, for full-bodied, beautiful words, of sensitive, at times exquisite metaphors, a popular approach, a truly national originality and at the same time a human breadth of vision."

The writer published his first book of verse, "Good Morning", in 1941, on the very eve of the war. His first book of short stories, "Birch Sap", appeared in 1944. From that time on he has been known as the author of such epic novels as "A Big Family", "Let the Blood of Man Not Flow" and "Bread and Salt", for which he was awarded the Lenin Prize in 1961.

Mikhail Stelmakh was born in Vinnitsa Region. Upon graduating from Vinnitsa Pedagogical Institute in 1933 he

began teaching in the rural areas of Kiev Region. He was an artilleryman during the Second World War. He was severely wounded, and upon recovering joined the staff of a front-line newspaper. After the war Stelmakh did research at the Institute of Folklore, Ethnography and the History of Art of the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian SSR.

The present collection includes one of his short stories, "New Year's Eve" (1967). It will acquaint the reader with his prose, revealing his talent for portraying the beauty of his native land, his understanding of the peasants' hopes and dreams.

Mikhailo Tomchanii

(b. 1914)

Mikhailo Tomchanii is an authority on the life and mores of the Trans-Carpathian Ukraine, a humourist who commands a varied palette of artistic means of expression.

Tomchanii was born in the Trans-Carpathian Ukraine, into the family of a peasant. From childhood on he witnessed the tragic fate of his land, which was forcefully separated from the rest of the Ukraine until 1945. Thus we find that the central theme of his work is the noble tiller of the land who preserved his native tongue and customs, his human dignity through all of life's adversities.

Tomchanii's books, "Trans-Carpathian Stories", "Hotel Soloma", "Terezka" and his novel "Zhmenyaki" are all very popular.

Grigor Tiutiunnik

(b. 1931)

Grigor Tiutiunnik's first collection of short stories was published in Kiev in 1966 and was an immediate success. His simple stories describe the beauty of first love, the

complexities of human relationships. His heroes are the Ukrainian young people of today. There is a feeling of truth in every tale.

Tiutiunnik was born in Poltava Region. He worked in a Kharkov factory, on a collective farm, at a construction site, restoring mines, in a railway roundhouse, he was a fitter, a driver and a lathe operator. He graduated from the Philology Department of Kharkov University in 1962.

Tiutiunnik's short stories appear in many Ukrainian newspapers and magazines and many have been translated into Russian. The magazine *Druzhba Narodov,* in awarding him its prize for 1967, wrote: "Grigor Tiutiunnik is a very original story-teller with a fine ear for the language. His approach to his characters is one of great tact, and he may justly be cited among the best of the younger Ukrainian prose writers."

Ostap Vishnya

(1889-1956)

Ostap Vishnya, a master of political satire and humourous stories, a major Ukrainian writer, was a connoisseur of Ukrainian folk humour, of the spoken word. Many of his characters and expressions have become a living part of the language.

Vishnya was born in Poltava Region. He graduated from a military medical school as an assistant doctor and entered Kiev University in 1917. This is when he began writing. His first satirical pieces were published in 1919. In 1921 he became a staff correspondent for *Izvestia* in the Ukraine.

Ostap Vishnya's collections of satirical sketches and humourous stories are very popular. "An Independent Hole", "The A-A Gun", "Beautiful Spring", "Farm Wisdom" and "Hunting Tails" are but several of these.

The writer has contributed much to Ukrainian culture

by his translations into Ukrainian of Gogol, Chekhov, Mark Twain, Jaroslav Hašek and other classics.

The works of Ostap Vishnya have been translated into the languages of many peoples of the USSR and foreign tongues.

Yuri Yanovsky

(1902-1954)

Yuri Yanovsky, the author of the world-famous novel "The Riders" (1935) was born in Yelisavetgrad (now Kirovograd). He studied at the Department of Electrical Engineering of Kiev Polytechnic Institute in 1922-1923. He published his first poem, "The Sea", at the age of twenty. He is the author of short stories, novels, scenarios, plays, articles and essays. His first book of prose, "The Mammoth's Tusks" was published in 1925, and his first book of verse, "The Beautiful Yut", in 1929. Yanovsky gained fame with his novel "The Riders", his play "Thinking About Britanka" and "Short Tales", a collection of prose vignettes.

Yanovsky was a war correspondent during the Second World War. He represented his paper, *Pravda Ukrainy,* at the Nuremberg trials.

His most popular post-war books are the novel "Peace", and "The New Book" and "Kiev Tales", two collections of short stories. The latter of these was awarded the State Prize.

Yuri Zbanatsky

(b. 1914)

During the Second World War dispatches from the enemy's rear often described the operations of the Shchors partisan detachment between the Desna and Dnieper rivers. Yuri Zbanatsky, a village teacher, was in command of this

detachment. After the war he became a well-known Ukrainian writer.

Zbanatsky was born in Chernigov Region. He was a teacher, and shortly before the war became editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Kolkhoznaya Zhizn* (Collective Farm Life.) This is when he began writing his first short plays and poems.

Yuri Zbanatsky was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union for courage and heroism in fighting against the nazi invaders. "The Storm", which appears in the present collection, is a page from the writer's life as a partisan.

After the war Zbanatsky began teaching at the Gorky Pedagogical Institute in Kiev. He headed a literary studio and began writing prose. "For Good", "The Forest Beauty", "Among Kind Men", "The Kuril Islands", are but some of his better known stories. The author was awarded the Nikolai Ostrovsky Prize for his short novel "The Only One".

Semyon Zhurakhovich (b. 1907)

Semyon Zhurakhovich was born near Poltava. He has been a journalist since 1928 and was a war correspondent during the years of the Second World War.

Zhurakhovich's first story, "Path of the Faithful", was published in 1948. He has published a series of collected short stories since then ("The New Road", "The Decisive Conversation", "They're All Hunting for Diamonds"). Zhurakhovich's novel, "Kiev Nights", which tells of the struggles of the Soviet people against the nazi occupationists is very popular. "The Hundredth Day of the War", which appears in the present collection, is about the tragedy of Babi Yar where hundreds of thousands of Jews, Russians and Ukrainians were executed or buried alive during the nazi occupation of Kiev.

The second story "The Sinner and the Righteous Woman", is taken from contemporary life.

Pavlo Zagrebelny

(b. 1924)

Pavlo Zagrebelny volunteered for front-line duty as soon as war broke out. He was wounded and captured and survived several death camps. In 1945 he was on the staff of the Soviet Military Mission in Western Germany. He enrolled in the Philology Department of Dnepropetrovsk University in 1946 and graduated in 1951. He has been Secretary of the Board of the Writers' Union of the Ukraine since 1965.

The war produced the impetus that made the twenty-year-old youth try his hand at writing. The author's first books were about his contemporaries. He has also written books for children. But his main theme is the war. "Thoughts About Immortality" is about the heroism of Ukrainian youths in the Second World War. His novels "Europe. 45" and "Europe. The West", two epics of the war, are based on extensive research and documents.

Though Zagrebelny has written in various genres (two novels, "A Day for the Future" and "Kind Devil", a play, "For and Against" and a scenario, "The Rockets Must Not Be Fired") he returns again and again to the short story as a means of expression. "The Teacher" is one of these.

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