DUEL

BORYS ANTONENKO-DAVYDOVYCH

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Also from *Lastivka Press*

New Guinea Impressions
West of Moscow
On The Fence

DUEL

Borys Antonenko-Davydovych

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INTRODUCTION

Borys Antonenko-Davydovych (1899-1984) belongs to that colorful group of post-revolutionary writers who resurrected Ukrainian literature. He was born in 1899 in Romny, Poltava Province, into the family of an engine-driver. Before the 1917 revolution he had already finished his secondary education, and later studied at Kiev University and the People's Institute of Education. In 1920, during the times of militant Communism, he took part in the battles against the anarchist Makhno. Shortly thereafter he headed the Education Department in Okhtyrka, later working in publishing houses and at the Kiev Cinema Plant.

Antonenko-Davydovych was not only a writer, but also a thorough expert of the Ukrainian language and a translator of books from Russian. Altogether he wrote 24 books. His better works have been reprinted in England, the USA and Australia, as well as being translated into English, Polish, Bulgarian and Russian. The author's early works included *Knights of the Absurd* (1924), *Dusty Silhouettes* (1925), *Took-Took* (1926), *Blue Strawflower* (1927), *Duel* (1928), *Throughout Ukraine* (1930), *The Wings of Flying Artem* (1933)

In 1934-37, during Russia's rout of Ukrainian culture, when 240 Ukrainian writers perished, Antonenko-Davydovych was sentenced to ten years hard labour in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia. He remained in exile for 21 years, and only returned to Kiev in 1956, after his rehabilitation.

He resumed writing once more: *Behind the Curtain* (1961), *Mother's Word* (1964), *Selected Works* (1967), *From Near and Far* (1969), *How We Speak* (1970).

However the early 1970s again saw the resumption of arrests, trials and the persecution of Ukrainian patriotism. One hundred and thirty-two writers, artists and scholars signed a protest letter to the regime against the renewed destruction of Ukrainian culture. Antonenko-Davydovych was one of the signatories. From then on his works stopped being published. The KGB began to make frequent searches of his home, confiscating letters, books and manuscripts, and a campaign of attacks was launched in the press.

In the last years of his life he was a sick, hounded man, blind in one eye. His wife, whom he had married in exile, spent periods in psychiatric hospitals until her death in 1982. And two years later, in May 1984, Borys Antonenko-Davydovych himself passed away, his memoirs having being earlier confiscated by the KGB.

Duel (titled *Smert'* in the Ukrainian original) brought the author fame and recognition for his courageous and talented work, but at the same time it brought even greater misery, persecution, and finally — exile. The novel was first published in 1927 in the Kiev magazine *Life and Revolution. Duel* looks at the life and activities of a Party organization during the period of militant Communism. The action takes place in a small provincial town, reminiscent of Okhtyrka, where the author worked in 1920-21. At the time young Borys was a member of the Ukrainian Communist Party, later liquidated in 1924 on orders from the Comintern. Thus the author was well acquainted with Party politics, the circumstances prevailing in the city and the countryside. *Duel* is interesting in that it has no fictional characters, some even retain their real names.

In those days the Party organization assumed control of all aspects of everyday life. The situation was quite tense — the city was surrounded by the hostile countryside, which had no desire to pay levies to the occupying Russian regime. Besides, insurgent bands were organized in the villages to fight the Soviet government.

The novel's central hero is Kost Horobenko, a former Ukrainian nationalist, who now plays an active role in Party life. He has crossed over to the Soviet side, accepted their platform, but his actions, his judgements of people and his thoughts reflect a sustained inconsistency, a constant struggle with his own conscience. He is forever tormented by doubts. The villages had been the base of Ukrainianism, but now he has to venture there with others to collect taxes, arrest and execute people for the slightest resistance. Most of his fellow Party members are newly-arrived Russians of Russified Ukrainians. Though he heads the local Education Department, he must perform many other odious Party duties, often armed.

With a sharp eye for detail, the author has presented us with a whole gallery of Party workers, exploring their mentality and actions. Through Horobenko's eyes we see that the Party treats not only the villages as enemy targets, attacking and wreaking bloody havoc upon them. In the towns they confiscate private libraries and

equipment which the Ukrainian intellectuals need to continue with their work.

And so throughout the book our hero, the upstanding Communist, is forever duelling with his alter ego, the Ukrainian nationalist.

Dmytro Chub

For life one pays only with blood,
Death can only be overcome with death.
Vasyl Ellan

I

Kost Horobenko examined his Party ticket, and this time the few familiar and ordinary words seemed much too expressive and significant:

Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik).

Kost thought limply: what nonsense — to print the word 'Russian' in Ukrainian . . . And yet actually it wasn't this which had caught his eye and indomitably prompted him to pull the pink book from his pocket and to stare at the first page.

The whole essence, its whole inviolable strength which had concentrated his attention over the past few months, was to be found, it seemed, in that quite superfluous word tacked onto the end, hiding inside parentheses, but which in reality was neither superfluous nor ordinary — (Bolshevik) . . .

'Bolshevik!' This was by no means the same thing as 'Communist'. 'Communist' was a new term, and Kost had become accustomed to it at once, even associating with it. But not with the word 'Bolshevik', that selfsame Bolshevik who, according to recent terminology had 'borne Communism from the north of Russia to Ukraine' on the tips of bayonets — no.

Kost lay his Party ticket on the table and looked about the room. It was quiet. Through an open window came the monotone twitter of some small ridiculous bird in the orchard. The sun was setting in the west somewhere behind the leaves of the trees, and its pale rays painted a grayish marble network on the wall. Scattered books, a pair of pants on his pillow, a revolver on the table — all this was mute and deaf . . . Nothing here could eavesdrop on Kost's thoughts, to whisper them later to the organization members in corners, behind his back. Kost calmly looked out the window into the orchard and said quietly to himself:

"I am a Bolshevik . . ."

He wanted to impress this on the very depths of his consciousness, but failed this time too. Kost became embarrassed and sat down, tired. A light ironical smile played on his lips. He felt uncomfortable. In the same way he had once deceived his parents, hiding from them his fail grade in dictation. What was the dif-

ference? Then it had been a fail grade, and now it was those two buildings which his unsuccessful father had once owned prior to public auction in this very same town, and that gymnasium which still remained standing on the corner of two streets in a park, but in which they now held pedagogical courses. It was these things which irritated his Communist conscience or, more simply, his soul, it was they which stopped him from calmly considering himself a Bolshevik, just like all the other members of the organization. It was these things.

Kost rested his elbow on the table and thought:

'Why the hell is all this plaguing me? Father was a petty bourgeois — that's true. It's a fact. What's more — he even kissed the hand of the synodical appointee, the auburn-haired Father Havrylo, and his sister, who had once been my blood aunt, was married a second time to a neophyte merchant — this is true too. All this is so. But father took the trouble to die a year before the Revolution and, heaven preserve him, did well to do so. I detest him because he was my father, and am thankful to him that he is no longer around. Now I have no one. All this is very true. I am not responsible for my parents. And anyway: some were destined to be heirs of their class and others — renegades. Let it be, according to their theory, that I'm petty-bourgeois intelligentsia! I put it a little differently — a renegade of the petty bourgeoisie. It's important how I see myself, not how someone else sees me. And I have no need for reproaching myself! Yes, I was a Ukrainian nationalist, I supported the head of the district branch of the National Alliance*; while a mustacheless youth straight out of the gymnasium, I spoke out at meetings in this town in 1917, crucifying myself at various gatherings for 'Mother Ukraine', calling to witness the dust-rotted memory of various Sirkos and Hordiyenkos. This is all true, and I'm not hiding it from anyone. That is all in the past, but now I'm a . . .'

Kost paused again, but strained and said aloud: "Bolshevik!"

But suddenly he remembered a folk tale from school or his childhood years, and he felt sad, wanting to laugh.

An alchemist had been seeking his philosophers' stone. he prayed to all the saints he knew, appealed to the Virgin Mary, and finally to Christ Himself to help him, but all were silent, like the ordinary

* Ukrainian National Alliance *(Natsional 'nyi Soiuz)* — an alliance of socialist parties opposed to the monarchist Hetmanite government in 1918 in Kiev.

stone of which this house was built. Then the alchemist damned them all and turned to the devil. Satan eagerly agreed to help, but with one proviso: 'You'll find what you're seeking. There's only one condition, my friend: don't think of polar bears for a week'. The poor alchemist, who probably hadn't once in his long life thought seriously about bears, let alone polar bears, could not rid himself of this annoying thought about polar bears for one minute that whole week.

Horobenko smiled and thought: 'Bolshevik — this is my polar bear, but what philosophers' stone am I seeking . . .?'

He replaced his Party card in his pocket, picked up his revolver, securely closed the window, and left the house.

This damned provincial town with its ridiculous dirty lanes, the shed in the marketplace, the clumsy pink merchants' homes, a town where everyone knew every trifle about each other and were thoroughly sick of each other, this town was a witness. It knew everything. Here was the public hall. His father had stood here with the Tsar's portrait during a manifestation to mark the occasion of the taking of Peremyshl; here was the marketplace, beyond it, to the left, the street where Nadia had lived with her aunt . . .

Kost strode quickly across the soft dust of the marketplace. Now the market was dead. Half-destroyed stalls repugnantly projected their rotting rafters. These were the victims of the municipal department's fight with private enterprise. The stalls stank of human excrement and the long row of meat stalls resembled fallen horse skeletons.

In one corner, against the stone wall of a building, several women were sitting like accursed souls with their apples, further on was a peasant cart, to one side was a wall with a sign cut in two by a downpipe:

Sapozhnaya masterskaya Uezdso/besa.[1]

The downpipe had mercilessly divided the two parts of the Russian word, making the first part 'uezdso' feel orphaned and lonely, however the 'besa' seemed quite appropriate.[2] It had derisively jumped away from the downpipe, and pointing the tongue of its 'b' into the air, it laughed cruelly at the faithful townsfolk.

Among the market saleswomen, once merchants' wives and devil knows what else, this caused all kinds of uncertain rumours and

1. Cobbler's Workshop of the District Social Insurance.
2. Genitive case of the Russian *bes*, meaning devil.

sustained their thoughts about the Antichrist (the authorities were admitting themselves, that it was the devil's . . .).

Horobenko thought unexpectedly:

'Had it been written in Ukrainian, this wouldn't have happened, even if the downpipe had broken the sign in two.' However he immediately became ashamed of his own primitivism. And then he focused his attention on this wall not because of the 'besa', but because the Petliurites had executed someone here, and Horobenko smiled to himself:

'Actually, looking at it logically, in the climate of those days, I too should have been executed, and it's very strange that this didn't happen . . . True, I wasn't in the army, I carried out political intrigues quietly, so to speak, but still . . .'

Horobenko crossed the wide paved main street and ascended the stairs of a front entrance. Previously there had been a bank here, where the father of a friend of his from the gymnasium had worked, now this was a workers club. Because of a lack of space in the District Party Committee offices, the organization's general meetings were usually held here.

Yellowed garlands of pine, paper flags, the leaders' portraits hung sloppily on the walls, posters dirtied by flies and someone's fingers, an untuned piano on which someone was forever hammering out the *International* — all this looked chilly and uninviting. There was no mark of caring hands here, the place lacked spirit. People appeared here suddenly. In a noisy crowd they filled the hall, bringing with them the smell of their skin, tar, grease, makhorka tobacco, even the dust of country roads, and then chairs were scattered about, the floor became littered with cigarette butts and the room filled with a pall of thick bluish smoke. But when the people left, the room filled with quiet, solitude and sadness, like a burnt ruin.

The general meeting had not yet begun. Party members were filling the hall and drifted into the corners in groups.

Slavina flew up to Horobenko. Her short hair did not suit her face of indistinct age, and he was quite annoyed by the ring on her finger.

"Comrade Harabyenko. Comrade Harabyenko."

She grabbed his shirt button with her bony fingers and began to twirl it mercilessly.

"Where have you been hiding? I really must talk to you."

Her Russian, with a false Moscow accent, immediately fell

several tones and lapsed into whispers. Imperceptibly she dragged Horobenko off into a far corner.

"You know . . . This is impossible . . .! This undermines our authority. Firsov was drunk when he spoke at the teachers' meeting yesterday . . .! This must be included in the order of the day, without fail . . . If only you knew how he . . ."

Horobenko wanted to get rid of her somehow. This chief of socialist education really was far too tiresome. He moved back his cap and replied languidly:

"These are trifles, Comrade Slavina; now isn't the time for them . . ."

But Slavina was already twirling the button with both hands and hastily rustled away with her words:

"What do you mean, trifles! This compromises us all . . . This disgraces the whole Party . . . And do you know that this same Firsov . . ."

Horobenko looked impatiently into Slavina's eyes. He could see straight through this former teacher: she was seeking support among the intelligentsia . . .

He felt uncomfortable again — for Slavina wouldn't have gone to Horban or Druzhynin to whisper in their ears, she directed her 'Comrade Harabyenko, Comrade Harabyenko' at him. How repugnant this was! He looked at her thin bloodless lips and suddenly thought: 'Those rumors are probably true — that Slavina is the illegitimate daughter of some Tambov bishop . . .'

"Comrade Harabyenko! (Slavina stressed the name) We really must think this over together . . ."

Horobenko stopped her in a dry voice:

"This is just a squabble, comrade. Excuse me, I must go and talk to someone . . ."

Horobenko turned away sharply and went off to join some group. Slavina watched him go in surprise, but regained her composure and ran off to look for someone else . . .

Horobenko was stopped by Zavalny. As usual, he grabbed Horobenko's arms above the elbows and, fingering his muscles, shook him several times.

"Greetings, Horobenko. How's the 'language' going?"

Zavalny bared his teeth and his chin bristled with a smeared grin.

"You're sowing the seeds of Petliura nationalism, you canaille! Was it you who Ukrainianized Marx?" He pointed to the fresh posters printed in Ukrainian, and flashed his front gold tooth.

These clumsy witticisms came in a stream from Zavalny, but despite the grin Horobenko sensed in him alone a feeling of comradeship and goodwill. Zavalny was possibly the only fellow in the whole organization who read *The News** and leafed through Shevchenko† at home.

Horobenko answered him in Russian.

"Listen, why the hell hasn't your cultural section organized a club library yet?" It was Popelnachenko.

Popelnachenko was accustomed to speaking in a peremptory, commanding voice, and this somehow incromprehensibly harmonized with his still far too youthful facial features and lank figure. He was still a boy, but he was the pet of the organization.

Popelnachenko thrust his chin up into the air:

"What do you mean there are no books! The intelligentsia has these books — they should be requisitioned! Just get in touch with the Board of Instruction. Take them and be done with it!"

Popelnachenko could say that. He had been in the Party since 1918. Popelnachenko had grown up to the beatings of his tailor-father's iron ruler. He was a 'true proletarian'. And as for the intelligentsia, that wasn't said blindly. He understood everything. This bandy-legged Popynaka, as he was nicknamed in the organization, was a cunning type. He knew where to throw his punches. And yet he suffered from consumption. It had probably filled Popynaka's whole being with malice, weighing down the corners of his puffy lips. Why then was Popynaka loved in the organization? For loved he was! Popynaka was allowed everything.

Popelnachenko slid his hands deep into his trouser pockets and contemptuously screwed up his eyes with their long black eyelashes:

"You, brother, I'm telling you Horobenko, you're a full one-hundred-percent intellectual. You should be sent three times or so to deal with the kulak trash — then you'd be hardened, but the way you are now . . ."

Popynaka didn't finish. He stopped in a fit of coughing. The coughing resounded loudly throughout the room, striking the ceiling, and made everyone feel uncomfortable. People in the nearest groups became silent. Some woman came running up with a rusty mug of water.

* The News *(Visti)* — largest circulation Soviet Ukrainian newspaper of the day, published in Kiev.

† Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861) — One of the greatest Ukrainian poets.

Popelnachenko waved his arms about and angrily spat to one side. Horobenko studied the contorted Popelnachenko and a thought drifted through his head like a wisp of cigarette smoke:

'He's a cynic all the same . . .'

At the table the Party Committee secretary, Krycheyev, shouted out loudly:

"Comrades, please take your seats! Please . . ."

He hammered his fists against the plywood and then said in a calm monotone, as if he wasn't addressing a hall filled with Party members, but was talking somewhere to the left, into a corner:

"I propose we elect a chairman and a secretary . . ."

II

Horobenko hastily sorted a pile of stamped papers into some folders, stuffed some long sheets filled with writing into his briefcase, together with a piece of ration oat bread, and left his cultural section an hour early.

The Party members had already gathered before the Party Committee office, and stationed themselves on the sidewalk in a clumsy mass of motley clothes, footwear and faces.

Slavina could not hold back this time either. Her uncovered, cropped head atop a thin long neck could be seen from afar. Probably because of this thin, though nimble neck on which her head swivelled about in all directions from time to time, Slavina resembled a bare-necked chicken. As if on purpose, Slavina wore a low-cut beet-colored blouse. In this cut duelled Slavina's pretension for a decollette and Party decency. It was hard to tell which of them had won, but in any case the blouse put on show her whole ugly neck and gave the impression of something which had been plucked. With small chicken-like steps Slavina dashed in between the male figures and grabbed hold of Horobenko's briefcase. This immediately made Horobenko indignant and evoked his brutality. Devil knows, what a ridiculous habit — she always needed to twirl something! Slavina fingered the glistening lock of the briefcase and ceaselessly sowed short words in every direction that her small head turned. This was not even language, but a kind of rough verbal stenography. From her thin lips emerged scraps of words, without beginning, without end: Slavina ground them up somewhere inside her narrow throat, and only the husks were being

winnowed into the air, unpleasantly filling her interlocutor's ears with dust.

"It's very easy to organize a kindergarten here . . . But first we need the parents . . . A meeting . . . We can consider the plan and a joint discussion . . . You're free on Friday . . . Then there's also the Husynka Library . . . Our candidate, Andriychenko, is sitting there, but it's impossible. Her mimicry, and then, you know, her behaviour . . . Generally speaking, our women's section . . ." Slavina didn't finish. She grimaced, shook her head about, and tugged deliriously at a corner of the briefcase.

"I don't know, I just don't know what all this will lead to . . . We need to think about it . . ."

However Horobenko knew only too well that Slavina detested the women's section as a whole, and each female Party member in particular. She was principally against a women's section. The women's section in turn didn't like Slavina, yet wanted to load her down with work, which Slavina avoided and shirked. Slavina took Horobenko aside a few steps and craned her neck to his ears.

"And how do you like this? I have to be off to a meeting now, each of us is overloaded with work, and here you go. Please. A *subotnyk!** This is simply histrionics. Marching about the city . . . Fun — my oath . . .!" Horobenko looked hopelessly at Slavina. She stuck to people like cobbler's pitch. Indeed, she poisoned Party life. It was hard to get rid of her.

His tired eyes fell on her thin neck, and he suddenly thought:

'If only one could grab this neck in one's fist, this stalk of dough, and slowly squeeze it with one's fingers . . .!' He was even amused: Slavina would probably begin to scream then, and would expire like a rubber devil puppet at the market . . .

Nearby a hoarse sergeant-major's voice barked:

"Fa-a-all i-in . . ."

This was the cavalry squadron commander, Nestorenko. He was appointed to take charge of the *subotnyk,* and laced up with needed and unneeded straps, his black field jacket inflated its well-built chest on the side-walk.

The first to come out onto the pavement were the Party Committee secretary, Krycheyev, and the responsible officials. They formed up in a line, and were followed by the gray Party masses, who reluctantly left the sidewalk. This hurried following of orders by Krycheyev and the responsible officials seemed domonstrative

* A day of voluntary labour on community projects.

and forced. 'Republican psuedosimplicity!' Horobenko thought.

From the sidewalk the indispensible street urchins opened their mouths, and the slightly startled townsfolk watched warily from their windows.

". . . i-ick a-arch . . .!"

Up ahead the Party Committee flag with the golden star flapped wearily, and a hundred boots beat time on the pavement.

Someone in the rear began singing in an uncertain, low voice, but he was joined by the middle ranks, then the front rows picked up the tune and a semi-military, semi-youthful Russian song echoed through the streets:

. . . Into the kingdom of free-eedom
We'll carve a way with our chests . . .

They sang in unison, without dividing into parts, but assiduously tried to compensate for their lack of vocal nuance with shouts of especially significant words:

. . . Long did they keep us in chains.

The chief of the judicial section, the flippant Mysha Chernyshov, was dissatisfied. He had long since supported the idea of organizing the Party members into a choir, but his idea had yet to be given support. He rejoiced wickedly, when someone broke off on a high note, or the singers were thrown out of time.

"Smarten up there! One-two, one-two. . ." Nestorenko half looked around and critically examined the undisciplined Party ranks.

"Druzhynin — your step!"

The lanky Druzhynin, who was marching alongside Horobenko, turned his head angrily in Nestorenko's direction and looked away. Without a word he fell in step and once again under his leather cap a weary shadow settled on his face, together with a rough dry reverie. Throwing her heels to the sides, Slavina pattered ahead of them. Nestorenko ran to the front of the column and his forceful voice rang out once more:

"Last on the right, move up . . .!"

Druzhynin spat to the side and swore. He placed his old, worn filer stuffed with papers under his arm, rolled a cigarette of *makhorka,* and calmly puffed away on it.

Kost Horobenko studied his movements. This Druzhynin was one of the few who did not possess a briefcase. He stubbornly held onto his useless filer. Why? Slavina answered that very simply — he was in charge of the work section. And who didn't know that

platonic section . . .?

Kost Horobenko suddenly thought: which of them is the 'face' of our organization — Druzhynin or Nestorenko . . .?

The old zemstvo[1] tarantass rumbled past them, bearing the engineer and the contractor. These were the experts. They were the technical supervisors of the *subotnyk*. The engineer's pince-nez glistened over the Party ranks, but there was no change on his Chekhovian face. He said something to his driver and lit up a cigarette further up the road.

Horobenko looked for a long time in the direction of the tarantass's intermittent clatter.

What did he think of them, this 'last of the Mohicans'?

The street widened. They passed the last houses on the outskirts, but the merry crowd of boys did not desert the detachment. They ran on both sides of the street, catcalling, laughing, running right up to the ranks, and then scattering suddenly under Nestorenko's gaze.

Like tiresome flies, these boys teased Horobenko. In any case, Slavina was right: why these props . . .? Couldn't everyone have assembled at an agreed place, without this marching and singing? What use was that 'keep in line' and Nestorenko decked out in straps? What the devil was all this comedy in aid of? To amuse the children and give the petty bourgeoisie and excuse for ridicule . . .?

'Give the petty bourgeoisie an excuse for ridicule?' Horobenko caught himself out and deliberately began to judge himself.

'You still care about the petty bourgeoisie, you care what they will say? Own up — isn't it all the same to you? Or are you afraid of their jeers? Perhaps you want to justify yourself before them, right? After all, everyone you mixed with until recently, all of them were on the other side, all of them were — petty bourgeois. Wasn't Nadia like that? Didn't her merchant relatives still live in Moshchenka?' What did they think of him, and how would Nadia herself have regarded all this, had she still been alive? And Nadia was . . .!'

This began to resemble something more like self-torture, but there was something gratifying about it, something painfully pleasant, which justified, forgave and swept clean his littered soul, like a guest room before a holiday. And then hundreds of people, quite different from each other, became a kind of solid, fused mass,

1. An elective council responsible for the local administration of a provincial district in czarist Russia

so alien and distant to the whole provincial town with its old-fashioned merchants' houses.

He even felt overjoyed and lighthearted when the town finished and the vigorous scent of pines enveloped them.

The engineer and the contractor had long been standing near a pile of shovels beside several village carts, when the detachment arrived at the *subotnyk* site.

The engineer looked calmly over the top of his pince-nez, placed carelessly in the middle of his nose, and said phlegmatically to Nestorenko:

"It's important to build up the approach, the bridge can still hold out. I'd ask you to split up into parties; one lot will dig the clay, and then, I guess, we'll also need . . ."

Horobenko scrutinized the engineer. He walked among the carts with Nestorenko and languidly gave instructions. He was no longer the mysterious sphinx that he had been in the tarantass. It was immediately evident that this 'specialist' considered all this work, this whole *subotnyk*, a waste of time. Under different circumstances the contractor and several labourers would have filled in the road, repaired the bridge, or perhaps even have built a new one (surely the zemstvo would have allocated the necessary funds?) — and everything would have been done. The engineer would only have inspected the completed job, he would have said a routine thing or two to the contractor, and in the evening would have settled down to a game of preference with the doctor and the magistrate. But now: well, he had to cater to the whims of these grown children and to play the fool together with them. For him, an old liberal, even a populist, this was difficult, it was moral torment, but there was nothing he could do. This "way of the cross" had to be traversed. This was the fate of the Russian intelligentsia which had torn free of its folk roots. This path was painful and disgraceful, but it had its end. The engineer knew only too well that those who were against private enterprise would not be able to hold out for long! Trade was always the driving force behind progress and culture — the Phoenicians, Greeks, Rome . . . The engineer was sure of the future, but now he spoke courteously, though dryly, with restraint.

Horobenko pitied these hundred or so people of whom roughly seventy believed in the *subotnyk* as a fetish of economic improvement, and were prepared to forget their undernourishment and exhaustion. The engineer's apathy profaned the forceful swing of everyone's arms. It seemed as if the engineer was sweeping soil

from the shovels with his indifferent gaze through that sceptical horn-rimmed pince-nez, quashing the force of the blows, and turning this more into a children's game at workers. One wanted to throw the engineer the hell out of here, and with him his shadow — the contractor. Druzhynin spat into his palms, grabbed the shovel handle and, as if replying to Horobenko's thoughts, growled:

"Brought all kinds of chiefs here! They need to plan. Tell me, please — what great deal is this! Can't we shovel earth ourselves . . .?"

Meanwhile the engineer moved silently among the Party members and bored into their backs with his eyes. Horobenko dug deeply with his shovel, when he heard the engineer behind him tap a cigarette against his silver case and strike his lighter.

"Move away please, you're in my way!" Horobenko told him curtly and forcefully tossed the shovelful of earth away from himself.

The engineer looked around in surprise and, politely excusing himself, continued on his way. Horobenko said angrily in his direction:

"Loafing about here . . .!" and briskly set to work.

It was already growing dark, but the results of the *subotnyk* were still quite miserable. The approach to the bridge was levelled out on only one side, while on the other the earth lay in fresh slabs and just before the bridge, where its rotting boards began, a large hole opened its black maw. It was obvious that even the essential things would not be completed that day, and the engineer was probably rejoicing already, but the Party members were keen to finish the work. Assiduously they shovelled earth and brought it up to the bridge. Druzhynin deftly reinforced the slope, and only Nestorenko, District Supply Commissar Drobot and the organization instructor stood by the side of the road arguing about something.

Druzhynin took off his cap, wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, and rested on his shovel for a minute to catch his breath. He looked at Nestorenko's company and set to work again.

"No, first you recast man for me, that's what," he continued at Zavalny, "because every man is scum in his own way. Understand that?"

"Starting up your old tune again, 'god-seeker'," Zavalny bared his teeth: "You're philosophizing too much!"

"I'll tell you straight, brother, that until you make a man of each

of our Party no-hopers, a man, you understand, nothing will come of all this. Just take a look at them, brother," he nodded towards Nestorenko: " 'One-two!' he can do, but when it comes to pick and shovel — excuse me? But I ask you, what the hell do we need an N.C.O. for? Eh . . .!"

Druzhynin swore and angrily waved his shovel about. Horobenko wanted to come closer to Druzhynin and talk with him. There was something amiable about his thin, hairless, deeply-wrinkled face. Looking at Druzhynin's whiskers and beard one involuntarily recalled Ivanov's geography: 'In the North the vegetation is more exiguous, with only patches of moss and lichen . . .' Druzhynin had a few yellowish hairs above his mouth and something wiry protruded from his chin in places, but what a good face this Druzhynin had! His face beamed with something of hard work and grief, something truly working-class — 'from the workbench'.

The head of the woodworkers, Frolov, sat by the side of the ditch, his vest unbuttoned. He was sweating from the work he had done, and languidly wiped the sweat from his bald patch with a muddy hand. His movements caused the thick silver-plated watch chain on his vest to dangle heavily and tinkle with cheap trinkets. Stepping over shovels and fresh slabs of earth, Mrs Frolov sumptuously walked past the scattered figures of the Party members.

"Semyon Petrovych, I've been looking for you everywhere. I was barely able to catch up to you all. Have a bite to eat . . ."

Mrs Frolov untied a small bundle of patties and lay it before her husband.

"My, it's so humid . . .! Why didn't you mention you had a *subotnyk* today?"

Frolov rubbed the wet patches under his arms, feebly looked about him, and sighed. He was a little ashamed of the patties in front of the hungry Party members and hesitated whether he should eat. Mrs Frolov realized this. She leaned over to her husband and whispered tenderly:

"That's all right, Senia. You take them, and then pretend you're going to relieve yourself in the rushes — and you can eat them there . . ."

Frolov grumbled angrily:

"All right, then. Go home. There's no need to be here . . .!"

Mrs Frolov hastened to her feet and whispered in parting:

"The darker ones are with meat, the others with cabbage . . ."

Slavina eyed Mrs Frolov askance and, seeing the patties, said sorrowfully, as if to herself, but for all to hear:

"Amazing how stubbornly our comrades sometimes retain bourgeois habits . . .!"

Frolov did not hear her words. Still, he looked suspiciously at Slavina, drove his shovel into the ground and sneaked off into the rushes.

It was already completely dark. Someone's belated wheels were rattling across the road beyond the Vorskla River and a light mist rose over the water.

Slavina was standing beside Druzhynin, rearranging the plait on her head. She was eager to enter into an argument.

"Undoubtedly, Comrade Zavalny. We must educate! Teach! And secondly, is this admissible: our 'rep' is terribly fond of smoked ribs (he makes entries in the protocol each day), and the likes of Comrade Nestorenko have three pairs of boots each — all this when we must sacrifice everything. We lunch in the Communist dining-hall, we . . ."

Druzhynin wordlessly struck the slope of the approach with his shovel.

Horobenko stopped work and stretched deliciously. An unwonted, pleasant, physical weariness spread through his body. The first stars lit up the sky. Distant, fresh, dreamy stars. The same stars which had shone before the Revolution, during the Revolution, and which would shine forever after. Forever? Yes, yes — forever. There were many things which were beautifully independent of everything. Would Druzhynin have been any worse, had he been a non-Party man?

Horobenko discounted this sudden, tempting question and said to himself:

"No, it's very good that he's in the Party. He is a real, natural Party member."

Horobenko lay the shovel down and squatted on the spurge.

"Why the hell haven't they thrown Slavina out of the Party yet, though?"

From beyond the bridge came Nestorenko's booming voice:

"As you were! Fall in, in two lines . . .!"

III

It was morning. The sun boldly cut the green leafy mass with its golden swords, embroidering a fantastic tapestry on the wall. Kost Horobenko came up to the veranda parapet and took a deep breath of fresh air.

The morning was celebrating its triumph. Its azure forehead was not darkened by a single cloud. It had effortlessly tossed the night over the horizon and made its way victoriously towards day. Thousands of birds sang triumphal cantatas to it; the neglected dahlias, probably planted by the previous owners, and those common red irises in the orchard near the veranda seemed spruced up specially for today — washed, preened, a little saddened by their eternal silence, greeting the victor with gentle smiles.

And the morning marched on. Its invisible legions dressed in golden armor rushed forward unchecked, and before their countless phalanges the last prince of night — the pale, barely-noticeable moon — fled, bent double, across the heavenly expanses.

Horobenko leaned against a post gray with peeling paint and unbuttoned his collar. The morning freshness pleasantly penetrated his languid body, but the sunbeams had already overcome the last hurdles and burst through the damp leaves, their passionate breath trembling on Horobenko's chest. The sun inundated the veranda, and only a sorrowful piece of shade remained in one corner near the eaves, almost as if a memory of someone's hopeless grief. Horobenko peered into this shade and found it dear to him. The intoxicated sunny joy and the lonely sorrow of the shade were related, they complemented one another like true brothers.

During the night Nadia had visited him in his dreams. The same Nadia who had once been, the Nadia who could not now be . . . Why?

Horobenko knew very well why, but he asked himself on purpose and answered frankly:

"Because back then she was simply Nadia, she was my fiancee (though this was not mentioned officially), but now she would have been a 'bourgeois', 'ballast', non-Party scum . . ."

Horobenko had said that on purpose too. This crudity contained a kind of sheer pleasure. But it was so. There was no need now to lie to the sun, the dahlias, or to himself. Perhaps Nadia would have understood this too had she been a reality, instead of a nice dream, but then . . . there was much beauty in things which were no more

and could never be: in winter there would be no dahlias and no irises, but in one's memory they would be better than hothouse chrysanthemums; in a freezing gloomy snowstorm one easily recalled a clear, sunny spring morning . . . Nadia had died, died only physically, and when she occasionally appeared in his dreams, she would simply be Nadia, 'pre-Revolutionary' Nadia.

The janitor's wife, Paraska Fedotovna, came out onto the veranda with a trivet and a kettle. The Revolution had left its mark on her life first and foremost by the fact that the Housing Committee for the Poor had resettled her family from their kennel into a former aristocrat's study. She lived next door to Horobenko and was pleased with her quiet neighbour. Sometimes she even felt sorry for this taciturn 'commissar': 'he's a little queer: others have their own outgate, they celebrate Communist Easter secretly in the old way with roast pig, cheese *paska** and spirits, but this one . . .'

Paraska Fedotovna greeted him meekly, stood the trivet on the cement floor and floated off down the steps to collect some twigs in the orchard, returning to the veranda to light the fire. It was safer here: one could leave for a minute and no one would steal the kettle; besides no one would see, and pester her for some boiling water.

Horobenko looked at Paraska Fedotovna's plump figure and thought:

'It's strange: in all my time in the Party I haven't yet been drawn to a woman. And it's not at all because of Nadia . . .'

When the lively fiery tongues began to jump about under the kettle, assiduously licking its dirty black bottom, Paraska Fedotovna wiped her hands on her skirt and turned to Horobenko:

"Warming yourself in the sun? It really is beautiful . . . Perhaps you'd like a glass of tea? I'll just brown some sugar . . . You know the sort of tea you get now . . .!" Paraska Fedotovna said, sighing. "Before, you could go down to the store, get Vysotsky's Prime Quality, and buy some lemon on the way at Pankratov's . . ."

Paraska Fedotovna grumbled away delightedly, and meanwhile the kettle began to boil over, and the fire hissed angrily from its first splashes.

"Yes, please drop by and pour yourself a glass . . . it's all the same to me, but you, a bachelor, how can you go off to work like that . . ."

Paraska Fedotovna liked to chatter away like this with the strange

* Easter cake.

'commissar', she wasn't even averse to flirting a little (this wasn't damned Mytka for you, who had beaten her for fifteen years while under the influence, but was now unable to satisfy the old wench's appetite). Paraska Fedotovna winked slyly at Horobenko and went back inside the house.

Horobenko returned to his room, took off his shirt and began to wash himself. Splashing in all directions, he threw cold water onto his neck and chest, and whether it was because of the water or his movements — his pensiveness vanished without a trace and his body filled with energy and vigor. Drying himself with a coarse towel, Horobenko paused for a moment to look at his fairly well developed muscles, and for some reason suddenly thought: 'It'll be a pity, anyway, when I'm killed and this supple healthy body turns into abhorrent cracklings.'

Horobenko ate a slice of stale oat bread with some oil, but didn't drop in to Paraska Fedotovna's for some tea.

The sun was already quite high and it was becoming humid outside when Horobenko emerged from his alley into the wide street which led straight to the trade-union cultural section. There were already quite a few people heading the opposite way: this was the time when people returned from the market. Horobenko spied plump Mrs Frolov, loaded down with a heavy basket. This was the wife of the head of the woodworkers. A chicken's head and carrot tops protruded from her basket. Mrs Frolov moved along sumptuously, pleased with herself.

Horobenko felt bad. How ridiculous this was: they fought against markets, and at the same time the wives of Communists went there to buy things, and hadn't even he himself gone there to buy some makhorka tobacco? And others went too. The collective farm had demolished the meat stalls, so now the butchers lay the meat out straight on the ground. What was better? The day before the militia had dispersed the market, and now the produce had tripled in price . . .

But the market survived, the same as it had been before the Revolution, becoming even livelier and more colorful. It was the final hope and joy for many. What would Mrs Frolov be left with if the market really did disappear?

Frolov's wife had already opened the gate and entered her yard, but at that moment her shrill, irate voice rang out:

"How many times have I told you not to draw water from our well! I don't know, what the hell you think this is . . .!"

A red haired fellow barked back from the well in the yard and quickly made his way into the street with a full bucket.

". . . Choke on your well! My, what a clucky housewife . . ."

"I don't want to see this happening again! You think my husband will be fixing everything up after you . . .? We dug this well. You can dig as many as you like for yourself . . ."

Frolov's wife hastened to the well and, seeing a fresh puddle near the well joists, shook her head angrily.

"May you all die . . .!"

Frolov himself emerged from the orchard, dressed only in his vest. He ran his hand guiltily through his shorn hair and said to his wife:

"I told you — we need to tie a dog to the well. Otherwise you won't stop this . . ."

Druzhynin stood on the street corner and chatted with the red-haired fellow holding the bucket of water, waving his free arm about, pointing with his finger towards the Frolovs' yard.

Horobenko greeted them and quickened his step. Behind him he heard Druzhynin's soft words:

"I'll bring it up at the Party committee . . . There is scum everywhere, this can't all be rectified straight away . . ."

In the doorway of the trade-union building Horobenko was stopped by the Party committee clerk, Holtsev.

"Want to see something interesting?" Holtsev brought his long hooked nose to his ears, and screwing up an eye, said softly: "It's about you . . ."

Horobenko looked questioningly into Holtsev's colorless eye, peering craftily from under red eyebrows. Forcing a smile, the fellow hastened to explain:

"Your character reference from the Party committee to the guberniya . . . Let's step into your office." He lightly nudged Horobenko and they made their way to the second storey of the former spacious home of some merchant. What did Holtsev actually want? And why these visits of his, and that conversation about his supposed former job as printer for the Directory's* Ministry of Land Affairs, and all this friendliness and somewhat unnatural amiability. Horobenko looked askance at Holtsev's grimy merchant's pants and suddenly thought: 'He's a secret agent!

* The Directory of the Ukrainian National Republic — a revolutionary government which succeeded the monarchist regime in late 1918.

Been charged with watching me . . .' He felt disgusted, but was surprised: 'To operate so openly! They could have used someone else . . . couldn't they find anyone respectable . . .?'

Horobenko sat at his desk, unlocked the drawers and looked sharply at Holtsev . . . A peculiar cunning smile played on the fellow's face. Short wrinkles ran in thorns from the corners of his eyes, and his large, greasy lower lip protruded slightly forward. It seemed as if Holtsev had already made up this smile long ago, working out its every detail, and when needed he could slap it onto his face in a flash like a mask, removing it just as quickly. Holtsev waited a minute in silence, then bent over his briefcase and swiftly rummaged through his papers. Pulling out a sheet of bluish sugar paper, he grabbed the chair and moved closer to Horobenko. Screwing up one eye again and nudging Horobenko with his sharp elbow, he whispered quietly:

"Only, please, this is just between us . . . You must realize, of course, that this character reference is secret . . . But I thought to myself, why shouldn't I tell a friend of mine like Horobenko . . ." With his long, thin hand covered with black hairs Holtsev made an uncertain gesture and slapped the smile back on his face.

There was something repugnant in his intimacy, in his drawing up his chair and those unceremonious nudges. Horobenko moved away involuntarily and wanted to refuse point-blank to read the Party committee's reference, but looking at Holtsev, immediately became confused. Holtsev's smile constrained him, paralyzed his movements, and then settled on his head in a dense mass.

"Please . . ." Holtsev moved the form over to him. Still stunned, Horobenko looked at the careless, scattered lines and greedily ran his eyes over the form, as if it was something illicit.

There wasn't much there, but it was quite clear:

'As a Communist-Bolshevik (someone seemed to have underlined this second word almost deliberately and consciously) — he is unstable, on account of his previous membership of Ukrainian organizations, but as a cultural worker he can be used on the provincial level.'

With a certain effort Horobenko tore his eyes from the form and reddened a little. He was watched by Holtsev's silent dead smile.

IV

The hasty patter of Holtsev's feet on the wooden steps had long since cooled and disappeared, the typewriters had already been clattering away for an hour, clattering monotonously and much too tediously, but Horobenko remained sitting at his desk without making a move. A half-opened drawer with folders, a stamp, piles of paper and a packet of makhorka tobacco remained opened after Holtsev's departure. It was like a tentacle about to grab his very soul, dragging it into the yellow, ink-stained, scratched and pockmarked monstrosity — the old office desk with its torn green material.

Horobenko could not collect his thoughts for a long time. They flitted away in every direction like sparrows, and all he saw before him were the words, 'as a Communist-Bolshevik — he is unstable', and Holtsev's screwed up eye.

Horobenko lowered his hands, squeezed his interlocked fingers together till they cracked, and thought: 'This is probably Popelnachenko's doing . . .' But immediately he looked askance at his briefcase and decided: 'Isn't it all the same, after all! The main thing is that it has been stated, that someone has definitively and clearly said that which I was unable to say myself.'

And yet it was unpleasant and painful. And once more those two buildings owned by his father surfaced in his mind, and that Prosvita*, and the year 1917 . . . Horobenko grew annoyed. 'Unstable'. . .? Could he ever be stable to them? Could they forget this? They were like monks who in their frenzied fanaticism could never forget this, never — not until he lay in his grave. And then this Ukrainianism, what was it to them? They, for whom there was no Solonytsia, nor Berestechko, nor Poltava, nor even Kruty![1] For whom history was just an eternal class struggle . . . Ah, how doctrinaire they were . . .!

Horobenko ran his hand over his forehead and his eyes rested on Trotsky's pince-nez. So familiar and just as irksome as all portraits which existed in this world, the portrait seemed quite different to Horobenko now. It had assumed new features, and these features said a lot. An energetic beard, two deep wrinkles from the nose to

* Literally means "Enlightenment". A cultural and educational community organization existing in Ukraine from the mid 1800s to the late 1930s.

1. All were battles in which the Ukrainian forces were defeated.

the corners of the mouth and a serene, hard, distant gaze. The eyes were barely visible because of the pince-nez, and yet the gaze remained. People with such gazes saw far ahead through the present. They did not experience hesitation, they had no damned wavering to worry about, their perspectives were clear as day. They had their eternal formula. 'Existence determines consciousness . . .' This was their verity, this was the 'new testament' with which they were to take the world, replowing the whole earth, erasing all borders, mixing all nations into a single torrent, a black mass of trampled slaves which had broken its banks. Marx's *Das Kapital* . . . What was this? A Torah, a Bible, an Al-Koran or an Archimedian lever . . .? How strong they were, these people in pince-nez with distant gazes and the fanaticism of Islam!

Horobenko sat hunched up in his armchair, but it seemed that he wasn't sitting at all, that he was just hanging on a tiny bit, on the very edge near the armrest. The inkstand on the desk was more firmly placed than he in his armchair, even the penholder and nib beside the inkstand had more support than he. Everything around him, to the smallest trifle, was far too distinct, there was only a squashed intimacy sitting inside him. It had become so deeply entrenched inside him, that he seemed to feel his own skin, even the hair on it in some parts, and here there was a protruding finger. Was it his or someone else's . . .?

Horobenko stole another glance at the portrait, and then someone's mighty hand seemed to stroke his head and everything became quite clear:

'They're right . . . What are you? Perhaps it's only idle chatter, that "history — the struggle of classes"? No. They are still quite restrained. They are simply curiously soft towards you. You are unquestionably "unstable". Yes, yes. And why? Because of whom and what? Because of your ancestors who gave birth to the Kochubeys, the Halahans and Yuzefovyches,* or because of those kitsch Prosvita members, or is it simply because of the cherry orchards, the stars, darling flowers and that tinsel called "national separatism"?'

Ah, how ridiculous this was, that a nation could stand between him and the Party. A nation which had invented only the bandura

* Ukrainian traitors. Kochubey betrayed Mazepa to the Russian czar, Halahan helped the czarist army destroy the Zaporozhian Cossack Sich, and Yuzefovych was the actual author of the Ems Ukase, which forbade the use of the Ukrainian language in 1876.

and the *plakhta*![1] This really was nonsense. An anecdote.

The door burst open and the room filled with the chatter of wooden sandals. The Party committee courier opened his filer without saying a word, rummaged about in the papers and handed Horobenko a notice.

"They asked if you could make it as soon as possible."

Something creaked across the floor, there was a thud, and then a clatter down the passage. Horobenko watched the courier's gray shirt disappearing through the door and then read: 'Upon receiving this note, please come immediately to the district Party committee office.' The notice was ordinary, perhaps even stereotyped, however he immediately became worried for some reason. Perhaps he was afraid? No, no. He just felt a little uncomfortable, for there was some matter requiring his presence. Just his. From among the whole Party collective Horobenko was to become quite distinct for a while, enlarged, so to speak; he had to demonstrate himself before the intelligent but sharp eyes of Secretary Krycheyev and the Party leadership. This meant being internally at attention, knowing that Krycheyev's glasses before him were looking deeply, looking specially, looking at him. In any case, the very fact of the Party committee notice signified that there was a second reason. What was it? Good or bad? However, one shouldn't expect good news from the Party committee.

Horobenko hastened off to the Party committee office. Only people who wanted to find out about some misfortune as soon as possible so they could be rid of it, went about with such empty haste.

Here were the worn steps, the iron handrails of the former hotel, the passage, the posters, the offices of the organizational instructor and agitprop, another door, two fellows with rifles perched on the windowsill and husking sunflower seed, and the door to Krycheyev's office. For an instant which could not have been measured by a watch, only able to be fixed in a person's psyche, Horobenko paused at the door. Then he hastily pulled at the handle, more likely yanked at it sharply, and entered.

Krycheyev and Popelnachenko were hunched over a sheet of paper with tiny writing. Krycheyev didn't look up straight away, but when he did, he said carelessly: "Wait a minute," and returned

1. The bandura is a Ukrainian folk stringed instrument. The *plakhta* is an ancient waistline garment composed of two widths of woollen cloth sewn partly together and worn instead of a skirt.

to running his dry pen over the lines.

Horobenko came up to the desk with weary steps. He leaned on the desk with his hand, but then moved his hand away and pushed his cap back. Only now did he feel how tired he was. It was stuffy, he could hear his heart racing away under his shirt from all the walking and the stairs, and there was nowhere to rest his eyes on the endless monotone diagrams and permanent portraits which covered the gray walls here and there. The portraits and diagrams seemed to highlight his fatigue. He was quite exhausted. Perhaps one could become tired simply living? Of course one could. Then what was relaxation for . . .? But . . .

Horobenko caught himself, quickly moved away from the desk and sat down on the nearest chair. 'Why didn't I sit down straight away? Well, that's obvious: I was standing before the secretary — my superior. Whoever said "there is something subservient in the psyche of every Ukrainian", was right.'

Popelnachenko rose to his feet, while Krycheyev turned to Horobenko:

"This is what it's about, comrade. A group of the local Ukrainian intelligentsia has submitted a request to allow them to publish a non-Party journal. In Ukrainian, of course. Their deposition is over there . . ."

Horobenko moved his chair closer to the table.

"You must of course realize that we're not quite competent in these matters. Therefore — your thoughts, as a Ukrainian?"

Popelnachenko lit a cigarette and slid his thin, bony hands into the pockets of his yellow leather coat. Krycheyev moved the papers to one side, adjusted the pince-nez on the bridge of his nose and threw his head back against the armchair.

"Here then. We want your opinion."

Horobenko looked at Krycheyev's pince-nez and for some reason picked up the letter punch off the desk. He turned it around three times by the handle and replaced it in its place. And then it became hilariously obvious: they were listening. Great. But this was far too naive. Just too much. Could they really think that he did not realize what this was leading to. They simply wanted to make sure once more how true the statement on the form was: 'As a Communist-Bolshevik — he is unstable!' All right.

Kost Horobenko screwed up his forehead, folded his arms, and said calmly:

"In my opinion the request should be unequivocally refused."

Krycheyev raised his eyebrows, as if in surprise, and asked again:

"So you think it should be refused?"

"Definitely. Because any such journal would in fact be . . ."

Popelnachenko sarcastically slanted his pale lips and interjected:

"As for me — I'd let them go ahead. Let them print it."

Popelnachenko strode over to Horobenko and slapped him chummily on the shoulder:

"By God, you're an odd one, Horobenko! It's signed by all those who used to be in Prosvita, remember: Kovhaniuk, Prydorozhny, that long-haired agronomist, what's his name, Pedashenko or something? You have to support them! What the devil . . ."

Horobenko blushed, turned the punch around once more, but turning to Krycheyev, said firmly:

"If anyone has the desire to support legal Petliura nationalism — it's up to you. Personally, I abstain."

Cunningly screwing up his eyes, Popelnachenko looked at Horobenko and smiled. Krycheyev nodded his head as a sign that the official business was over, and bent over his papers once more.

"We'll take your thoughts into consideration, Comrade Horobenko. You are probably right."

Krycheyev turned over a page and picked up a pen.

His last words seemed like a dull echo of praise or simply justification, however Horobenko cut short all his feelings and sharply made for the door.

"All the best . . .!"

Resting his knee on a chair, Popelnachenko mockingly watched him leave.

V

On the chair right by the bed a small lamp flickered away, however it was impossible to read by its light. Kost Horobenko dropped the newspaper onto the floor and rubbed his strained, red eyes. The whole room was filled with an orphan-like ribbon of light — a miserable flame from the night-lamp — and the thick hairy silence seemed to hold its countless black hands together, pressing tightly around the flame. On the darkened, smoke-stained ceiling clung the neglected shadow of the chair, and the door glistened dully.

Horobenko turned over on the bed towards the night-lamp and adjusted the soiled pillow under his head. The lamp burned away quietly. Occasionally its flame would swing unexpectedly to one side, becoming nervous, beginning to dawdle, but then calmed down again. Horobenko looked at it and the small flame melted away the secretiveness and wariness he had fostered while in the Party, casting unexpected thoughts, peering into his very soul and provoking frankness.

Paraska Fedotovna suddenly cried out behind the wall, and then he heard the hoarse, drunken booming of her Mytka.

"Devil, satan, Communist, anarchist, it's all the same! They've twisted a fine one: revcom, prodcom, soviet, but action there's none. Understand: there used to be a Russia, what a Russia! And now it's tiny, very tiny. And I ask you, why? Tell me — why?!"

Paraska Fedotovna swore and burst into tears, wailing in a long howl. Then there was the clatter of a falling stool as Mytka probably tried to stand up, and then the crash of broken glass on the floor. He heard the sound of rustling and the rabid screams of Paraska Fedotovna.

Over these past few months Horobenko had grown used to these scenes. The clatter and shouts reached him through the wall, entered his ears, but proceeded no further. The night-lamp thickened Horobenko's solitude and lit up a hidden corner in the endless corridors of his soul. The last few days surfaced, together with that audience the day before yesterday at the Party committee office, and Popelnachenko's malicious, sarcastic smile. Horobenko stirred as if someone had placed something cold against his bare skin, and his chest ached with indignation. He felt even more hurt than at the time. He really had to do something. He had to put a decisive end to this. Just to think that some Popelnachenko, a mere kid, could actually allow himself such jokes! It was simple mockery! So what of it that he had been in Prosvita and that all these Kovhaniuks and Pedashenkos were seeking a legal means to vegetate? He'd like to spit on them all . . .!

Horobenko rolled over onto his back and put his hands under his head. And at that moment a treacherous recollection surfaced. This same Kovhaniuk had risked his own life by harboring Horobenko in his home when Denikin's men had been searching for him. And together with Pedashenko they had organized a branch of the National Alliance and arrested the district hetmanite village elder. And with Prydorozhny . . .

These annoying recollections were like drops of mercury, grabbing onto each other and growing into a large ball which drew closer and closer, moving aside the present day, painting the year before last in far too fantastic and admittedly beautiful, pleasant, dear pictures, paining him inside once more.

"Conscience . . .? Ha?"

Horobenko threw off the blanket and lowered his feet to the floor. For a minute or so he listened to the hubbub of inner voices, watched closely their struggle and . . . was even amazed.

Quietly, hedging about, a long familiar thought emerged from the nooks of his subconsciousness. Well yes: he had decided this a long time ago, only until now he wasn't able to voice it out loud:

'They must be killed . . . I must execute them, rather than kill them. And then, when their blood appears before my eyes, when this blood of executed rebels, kulaks, speculators, hostages and countless other categories which all have one common denominator — counter-revolution, when it falls at least once on my head, as they say, soiling my hands, then all this will come to an end. Then the Rubicon will have been crossed. Then I will be completely free. Then I can tell myself boldly and openly, without the slightest hesitation and doubt: I am a Bolshevik.' With trembling hands Horobenko hastily rolled a cigarette and paced about the room. An enormous curved shadow appeared on the wall and the silence and darkness gave way to the steps of bare feet. Horobenko greedily inhaled the first stream of smoke, and suddenly the room seemed to become lighter. The flame of the lamp jumped about in a frenzy, its yellow string seemed as if it would be cut any moment, however the thought remained firmly entrenched in his head and, like a mole, burrowed deeper.

'Yes, yes — a few drops of blood must fall on the ground. Only *it* will wash everything away. Then everything will be permitted and I can spit on everything. Just once! There in the village, among those traditional orchards and white houses, all those various "lovely flowers", in overalls and dust mixed with sweat, with soiled hands — I must execute them . . . It is important to do it at least once. And no one less (this is important) than an insurgent. Yes. That same stubborn peasant, who in the twilight of a Poltava grove has dreamed up an 'independent' Ukraine and pulled on a red pointed beret over his dishevelled dirty hair!'

Horobenko had been pacing about the room from corner to corner for a long time. Everything which had been an incom-

prehensible obstacle, had now become quite clear, almost planned out. Now he understood what had previously stopped him. Now there would be no wavering. Now he would simply have to make his way towards his goal. What had been born now, had to be realized, for it was growing constantly and demanded an outlet. Horobenko stopped in the middle of the room. It was stuffy. He went over to open the window and saw that it was already dawning outside. Through the serene branches of the trees he could see the gray blanket of sky. Horobenko opened the window with a rumble, and the first twitter of a bird drifted into the room. In the corner by the bed the alien, now unnecessary lamp was burning low. Horobenko extinguished it and, appeased, returned to bed.

VI

Kost Horobenko requisitioned all week long.

He dashed into the Board of Instruction nearly every morning for the warrants, ran across the road to the Department of Labor to pick up a mobilized cart and several porters, and then the operation itself began. The large awkward cart, which had previously carried flour, would stop unexpectedly before someone's front entrance. White from the flour and chalk, the porters lazily got down from the cart and made themselves comfortable on the steps for a smoke, while Horobenko came up to the door and knocked energetically three times.

A minute or two later the door was carefully opened by a worried owner's hand, and Horobenko decisively crossed the threshold and handed over the warrant.

"I have to requisition your piano. Please show me where it is . . ."

The owner's hands irresolutely took the order and, without reading it, the eyes stared dully at the smudged stamp and timidly crossed to Horobenko's face, the feet hesitating whether to make a move.

Holding his mouth tightly closed, Horobenko stared into the owner's eyes for a while, and then, shuffling from foot to foot, announced coldly:

"I've no time. People are waiting outside. Please, don't hold us up . . ."

He turned his head towards the street and shouted loudly:

"All right, comrades, ready there."

Waddling along on their strong legs, the porters entered the room phlegmatically, as if they were coming into a storeroom, went into the rooms, and filled them with an unusual din. Without waiting for the owner's reply, Horobenko strode off ahead of the porters into the chambers, rummaging about the rooms with his eyes, as he sought the piano.

Then the owner's figure came to its senses, seeming to recover its gift of speech and, stuttering, it fearfully began the usual verbal procrastination:

"Actually, this piano . . . You see, we don't have it for entertainment . . . My daughter is learning to play, she has a good ear . . . I myself work in the statbureau . . . I beg you, comrade, couldn't we somehow . . ."

These eternal dramatic preludes frightfully irritated Horobenko. He hurriedly broke off the owner's words:

"Read the warrant? It's settled. What's there to talk about!"

He rushed up to the piano first, clearing the way of chairs, coffee tables and armchairs, removed portraits and books from the piano as if he were at home, and moved the piano from its place, where it had rested these long serene years.

The room became filled with the faces of frightened, desperate members of the owner's family, but Horobenko tried not to look at them.

"All right, comrade, give me a hand . . . come in from the right there . . . Come on — together! Once more . . . Slower, slower! Careful . . ."

Horobenko heard a girl's fingers crack, wrung in helpless grief, sensed that the owner's lips attempted to utter something and yet did not dare, and meanwhile he helped the porters shift the piano from the room intently and assiduously, as if there was no one else in the place apart from them. The piano left its place unwillingly, humming angrily, running into chairs, the doorpost, as if pleading with them to hold it back, not to let it leave the house, and over its hollow funeral boom the air behind him was cut by the involuntary rolling sobs of a woman crying, feeble entreaties and muffled curses.

Prudently shifting aside furniture from the path of the porters, the owner's figure rushed ahead to open the front door properly, so the piano wouldn't be scratched and asked Horobenko something on the run. The owner's bowed legs and hunched back would not

believe that the piano was being removed for good, they tried to convince themselves that it was only being moved from place to place for some reason, that it would suffice to utter some word and everything would be settled, everything would return to normal. But the owner's lips could not find the right word. Very harsh, it swirled about in his head somewhere, unable to crystalize into a concrete form. For this reason the trembling lips mumbled some vague absurdity, and the arms fluttered about, to help these dirty clumsy visitors, if need be.

When the piano was being stowed on the cart and tied down with ropes, Horobenko usually turned to face the front door and, without looking anyone in the face, called out in a bloodless voice:

"If you have any complaints, you can contact the Board of Instruction or the RKI*. . ."

Then he said loudly to the carter:

"Let's go! Only take it easy there on the rocks," and he left.

He returned to his permanent job in the trade union office with a sure, firm step, but along the way he pictured the stupid, disconcerted physiognomy of the owner, the red tear-stained face of the daughter, the jabbering of the stout *mamasha* . . .

He tried to imagine in great detail the atmosphere in the house orphaned of its piano, painted the despair and grief of the people he had just left — and this gave him a kind of wicked satisfaction. He remembered those families who still somehow managed to have pianos and grand pianos, and planned further requisitions. He not only made use of the Board of Instruction's warrants, but pushed for new requisitions too. Through various means he obtained lists of registered and unregistered pianos, also raising the question of the requisition of private book collections, and loaded carts creaked towards the center of town for a whole week. Beautiful oak desks, books in expensive bindings, cupboards, black doleful pianos — all this was removed from imposing studies, cozy lounge rooms, and rattled away over the damaged pavement to some building with bare, pockmarked walls, inside which an invisible spider spun a dirty web of mute emptiness.

The pianos were transported immediately according to assignation — to the club, childrens home, schools; one concert grand piano somehow found its way into the library. Writing desks and cupboards also found refuge in various offices, departments

Worker-Peasant Inspection — an organ of state control.

and sections. But it was far worse with the books. They were unsystematically dumped on the floor of an empty room in the public hall and here, on the dirty boards, countless titles from various fields of knowledge, science and art found a long resting place. In thick layers they spread the breadth and length of the room, the lower layers becoming covered in decaying dust, while new layers continued to rise above them.

And thus, day by day, the room became more and more like an uncovered common grave.

In these four walls with their large dirty stains from the damp, the serenity banished from life was buried with the books. Smells innate to individual families and people, the monotony and unconcern of district homes where people read *The Southern Land* by the samovar, subscribed to *Niva* and respected both Pushkin and Gogol, the dessicated thoughts (just like a herbarium collection) of demure studies, Maupassant's delicacies belonging to former gymnasium girls — this was all picked up by the flood after the dams and weirs were broken one stormy night, and all had been washed up here.

It seemed everyone had lost faith in books. None of the Party members or the plebeians came here, no one leafed through the books. More than half of them could have been pilfered, taken home in sacks, but no one was willing.

Even the library officials, despite an order, came only once and took a few books for appearances sake.

Only Kost Horobenko entered this room, sitting among the paper cadavers like an undertaker for hours on end.

Like the family estate of a former landlord, these books fascinated Horobenko. When he entered here, he first cautiously listened by the door to see if anyone was following him, then slowly closed the door, locked it, and then waded into the thick of the books. He picked up individual volumes, enormously thick collections of journals, and leafed through them. Occasionally he would stop at some chance page which had suddenly caught his attention for some unknown reason, and began to read. He read for a long time, as if by inertia, his eyes passing over page after page, until the twilight thickened in the room and his eyes became tired. Then he moved aside what he had read and looked at magazine illustrations.

Recollections floated from the old, yellowed pages of *Rodina, Around the World* and *Niva,* stained here and there with coffee, all so familiar, from his childhood. They were associated with

countless days, so snug and fragrant. These magazines were like a diary. Naive, a little foolish, but so simple, so close, so dear, like all that which had been, and which would never, never return. His deceased father had looked at these same pictures, so had his mother, who was still alive somewhere, and he had looked at them too. Looked at them when the swing of life was measured by the gymnasium timetable, when life ran along confidently, untroubled and joyous, like a sledge after the first snow . . .

Horobenko looked through the magazines until it was quite late, and amid the dust of the books, quietly, without remorse, without self-reproach, his childhood memories festered.

As he left the room one evening he remembered with horror that sooner or later the books would disappear. The time would come, and they would be dragged off to libraries, given away to schools, pilfered — would anything survive this 'general ruin', this gigantic invisible plow stubbornly plowing the last vestiges of the past . . .!

And he grieved over the books. They were the last 'material evidence' which had been carried like splinters through the froth, the ledges and waves of the rapids of the revolution. They alone could secretly tell so much, inside the four walls of this sullen, damp room! They alone . . .

Subconsciously Horobenko wanted to hold onto these books in the public hall for as long as possible. He reminded no one of them, diligently bringing more and more new tomes to this pagan temple.

The day before yesterday he had hung his own lock on the door, as well as propping the door up with a bench today.

VII

It was already growing dark when Horobenko returned home. He quickly removed his dirty boots, hurled them into a corner, and was about to stretch out on his bed, when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in. Who's there?"

The door was quietly opened by Paraska Fedotovna, and someone's gray head appeared behind her from the evening twilight.

"Someone here to see you," and she again disappeared behind the door to allow the gray head to enter the room. "Please, he's at home . . ."

Kost Horobenko threw on his field jacket and stepped towards the door.

"May I? Thank you . . . Allow me, Konstiantyn Petrovych, I have a request . . . Recognize me? I've come to see you about a matter . . ."

Kost didn't recognize him straight away. With his gray shaggy hair, with one cheek bandaged in a handkerchief, and, finally, all hunched forward, much too shabby, almost like a beggar — there was no way he could have recognized him.

Kost moved a stool up for him and stole a look into his face.

"Sit down, please."

"Thank you, thank you . . ." His back bent even more and it looked as if his arms would fall off at any moment, his head would roll off somewhere, and his feet dawdled fearfully in one spot when he plonked down on the stool, working his old coat under himself. "I've become ill, you know: the teeth and liver . . . Excuse me, Konstiantyn Petrovych, that I . . ."

Horobenko became suspiciously wary. Why had this former merchant come, the brother of that neophyte merchant who kept his blood aunt? He was a neophyte too, and obviously just as much a scumbag.

"Well then, Konstiantyn Petrovych, there's one matter here, but . . ."

Horobenko was unpleasantly surprised by this respectful use of patronymic. Earlier, when he had been a gymnasium student, he had met this fellow only once a year at his aunt's name-day party; this merchant would exchange two or three words with him out of kindness, calling him only 'Kostyk'. Now he was wheedling for something . . . And Horobenko became even more wary. With concealed disgust he looked at the tattered coat, quite unneeded in summer, at the fellow's contorted fingers, and said dryly:

"Please, I'm listening."

"You still speak Ukrainian . . . I remember once when you recited Shevchenko at Varvara Mykolayivna's . . . *The Rapids Roar,* or something like that . . . Ha-he . . ." The old man laughed prudently with a false petty chuckle, and this made Horobenko quite angry. This family familiarity and all these reminiscences had to be stopped. He sharply interrupted the chuckling.

"Forget about that. And Varvara Mykolayivna has nothing to do with this. What is it you want from me?"

Horobenko buried his spread-out fingers in his hair and looked

the old man straight in the face. But the old fellow procrastinated. Using every means, he tried to delay that most important thing which had brought him here to the place of the accursed Bolshevik, who had once been an ordinary, meek gymnasium student.

The old man wanted to do some verbal spadework, to soften the Communist's leather heart, to display all the holes of his bounty, to prove that he was no longer a merchant, but a proletarian like everyone else, trying to strum on family strings; other commissars helped their relatives evade all kinds of requisitions and the installation of new tennants. The old man fearfully swallowed the last warble of his chuckle and wriggled about on the stool. Then with guilt and humiliation, like a dog before the sting of its master's whip, he stretched a gentle smile across his wrinkled face:

"Forgive me, forgive me, Konstiantyn Petrovych . . . It just somehow happened to slip out — the past came to mind, you know . . . It all seems so recent . . . your auntie, your father . . ."

From the table near the window came Horobenko's rough impatient voice:

"I haven't time to listen to you for long, get to the point."

The old fellow became completely confused and in despair suddenly proceeded to the essence of his visit, without beating about the bush any more and making allusions.

Bending over the table, Horobenko impatiently watched the bandaged cheek from over his hand. The old man was already gesticulating with his hands, babbling away about the all too familiar and repugnant problem with a piano.

Aha, the Board of Instruction had requisitioned his piano? Great. That's the way it should be. Understandably, he wanted the piano returned. His Olia had once wanted to enter the conservatory . . . Sure, sure . . . He was asking Kost, actually that sweet 'Konstiantyn Petrovych', to intercede on his behalf before the Board of Instruction . . . He was a Communist and, though distantly related, still a relation. He begged that Kost take pity on him — this piano was his last solace. Some of their things had been confiscated, others they had to sell to survive, but the piano — Olichka played so beautifully . . . The old man's voice trembled and wheezed pathetically; if it hadn't been for the twilight which had ensnared the room, Kost would probably have seen the tears in his eyes.

For a moment something akin to pity stirred in Horobenko's

chest, but immediately it died away and was replaced by an even greater indignation. He rose to his feet, placed his hand on the table and announced categorically:

"It's no use telling me all this. They were right to take the piano away from you. It couldn't have been any other way. I would have done the same, had I been in their shoes."

The old fellow flinched on the stool and hastily, as fast as his bowed feeble legs would allow him, rose to his feet.

"Konstiantyn Petrovych! I beg you! Please . . .! Forgive me . . ."

That last 'forgive me' made Kost redden. 'Forgive me'? For what? That the scum had made a fortune before? Wandering from market to market in all kinds of Nizhni Novgorods, Kazans and Kharkivs to fleece someone for an extra rouble! Perhaps 'forgive me' for that haughty aunt who grew a double chin on that neophyte's profits? Or for his humiliated crawler of a father, who secretly dreamed of equalling his sister in wealth? 'Forgive me' for this?

Horobenko slid his hands into his trouser pockets and stood with his bare feet apart.

"Citizen Poltavsky," he purposely avoided using his name and patronymic, saying 'citizen' slowly and with emphasis, "do you really think that I will defend the bourgeoisie, even if they happen to be relatives of my father?"

"What 'bourgeoisie'! You can see for yourself what it's like for us now . . ." The old fellow caught himself and slipped a tearful note in his voice:

"Konstiantyn Petrovych, help us out . . ."

"I'm telling you firmly, this can never be. Understand? I'm a Communist! Didn't you know that . . .?"

The old man moved forward and stretched his hands out towards Horobenko.

"I understand, of course . . . You're certain . . . Of your ideals, so to speak . . . But . . ."

The old man choked, slurped at the air with his nose, and quickly slipped his hand into his pocket, feeling his way there with his trembling fingers, along the coat seam. Horobenko shuddered and took a step back in amazement. 'Wants to give me some money?! A bribe . . .?'

He almost shouted:

"Listen, leave my apartment please. And I'll ask you this once to

stop these visits. If you want to talk, there's the office . . ."

The old man pulled out a dirty handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his tearful eyes with it. Then silently, thudding loudly with his old shoes across the floor, he left the room, hunched up.

Before he had reached the door something creaked behind the door and there was a rustle. That was Paraska Fedotovna hurrying to her room after having eavesdropped on their conversation by the door with baited breath.

VIII

The Board of Instruction secretary bent over the director's chair far too courteously and lay the minutes on the desk. He did this very quietly and cautiously, as if fearing that the minutes might be scattered like a house of cards.

"Please, Ivan Yosypovych . . . This is all the pedagogical council meeting. You'll have to forgive me — they're still in Russian, but you know . . ."

The secretary's voice took on an intimate tone and dropped to a whisper: "This pedagogical technical institute of ours — is really . . . It'll have to be taken in hand. All the old element has remained, the specialists . . ." The secretary spread his hands apart and grimaced.

Ivan Radchenko began to leaf through the minutes untidily, oblivious to the secretary's efforts. He raced over the lines with his screwed-up short-sighted eyes, and with each page loud remarks left his large mouth:

". . . Humbug . . .! How can they discuss 'the material standing of the pedagogues' at a meeting of the pedagogical council?! . . . And here they go again . . . And what's this . . .? What rubbish is this?!"

Radchenko's voice made an unpleasant crackle and filled the room, as if someone was splitting dry pine logs in half.

Radchenko threw the last minutes to one side and picked up a pencil; then he suddenly struck his fist against the desk, and without turning around, asked the secretary:

"Yeah . . . I nearly forgot. What is the language of instruction in the technical institute?"

The secretary shuffled from foot to foot and reverently picked up

the minutes.

"You see, Ivan Yosypovych, it's not yet quite normalized. There is no definite regulation. Even when Comrade Kudriavtsev was director here, I told him that Khanov had to be removed . . . He isn't the right man for the job, and besides . . ."

Radchenko interrupted him rudely:

"I'm asking you what language they're teaching in?" and amazed, he looked at the secretary with his watery gray eyes. The secretary broke off in mid-sentence, but immediately regained his composure and said in a hushed voice:

"Some of the pegagogues lecture in Ukrainian, the rest still in Russian."

Radchenko grabbed the telephone receiver and barked at the secretary:

"Get an order out: from the new academic year all pedagogues are to teach in Ukrainian before lunch, and after lunch — in Russian . . . Clear? That's all . . .! Comrade! One-fifteen . . . Organization instructor? Listen Semyonov, it appears you have . . ."

The secretary collected the minutes and asked Radchenko timidly:

"Perhaps it's better to write that they all be conducted in Ukrainian? They all need to be squeezed . . ."

Radchenko glanced angrily at the secretary and, without giving an answer, continued to mumble into the receiver. The secretary wilted and left the office on tip-toe.

Horobenko attentively studied Radchenko's face. This face changed animatedly — his eyebrows, eyes, mouth, chin and even his hair and ears kept moving the whole time, making it seem as if there wasn't a telephone receiver before Radchenko, but a live person with whom he was arguing. Viewed differently, this was a dangerous madman talking with himself.

Horobenko didn't like this, but be began to study Radchenko's face even more closely:

'Who is he, this Radchenko?'

The question surfaced quite illogically, for Horobenko already knew a little about him from rumors.

He was sent here from the provincial center, where, it seemed, he had connections, acquaintances and friends. Radchenko was a former Borotbist[1], and it was obvious that after the liquidation of

1. Ukrainian National Communist.

Borotbism all kinds of national prejudices ceased to exist for him. He had this innate quality of always creating a commotion wherever he was. What else? His habit of rummaging through other people's papers and talking far too loudly, showed him to be an independent person, and quite insolent at that. Just why he had appeared in this district backwater — no one knew. The Party membership treated him ingratiatingly, though with caution.

People stopped being directly interested in him, he was drawn into the board of the local *Information — News of the District Party Committee, Executive Committee and Trade-Union Council,* appointed as director to the Board of Instruction, and people became accustomed to disregard the creak and crackle of his voice. Only at Party meetings, when Radchenko had the floor, were notes passed on to the presidium, demanding that the regulations be adhered to. Radchenko had only been in the organization a week, but he was already 'one of the boys', with all his weaknesses, both good and bad.

But then really, all this was not important. There was something else. Horobenko rested his fingers on his temple, screwed up his eyes and understood.

Radchenko was to become the reflector which would illuminate his, Kost's national side. This was comical, strange and funny, but it was so. Before, when only Horobenko had been 'for the Ukrainian' here, this side of him had not shown, he could bait and destroy it within himself. But now, with the appearance of this Radchenko who had the knack of making everyone feel he was 'one of them' — everything would go differently. Radchenko's every move would be viewed.

Kost Horobenko thought sadly: 'How good it would be if Radchenko wasn't here . . . 'If he wasn't about at all, if he didn't exist . . .'

Radchenko replaced the receiver with a crash and moved closer to the desk.

"Yeah . . . so now, Comrade Horobenko . . . start teaching Ukrainian at the teachers' courses."

Horobenko rubbed his forehead and said wearily:

"I don't feel competent in this area, I can't appear to be a dilettante."

"What do you mean, 'dilettante'?" Radchenko raised his bushy eyebrows in amazement. "We need to send at least one of our people there. There's not one Communist at the courses."

Horobenko wanted to object one more time, but Radchenko slapped his hand on the table, as usual, not letting him speak.

"We can't send a Petliurist there, eh! Clear? That's all. Negotiate the hours with Khanov."

Radchenko was inclined to an American tempo and strove for speed.

He was about to rush off somewhere, but the telephone rang and Radchenko's 'Hello!' filled the room with a crackle. The receiver crackled away, but said nothing. Radchenko swore and threw the receiver down on the desk. Then he grabbed his briefcase and cap, and dashed off to the general office. Near the door he turned sharply and said to Horobenko:

"Yeah! We'll still have to talk about political instruction in the environs . . . The hell knows what's going on — nothing is happening . . .!" And cursing under his breath, Radchenko disappeared through the door. Horobenko came out into the street. The midday sun flooded the street with oppressiveness and indolence, but Horobenko moved along, satisfied that all was quiet about him at last, and Radchenko's voice had stopped creaking in his ear. And yet his weary mind still could not break free of Radchenko. He imagined Radchenko standing on his short legs, eyes popping, ready to swear . . . Who did Radchenko remind him of . . .? Aha: the children's story about the adventures of a crocodile and the brave gymnasium student Vania:

Through the streets did stroll
A large crocodile.
He strolled,
And in Turkish trolled,
But to speak Turkish
Is forbidden here.

Really, with his long mouth, gray goggly eyes with sharp pupils and his disproportionate body, Radchenko did resemble a crocodile. He was probably teased that in school. Actually — in the seminary. For Radchenko was a priest's son. And he wasn't even Radchenko, but, as Slavina had learned from somewhere, Voznesensky. Radchenko was only a pseudonym. And there was a reason. The surname was derived from the Ukrainian word *rada* — council. Obviously alluding to the Workers', Peasants' and Red Army Council of Deputies.

Horobenko stopped at a street corner and checked his watch. It was approaching five. He turned left into a side street and made his

way along the rotten wooden footpath.

The district supply commissar, Drobot, appeared before him unexpectedly.

"Greetings, you sonofabitch!"

Drobot slapped his spade of a hand against Horobenko's dry hand, and his open mouth reeked of hooch.

At first Horobenko didn't comprehend the reason for Drobot's familiarity, and even stopped. Drobot's hand slapped him on the shoulder, and he asked out of the blue:

"Shuffling along?"

Horobenko smiled.

"Come with me to Chernyshov's!"

Drobot grabbed Horobenko by the elbow and dragged him forward. His drunken breathing tickled Horobenko's right cheek a little unpleasantly, but he suddenly wanted to go to Chernyshov's and even quickened his step.

Things were already buzzing at Chernyshov's. When they appeared in the doorway of the room swathed in tobacco smoke, those present began to stir. Mysha Chernyshov froze in an unnatural pose, hiding his left hand somewhere deep underneath the dirty tablecloth, and looked fearfully at the door. Assured that there was no one else apart from Horobenko and Drobot, he changed in a flash. He guffawed loudly and triumphantly brought out two half-empty bottles from behind the table.

"You skunks! You crawling rotters! To cause such panic!"

Nestorenko kicked a rumpled strip of carpet to one side with his boot and hooked the tail of a herring with his fork.

"Yeah, it's a fact: Drobot's walk is a take-off of Krycheyev."

"So what, if it's like Krycheyev's?" Horobenko heard Druzhynin's voice, and was surprised. Druzhynin was the last person he expected to see here. Druzhynin rolled a 'goat's paw' cigarette and lit up. His slightly animated voice was unusually sharp: he was drunk. Druzhynin — drunk? But Druzhynin seemed to sense Horobenko's thoughts, even though he didn't look at him. He said to Nestorenko:

"What's Krycheyev to me — a prior, and I'm a monk, or what? Yeah, I like to have a drink and may they all go to . . ."

"Our Party statutes don't stipulate that we can't drink hooch!" chuckled Mysha Chernyshov, but Druzhynin interrupted him:

"That's not the point. All I'm saying is, don't lie. If you drink, then say that you do! Just don't hide your bottles under the table,

you swine! There won't be any harm that you've drunk yours. Respect yourself, otherwise you're . . ."

Mysha Chernyshov interjected mirthfully:

"Otherwise, you're a crawling rotter!"

"A hungry belly has no ears," Drobot boomed in a heavy bass and poured himself half a bottle. "Brother, I squeezed the first three hundred poods of produce allotment from Mykhailivka Rural District."

Drobot tipped the glass over and emptied it without blinking.

Then he wiped his whitish mustache and told another supply commissar's joke:

"You can't suck bread from a finger — pump it out of a kulak!"

Drobot placed his fat briefcase stuffed with papers on his knees and set about tearing up a herring with his hands.

Nestorenko moved up to Chernyshov and returned to their interrupted conversation:

"I still don't understand: how can Marx collide with the earth? As long as the earth's existed, nothing like that has happened."

Mysha Chernyshov deliberately corrected him:

"Not 'Marx', Nestorenko, but 'Mars' — it's the name of a planet. Understand?"

"Well, yeah, I realize it's a planet, but why should it fly towards the earth?"

Horobenko chuckled to himself. But immediately checked himself and become more serious:

'This is terribly bourgeois — to laugh at people's illiteracy.'

Nestorenko was worried about Mars and continued to quiz Chernyshov:

"So what's this then — if it falls, it can destroy everything?"

Back in the times when he was an apprentice in Povzer's printing establishment, Mysha Chernyshov had had a pointed inclination towards all things unusual and unnatural. He was attracted to human and animal monsters with many legs, two heads, one eye or completely eyeless, Siamese twins, women with beards. Mysha Chernyshov had once been awfully interested why Halley's comet had not collided with the earth in the end, as had been anticipated. Actually, Halley's comet had disillusioned him. For this reason Chernyshov did not believe in Mars now, however for Nestorenko he painted the grimmest perspectives.

"Yeah, brother, Mars isn't a pound of raisins for you. Just think, Nestorenko: that thing comes flying along, a thousand times bigger

than the earth, and suddenly — thump! And no more Spaniards!"

Chernyshov explained this by slapping himself on his forehead, and added:

"Oh! There won't be anything left then . . ."

Nestorenko asked again:

"Nothing at all?"

Chernyshov replied offendedly:

"What did you think: just try to knock something like that!"

Nestorenko rested his head on his hand and became sorrowfully pensive. Drobot ran his eyes about the room, as if looking for something, and said capriciously:

"How come I don't see Popynaka?"

Mysha Chernyshov stirred on the sofa.

"The devil knows that Popynaka . . . He's a fighting fellow, so to speak, and mixes with Party committee members too . . ."

"Rubbish," Drobot said authoritatively. "Popynaka should have been dragged here."

Nestorenko jangled his spurs under the table and decided to add his bit to the conversation:

"I saw Popynaka this morning with that Radchenko — they were riding along in the communal-farm buggy."

Mysha Chernyshov suddenly flinched:

"We should have called Radchenko, comrades . . ."

"I don't like him, he's a smart aleck," Drobot replied categorically, smearing a slice of rye bread with thick linden honey. Chernyshov came out in enthusiastic defence:

"Nonsense! Nothing of the sort . . . He's a fine lad. You only have to know how to approach him. But here's what's interesting . . ." Chernyshov's leaning to things unnatural was awoken once more, and he enthusiastically, even a little secretively, grabbed hold of his objective.

"He's all right, only he has an unlucky hand for wenches. Just think — he's spoiled three already . . ."

Nestorenko was intrigued by this, he moved his chair closer to Chernyshov and straining his small head with a black shock of hair and small green eyes from his collar, he asked:

"What do you mean?"

Chernyshov eagerly explained:

"He has a unique structure. While his woman is still pregnant — everything is all right, but as soon as the birth begins, that's it . . . In Kharkiv in the spring his third woman died in hospital. They

pulled the dead child out with forceps."

Nestorenko jangled his spurs once more and said in amazement: "So that's how it is . . .!"

Drobot was eating, relishing the honey. He chewed assiduously with his long jaws and licked the edges from which slowly slipped large drops of honey. However several drops slipped out from under his tongue, falling onto his knees and silently slapping onto his briefcase. A minute later this was repeated a second time. Horobenko noticed these shining viscous spots on the dull leather of the briefcase and remembered the first three hundred poods of allotment from Mykhailivka Rural District. He suddenly thought: 'I wonder if they take an allotment of honey from the bee-keepers too . . .'

Mysha Chernyshov reminded Drobot of Radchenko's reference and finished animatedly:

"No! He's an ace lad. A golden lad. Except perhaps that he speaks the 'language' at times." Smiling, Chernyshov looked at Horobenko and, as if on command, everyone turned their heads in that direction too.

Horobenko became confused and could not find anything to say right away.

Drobot wiped his sticky hands on the tablecloth and, adding a little intimacy to his bass, moved awkwardly up to Horobenko.

"Tell me, Horobenko, is it true that in nineteen eighteen you executed sailors in Kiev?"

Horobenko gave a feigned smile, but said firmly:

"No."

However, catching Nestorenko's stern, sidelong glance, he was unable to allay his inner alarm and turned to Drobot:

"I just don't understand what kind of question this is?"

Drobot slid his hands deep into his pockets and placed his feet wide apart. A cunning smile played on his greasy lips.

"Own up — did it happen?"

Horobenko looked up uncomfortably at Drobot:

"What nonsense is this? Why this sudden . . ."

Drobot became angry:

"Because you're one sonofabitch . . .!"

Horobenko blushed deeply and rose to his feet.

"What does that mean, comrade?"

Mysha Chernyshov seriously began to fear a fight and hastened to his feet, rushing up to them.

"What sort of chicanery is this? I don't understand! Sha! Sit down you crawling rotter," he jostled Drobot jokingly, and the fellow creaked back onto his chair.

Mysha Chernyshov turned around to face Horobenko:

"Drive the rotters off . . .! Well, so you were for "independence" one time, but so what!"

Morose and silent, Druzhynin piped up unexpectedly from his corner. Since he hadn't spoken a word for a long time, everyone now turned attentively to face him.

"What's there to figure out — was he or wasn't he! Well, even if he was, what's better then: the fact that he's our comrade now, or that he should still remain a chauvinist independent? There are no people who are completely white or black, brother; if you look hard — most people are gray . . ."

No one replied to Druzhynin's words, however the strained atmosphere in the room was immediately defused and disappeared.

Horobenko wanted to give Druzhynin's hand a sincere shake.

IX

The lecture at the teachers' course was to begin at ten, and now it was only nine. Actually it was nine official time, but in fact, according to the sun, it was six.

Each month the clock hands were moved and the clock slowly lost its power of a former administrative standard. People reverted to the distant past and orientated themselves by the sun. Buy its beautiful, joyous rising, and sad, but no less beautiful setting.

With yellowed faces and souls, dried up like old archival paper, the former civil servants, now Soviet employees, saw the sun in all its grandiose beauty for the first time.

They were short of bread, millet and oil, wore away their last rags of clothing, like an empty barrel their noisy stomach drowned out their thoughts; they slowly lost everything, including all hope of any change, but they were never short of sun. There was enough sun everywhere. It seemed as if the new authorities had somehow increased the length of the day, cutting the night back to a minimum.

Kost Horobenko was overjoyed at this too. He walked along the sunny side of the street on purpose and bathed his uncovered head

in the sunshine like a child. The sun caressed his forehead and his hair, gently running its invisible soft fingers over his neck and under the open collar, its rays melting away doubts, suffering, and grief.

Then his mind and body fused into a single harmonious whole, and the familiar detestable houses of this district town, the people and the whole boundless world seemed better. And Horobenko's soul became devoid of malice, and envy, and suspicion: a single beautiful sunny word — love — subconsciously and imperceptibly welled in his chest and filled every corner of it.

He would never utter it now, but he had felt it. He had felt its eternal beauty and immortality, and this brought him joy. There were eternal beautiful things, before which countless people had bowed on the long path of history, and they would continue to bow before them as long as people were people and the earth — the earth.

There was mass poverty, misery, destruction, famine was drawing closer . . . He had his own hidden pains, disagreements and failures . . .

This was now, today. But years would pass, ages, millennia — and they would disappear . . . this was understandable — the ruins would become covered with new buildings, humanity would suffer poverty and hunger many a time, and among them such small and miserly personal pains and insults would become lost . . . The time would come, and there would be no Ukraine, perhaps there would be no nations at all, but there would still be the sun, and love.

This sun! This eternally youthful, always joyous morning sun! Why, when it shone like it did now, when it caressed his unlocked soul and his unbuttoned chest, did he remember so suddenly, so unexpectedly . . . Nadia?!

For some reason its rays decided to rest on the bulging muscle of his neck. Warming it most of all. Even seeming to squeeze it.

He remembered: Nadia used to love that muscle. Her hand, that loving hand which would no longer rise from the grave, stopped at this muscle many a time when it stroked his neck. And then her large black eyes, penetrated by the transparent shadow of gentle sorrow as in all southern people, rested on his profile. And quietly, silently, they watched him very, very closely. As if wanting to guess something, and without having guessed it, they went to the grave . . . Nadia had died.

And once more Horobenko thought that this was very good. Not

even because she would have been alien, non-Party. No. That was secondary.

Here was what was most important: the millstones of time would have ground up that fresh grain of feeling which had once welled in both of them, and their connubial life would not have been an intoxicating wine, only powdery flour, sticky dough, and who knows — perhaps even chaff. . . Now Nadia would always remain the way she was in those distant, irretrievable days. Nadia had died, but she would continue to live as a nice memory of his first girl, the pure memory of the first woman he had known.

This memory would live. It had to live, for it was the only thing he had left from the past.

And this was no vow of his male virginity, this was no sentimental 'till death us do part', this was something ordinarily human and quite real, but it was after all something bigger than them. Because one certainly could not forget one's first woman, who had been a virgin before you, and Nadia, Nadia . . .

Horobenko thought timidly:

'What would I have done with her now, where love seems to have been abolished and the bed has replaced the best relationships between the sexes . . .'

And just as a clumsy whitish cloud appeared out of nowhere and covered the sun, Horobenko suddenly saw the reality of yesterday, the day before, and the previous week, and the reality of people as they were.

He asked himself:

'What's it leading to?'

The sun melted away the small cloud and it continued on its endless heavenly trek in a scattered light mist, while the warm rays played on Kost's neck with renewed strength.

Then, without further thought, a long-since ready, but forgotten reply surfaced:

'These people, these official friends of yours — they're better than you thought.'

The Party wasn't an arsenal of saints. But therein was its effect, its unique missionism. From the most ordinary people, those with inherent good and evil, it was creating a new, quite distinct tribe. A Bolshevik race . . .

Who would reveal Druzhynin to the general public? This simple, and at the same time amiable Druzhynin? How simply, how humanly simply he had swept aside that damned gloom of suspi-

cion and distrust which had secretly swirled above Kost.

And was Druzhynin alone? No. He was the symbol of those potential Druzhynins, who were still making their way, but would arrive one day.

And then there was Mysha Chernyshov. He was obviously shallow, a drunk, and all earthly sins undoubtedly hung over him, but . . .

This was incomprehensible too. Chernyshov knew not only about the Prosvita and the National Alliance branch. There was more. This same Chernyshov, having once worked as an apprentice in Povzer's printing establishment, would have set call cards for Horobenko's father. And once even . . . it was in about grade six of the gymnasium — Kost had foolishly ordered call cards for himself.

Horobenko felt painfully annoyed at this recollection. He even wanted to let out a groan, to somehow erode those naive gymnasium call cards from his memory, which now burned his heart.

Theoretically, Chernyshov should be harboring, at least in his memory, a hostility towards him, a class hatred. For in fact back then he had been a proletarian, and Kost, though not consciously, was an exploiter.

But there was none of this. Chernyshov was his comrade now. He even had a certain affection towards Kost. What kind of 'general pardon' was this?

That magical word 'Party' floated before Horobenko once more. And probably for the first time he felt consciously and concretely a member of its enormous and unusual collective . . .

Horobenko had arrived early for the courses. Young teachers were already walking the passages in pairs, threes and alone, the shabby figures of old, once sedate pedagogues scurried along cautiously and silently, but this created no noise in the building. These teachers, who for long years (some obstinately, others with nervous exhaustion) had fought in class with natural childish laughter, shouts and noise, didn't know how to be noisy themselves now, they only rustled. And Horobenko felt strange walking along the passage past this quiet, seemingly constrained crowd.

This passage had known other times. This had been the home of the pedagogical technical institute, the home of his former gymnasium.

By some unknown tradition the lecturers of the teachers' courses now congregated in the 'staff room' before the start of lessons. These were mostly old gymnasium teachers. Here sat the slightly

frayed former lion of the town damsels — the geography teacher, handsome Borysenko, from whom Kost had received a 'fail' several times. The history teacher, *Makaron**, who would ask the gymnasium students: 'How long did the Thirty Year War last?', *Gander* — Prykhodko, the Ukrainian language beadle. All of them, like shabby museum relics of some forgotten era, had remained in the 'staff room'.

Khanov, the head of the courses, politely stepped forward towards Horobenko, rubbing his fists before shaking hands, and informed him:

"Your lesson is in ten minutes, Konstiantyn Petrovych, but in the meantime we've a small family conference, so to speak."

Khanov was the former director of another gymnasium. He acted prudently towards Horobenko — he was a Communist, so to speak, a goat in a sheepfold. But he had to accommodate him somehow. In fact, he had to be won over to their side. This could even be useful: why, for instance, didn't teachers receive white flour, while the Supply Committee employees had received two poods each!

Khanov tugged at his greenish, musty beard and adjusted his gold-rimmed glasses.

". . . Here, you see, as a ration, we've received four archines of material[1] . . . What do we do with it — you can't divide it among everyone . . .?"

"Raffle it off," *Gander* growled angrily from his corner.

The long-legged historian, *Makaron,* slipped his dry knotty hand under the breast of his vest, sullied with borsch and wax, and asked skeptically:

"What kind of material is it — some rubbish obviously, eh?"

Kost's teachers did not hide from him. Out of old habit they sensed their advantage over the young lecturer of Ukrainian, over this former student of theirs.

Borysenko sprawled out in his armchair and continued telling *Makaron* in Russian:

"Just you imagine, Nikanor Ivanovich, the Board of Instruction secretary hands me a form: 'Fill it out.' Magnificent! I read there: which party do you belong to? I reply: excuse me, I'll leave that question out . . . I don't understand them. What has the party to do with things? What stupid questions! Yeah, I consider myself above any party!"

* Literally means "Macaroni".

1. Just over three yards.

Khanov threw a fearful sidelong glance over his glasses at Horobenko. Borysenko caught this look and gave Khanov a carefree smile with his beautiful gray eyes. Khanov worriedly busied himself with his papers, while Borysenko continued to voice his indignation:

"Amazing prejudices . . .!"

'Boors! Educated boors!' Horobenko fumed inside, but he kept silent and only reddened slightly.

Some other lecturer responded from behind a cupboard:

"The Poles, they say, have already taken Kiev . . ."

Taking no notice at all of Horobenko, as if he wasn't even present, *Makaron* mumbled spitefully:

" 'Comrade' Budenny is hurrying to the rescue. He'll show them!"

Borysenko attempted a joke:

"Somehow our Budenny is already too humdrum."[1]

The pun turned out quite awkward and only Borysenko laughed at it, the rest merely smiled.

But this was enough for Horobenko. This neglectful ignorance of his presence, their indifference that a Communist was sitting among them — this irritated him to no end. Oh, these beadles knew the worth of his subject! Lectures in Ukrainian language in the teachers' courses were just as much a joke to them as those four archines of material designated for seven people, and the new educational measures of the authorities, and the authorities themselves, and this whole period . . .

Why were they so certain that he would cover for their hissing, remaining silent in the Party? Why? 'I'll go and tell them everything!'

Out of their civility, or perhaps pity, they at least didn't poke fun at him yet, a self-made professor . . . That would have been all he needed, the devil take them!

Kost itched to yell at them, to curse them in the most obscene language.

He looked into *Makaron's* cold eyes in defiance and noticed that he was still wearing the same jacket he used to wear to the gymnasium.

Something bridled Horobenko's anger and irritation. He came up to Khanov and said coldly:

1. A famous Russian military commander whose surname is derived from the Russian *budnishnii*, meaning humdrum.

"I won't be giving my lecture today. I've remembered that there are pressing Party matters to attend to.

"Please, please," Khanov rose ingratiatingly and hastened to shake Horobenko's hand in farewell.

"Please, please, Konstiantyn Petrovych . . . And when shall I fix it for?"

"I'll let you know."

The pedagogues became quiet and looked incomprehensibly at Horobenko. The 'Party matters' tickled their ears disagreeably and even saddened them. It suddenly became far too quiet in the 'staff room', and Horobenko's hurried steps sounded hostile and far too alien.

Makaron alone asked Khanov to let him see the material they had received.

X

Kost caught Radchenko as he dashed out of Socialist Education and raced off to look over the old theatre building, in order to reorganize the arts in the town.

Radchenko didn't want to stop, he greeted Horobenko on the run, with his eyes and a slight wave of the hand, but Horobenko said officially and even sharply:

"Just hold on there a moment, comrade. I've just come from the courses. There is total concealed counter-revolution there. Especially this Borysenko . . . They badly need a political commissar there."

"Ah, the scum! What did they say?"

In fits and starts Horobenko painted a picture of Borysenko. As usual, Radchenko stared at him with his watery eyes and swore abhorrently several times.

"Great. I'll tame that rubbish . . .!" he retorted finally and raced off down the street, waving his free hand about.

Horobenko watched him go for a minute or so, then looked indifferently at the high bell tower which appeared inopportunely before him, and suddenly felt an emptiness inside him.

The relief he felt after speaking to Radchenko took away with it the rest of his thoughts. These thoughts became entangled and hung down like rags. There remained a mush of dissatisfaction and disappointment.

Horobenko wandered off down the street. He wanted to amuse himself a little. However the mush did not leave his soul. On the contrary. Out of all its dirt something suddenly slipped out and took on a defined form.

'A denunciation?'

He felt bad and even ashamed.

'To stoop so low . . . To go to Radchenko and tell on them . . . You could have stood up there in the 'staff room' and told them all openly, even simply forbidden them to slander like that . . . It would have been a scandal, you would have felt very uncomfortable, but at least it would have been honest . . . 'Honest'?'

Horobenko paused at this word and smiled to himself:

'What twaddle! Who can tell now what is honest and what is base?

'In Borysenko's opinion one's very membership of the Party is dishonest, but in my opinion it's base to be dependent on the authorities for one's ration, and then to ridicule them furtively . . .! There can be no common path with these people. They are the rubbish which lies underfoot and are an obstacle to progress.'

Something prompted Horobenko quietly:

'They must be destroyed . . .'

Horobenko returned to the Board of Instruction, took a warrant, and went off to his gymnasium physics teacher to requisition a microscope for the workers' evening classes.

The physics teacher lived nearby in his own small annex, hidden behind bushes of lilac. Horobenko hurried across the yard and entered the house.

The old, bald physics teacher appeared before Horobenko in a torn tussore silk shirt, his middle girded with a rope.

He wanted to ask him to sit down and hurried to grab a chair, but Horobenko stunned the physics teacher with his dry official tone:

"I've come to requisition your microscope," and he showed the physics teacher the warrant. The physics teacher's gentle face, with its nice apple complexion, stretched and froze, immobile. He seemed to turn to stone. Something forced Horobenko to look at the physics teacher one more time. His kind half-closed eyes and face minced with wrinkles, colored by an ashen beard, were alluring. One could look into his face and feel one's gaze and mind resting.

Horobenko yielded and looked. The physics teacher's face before him was filled with pain, insult and amazement. He couldn't look

the physics teacher in the eye. Horobenko bit his lip and turned away.

If only the physics teacher had sworn, shouted, stamped his feet, argued with him — that would have made it much easier.

But the gentle physics teacher hadn't been like that at the gymnasium and he didn't act this way now.

The physics teacher left the room, taking large shaky steps and a minute later returned with the microscope.

He looked at the clean shining microscope tubes, sighed and handed it silently to Horobenko. Horobenko wanted to hand over the warrant, but the physics teacher had already disappeared behind a curtain.

Horobenko looked about the room and lay the warrant on the nearest chair. Then hastily, as if fearing that the physics teacher would come running after him, he rushed outside with the microscope.

Faded and old, like the physics teacher himself, Kashtan, whom Horobenko still knew from his gymnasium days, crawled out from his kennel to warm himself in the sun. He noticed Horobenko and, wagging his tail, ran to the porch. Poor old dog! He didn't even have an inkling what harm had just been inflicted on his master. Scratching the ground with his hind paw, Kashtan began to fawn upon Horobenko as best he knew. He licked his hand and rubbed his muzzle against his pants.

Horobenko paused involuntarily and patted the dog. He wanted to grab its shaggy head near the ears and shake it about as before. But the microscope in his left hand prevented him from doing so. Horobenko felt embarrassed and pained. He became embarrassed in front of the dog, which sincerely granted him its canine caresses, not sensing an enemy in him. These caresses were stolen — and Horobenko immediately made off for the gate.

He felt sorry for the naive Kashtan, and the poor physics teacher, and himself.

'These are all palliatives! Miserable palliatives . . .! You're not whipping the horses, but the rotten, good-for-nothing thills.'

A voice laughed inside Horobenko, mocking him:

'You've taken away an old fellow's last joy and want to prove that you're a Bolshevik? Ha-ha-ha . . .! Who will you prove this to? Perhaps to yourself? Rubbish! You know full well that this isn't the point. What is some microscope to the revolution! Tiny, egotistic soul! You want to buy yourself a new conscience with miserable

harm? That's cheap! Far too cheap . . . This is bought only with — remember that sleepless night? — only with blood! Death!'

Horobenko hurried along the edge of the sidewalk, his hand holding the microscope stretched unnaturally forward. The microscope stuck out before him like a damnation and burned his palm. But there was nowhere to hide it. Horobenko tried to evade the occasional passer-by, but this didn't work out. People still passed him, and their gazes rested on the microscope. Horobenko did not turn around, but it seemed to him that everyone stopped behind him and whispered:

"He's carried off the microscope! The microscope . . . There he goes!"

Horobenko quickened his step.

'These are all useless palliatives. Those requisitioned pianos, and cupboards, and books, and this microscope! Something else is needed. You should go to the Party committee and — that's that! Send me to the Cheka, I can't go on like this . . . They took into consideration my 'culture' when they appointed me to the cultural section of the trade union. I should tell Krycheyev everything frankly . . . Only could I work for the Cheka?'

And Horobenko immediately replied:

'To work in the Cheka one has to execute people all the same. One first needs a few drops of blood on the earth, otherwise there will be hypocrisy, otherwise everything will be lies all the same . . .'

Horobenko stepped onto the delicate wooden bridge across the narrow, foul river which flowed through the town. Some fellow walked across the small bridge and disappeared in the willows. Horobenko suddenly stopped. He caught his breath and suddenly looked about. It was deserted. Down below, breaking through the duckweed, the dirty water glistened in the sunshine. Horobenko looked about stealthily once more, and threw the microscope full-force into the river, as if it had been stolen.

Somewhere far away there was a splash and again everything became quiet. Horobenko ran from the bridge and made his way to the trade-union cultural section.

XI

With his whip handle the old peasant adjusted the shaft chain which had shifted on the thill, rolled himself an enormously thick cigarette in some newsprint, and merrily flicked the nag.

"Giddy-up, there . . .!"

The nag flicked its burr-encrusted tail to one side and trotted off for several steps, then again made its way languidly up the hill.

Slavina became silent for only a minute; fussily she spread a truss of hay under her and drew in her thin, skinny legs right up to her chest. This made the knees under her skirt appear sharper and it seemed as if they were capable of painfully pricking someone.

Horobenko transferred his eyes to Druzhynin's muddy boots hanging down from the ladderbeam, filled with holes, and to interrupt Slavina's incessant chatter he asked the old peasant:

"Is that Fedorivka over there already?"

"*Da*, along this sand a little more, and then we'll pass the rock, and there'll be the Fedorivka windmills."

However Slavina was not even thinking of abandoning her subject. On the contrary, she considered it her duty to continue persuading the old peasant to become an atheist. She was being shaken unmercifully on the cart; unaccustomed, she squirmed and made a wry face at every pothole, and she had long since felt that all her insides had become entangled into a terrible mess, however the presence of the two party members galvanized her. Slavina wanted to prove to them that she was not at all made out of "white dough" and this harvest wagon, and this road they had taken along the damned endless byways just to avoid the bandits in the woods along the direct route — all this was nothing to her. And so Slavina took a hold of herself and without any small-talk or reason, had been expounding her anti-religious diatribe before the old peasant.

The fellow turned out to be bright and good-natured. He completely surprised Horobenko by readily joining in the conversation, however he argued lightly with Slavina, avoiding decisive replies. He insinuated more and joked, then argued.

"It's right, of course. They say: as long as there are people, a priest can be found. But, after all, when one thinks about it . . ."

Slavina interrupted him in Russian:

"Hold on, comrade. First of all let us consider the very question of religion. For example, Karl Marx said: religion is opium for the people."

The old peasant had either misunderstood the last words or simply had not heard them right, for he suddenly had an urge to agree with Slavina and, tugging at the reins, he said briskly:

"Yes, it's true, everything now is for the people."

Druzhynin burst into loud guffaws, while Horobenko smiled and looked more affably at Slavina. Slavina became embarrassed and blushed. She felt insulted and awkward because of the muzhik's incomprehension and she itched to correct her own confusion. She squirmed in her place and, disconcerted, tried to explain to the old peasant:

"Religion is, you see, comrade, above all . . . well, how can I explain it to you . . .? It is an illusion . . . You are a man, who . . ."

The old peasant interpreted Druzhynin's laughter in his own way. He sighed deeply and turned to Slavina:

"Well, I can't say whether it's a "lusion" or not, but even I, by God, wouldn't be attending church if it was certain . . ." The fellow flashed gentle gray eyes from under his knitted brows and moved closer to Slavina:

"All that you've been saying, is of course right . . . Well, good and fine if there's nothing up there (the old peasant shook a rein, pointing into the sky)! But what if there is . . .?" The old peasant moved up to Slavina and looked intently into her face:

"Well, what if, when you die, and it's really all up there?!"

Slavina had no ready answer, and the old peasant spread his arms apart helplessly and once more moved forward to the nose-bag with oats.

"Come on, you nag! Dragging your feet there! Giddy-up . . ."

The old peasant cracked the whip in the air and uttered firmly, though in a lowered voice:

"No, no matter what, it's mother better to go to church. More peace of mind after all . . ."

The old peasant's conclusion again lit up a smile on Horobenko's face. However the smile was diluted with irony, and then he was seized with acute impatience — when would this nonsensical conversation finally end! He was irritated by Slavina's language too, which the old peasant could not understand, and her falseness with words, her inability to approach the old peasant simply, ordinarily. He even rejoiced that all this had ended as an anecdote, but at the same time he was afraid Slavina would once more set about convincing the old peasant. At times he felt pity towards Slavina. This quite unneeded woman, ugly in appearance and with sharp knees,

was setting herself up for ridicule. She kept mumbling awkward words, and the old peasant laughed at her in his heart. Oh, this was a cunning old peasant! Kost could picture him well. For him these anemic words of Slavina's were like peas thrown against a wall. On his village intellectual scale he was a whole head higher than Slavina.

Kost imagined perfectly how the old peasant would tell everyone in the village about this shorn, fool-headed "Communist" woman and make fun of her. Bah, he would make fun of them all. They were her comrades. Once again, he felt sorry for Slavina and was indignant at the peasant's patched cloak: you'll cry your eyes out yet!

Horobenko looked at the sumptuous field of wheat and, as usual, this soothed him. The untiring mischievous wind drove wave after wave across it. The waves rushed after each other, until they broke off at the fresh stubble, however the wind was oblivious to that: it raced back along the ridges dividing the fields and generated more waves. The harvest was beginning and the first shocks had already thrown a light shadow on summer. These shocks and stubble always made one feel sad. A pity grew in one's chest and one felt inexplicably sorry for something. The summer, the heat, or one's own days? Who knows. These shocks would give birth to an incomprehensible longing, and later, when the evening fall rain pattered on the roof, this longing would beckon unhappy autumnal conclusions with a senile hand . . .

Horobenko bit through a dry stalk and mused.

Reapers were having lunch by the roadside. Having reached them, the old peasant turned off to the left to bypass their empty cart and unharnessed rungy nags. As they emerged on the far side, pulling out of a deep rut, they dallied a little. The reapers watched them questioningly. When the cart drew up to them, the fellow on the end winked to the old peasant driver:

"Marketing there, Danylo?"

However the carter refrained from any jokes. He stopped his nag for some reason and greeted them:

"Good-day, may the Lord help you . . ."

Some devil prompted Slavina to join in the conversation again:

"Good-day, comrades!" She looked at the fresh sheaves of mown wheat and said condescendingly in Russian:

"You've a fine crop of rye this year."

The reapers burst into guffaws and the carter, as if embarrassed for his passengers, grumbled:

"Come on, this is wheat!"

Slavina whispered guiltily to herself:

"Can it be . . .? How could I have been mistaken . . .?"

"Of couse you're 'mistaken', you've probably never even sown it!" someone said from the back, smiling malevolently.

Horobenko had long been embarrassed about Slavina, and the reapers' joking laughter unnerved him. He tapped the carter on the shoulder:

"Hurry on. We have to get there before sundown."

The old fellow tugged at the reins and the cart continued on its way, pursued by the reapers' derisive stares.

After they had moved away, Druzhynin looked back towards the sheaves and, after a moment's thought, said to Slavina:

"*Da*, it really was wheat, not rye. That was rather unfortunate of you, Comrade Slavina. You should tread more lightly . . ."

Slavina made no reply and made herself more comfortable on her seat. She was overcome with disappointment and despair.

'You can't go far in the village with these Slavinas,' Horobenko thought and angrily spat a stalk from his mouth.

It was growing dark when they reached the village.

Ahead of them a herd of cattle was kicking up the evening dust on the road as it made its way home. The cows moved phlegmatically to their respective yards, stopping outside gates and lowing monotonously. Some turned around lazily and stared stupidly at the road.

Their gazes reflected utter boredom and eternal surprise.

'I don't understand a damn thing — what's all this for.'

However the cows did not even attempt to comprehend what it was all about. They merely satisfied themselves with having witnessed the arrival of three new people in the village, and turned away from the spectacle, to begin their philosophical lowing once more.

Their lowing filled Horobenko with warmth and a special serenity. It was gratifying to watch the cows disperse, to see the young herdsmen in muddy pants, bags over their shoulders, hurrying up the rest of the herd with switches.

The mounds of white houses and the green wool of black poplars, sycamores and willows created an air of peacefulness and tranquility.

It made one want to stare blankly ahead and watch one's whole inner being fill with calmness and peace.

Horobenko even cheered up. Shevchenko's words were so true — 'A village — and the heart can rest' . . . Only it wasn't that village which now spread before him; a test, rather than relaxation, was awaiting Kost Horobenko. One of the countless tests in becoming a 'Bolshevik', a test of life.

Horobenko lowered his numb legs onto the ladderbeam and curiously eyed the sloping strip of village houses, gray in the evening twilight.

Somewhere deep down, in those stove niches, behind the cattle sheds, on the meadows, the village soul lay hidden, together with the rusty sawn-off rifles. Wary, suspicious and cruel. While on the outside there stood gentle taciturn houses with smoke curling from some of the chimneys. These houses had probably stood unchanged since tsarist times, perhaps even since serfdom and the Cossack era . . . Who knows?

Horobenko said to himself:

'I still don't know you at all, village. You are still a riddle, like my whole whimsical nation. You are foreign to me — foreign, distant and incomprehensible. In this respect I'm not far removed from Slavina . . .

'It was probably because he thinks that every Ukrainian is a peasant deep down that Krycheyev sent me here as head of the reelection troika. Not Druzhynin, but me. That is understandable. And yet,' Horobenko smiled to himself, 'I am not a peasant after all, and there is nothing of the village in me. True, this is a little unusual for a Ukrainian, however, be warned, village — I'm not even moved to fathom you. I am not bowing before your lyricized houses, neat orchards, very ordinary "darling moon" and your other inevitable accessories. I'm quite indifferent to all this now, but sometimes . . . sometimes I damn well feel like smashing it all to pieces . . . But I will bridle you all the same, village!'

Sensing the journey's end, the nag suddenly started and set off at a trot. The cart clattered loudly over the hard earth and awakened the street. Children dashed out of yards and timidly hugged old logs as they curiously watched the cart. From windows beyond fences old women peered fearfully, and only rarely did a bearded male face watch them sullenly from beside a gate. These sullen looks from under scowling brows were very noticeable and became imprinted in one's memory.

The bearded faces did not prophesy anything good. Their eyes saw only enemies on every cart which arrived from the city. They

arrived here, to these tranquil houses, with allotments, levies, arrests and executions. The village had damned them and burrowed into its holes.

Horobenko suddenly thought:

'Oh, there's probably a fierce death lurking behind these looks . . .!'

Without restraint Horobenko studiously took them in, wanting to retain them for as long as possible, resting them on himself.

The street came to a sudden end and the cart shook its way into a square. On the left appeared the large awkward brick building of the former rural district office — now the Fedorivka Rural District Executive Committee office. The cart turned sharply towards the old steps and the columns blackened by time.

"This will be the Executive Committee then, whoa . . ." the carter announced without turning around, and pulled the reins towards himself.

Druzhynin jumped down from the cart and began to massage his legs. Slavina painstakingly dusted herself and mumbled something in displeasure.

"So you'd be the re-election troika, comrades?"

Harasymenko, the Collective Farm Executive Committee chairman, quietly approached the cart in his velour cap, a pistol on his belt, and placed his strong, chapped hand on the ladderbeam.

Slavina carefully lowered her feet over the side and jumped, holding her breath. If Druzhynin had not caught her by the arm she would probably have fallen under the wheel, however it ended fortuitously and, retrieving her briefcase from the hay, Slavina told Harasymenko angrily:

"Well really, your roads, comrade! They're a nightmare . . ."

Harasymenko slapped the ladderbeam in a business-like way, however he could find no answer to justify the roads and so remained silent. After everyone had removed their belongings from the cart, he transferred his hand to his waist and asked:

"Will you step inside the Executive Committee? The people are assembling for a meeting right now."

Horobenko liked Harasymenko's soft and gentle speech and his level behaviour. It contained an inner stability and confidence, as well as the reliable adroitness of an assiduous superior.

Moving up the steps alongside Harasymenko, Horobenko suddenly thought:

'How the revolution has changed people, after all! This fellow is no longer a former officer or clerk. One can rely on this man . . .'

Harasymenko let everyone pass into the dark passage, then unnoticeably moved ahead of them and staidly entered the 'chairman's room'.

The deep twilight had warped a black woollen fabric throughout the room. Rough words and whispers rose to the high ceiling from the dark downcast corners.

"We need a light here," Harasymenko said in the direction of the window. Everything became silent and pricked up its ears. The Executive Committee secretary promptly fetched a miserable lamp from a cupboard and diligently set about lighting it. The lamp resisted for a long time, flickering and dying away, but at last it lit up with a melancholy bluish flame. As if emerging from a chasm, the room slowly filled with staid beards, faces and peasant cloaks.

Druzhynin sat down on a small stool and wearily leaned back against a table.

Slavina had settled down on a bench against the wall, however the elderly villagers hastily moved away, sweeping the bench with the flaps of their cloaks, as if the woman's thin figure required room for three. Slavina became confused and hastened to join Druzhynin. Making herself comfortable beside him, she heaved a sigh of relief and settled down.

The room filled with an awkward silence once more, which no one dared disturb.

Horobenko paced across the room. Elderly peasants sat against the wall, eyeing the new arrivals with sharp questioning looks. These looks tickled Horobenko unpleasantly on the temple and right hand, but he did not turn to face them. He moved to the opposite side and purposely stood with his back to them. Marx hung sedately on the wall, studying the peasant cloaks, and under him someone had stuck up the old *V.I. Lenin's Letter to the Ukrainian Peasants* with glutinous bread. These external signs of a new era among the morose old men against the walls did not yet give the place a Soviet appearance: outside in the darkness, two miles away, was the Vorskla River, and beyond it the ancient Poltava forests, woodmen, rebellion and death. Who could guarantee what would happen here in an hour, two or three? Horobenko turned to face the light and ran his eyes over the peasants. They maintained the same pose, but now their faces seemed to be saying 'it's not my concern', 'we're not locals'.

'This is probably the best one could expect from them in times of trouble,' Horobenko thought. 'Although perhaps they might . . .'

The old peasants continued to sit in silence and all one could hear was their heavy wheezy breathing. The silence was becoming unbearable for Horobenko, but he did not know how to approach these people, how to unlock their closed souls, to make them talk, speak openly and sincerely to him as if he was one of them. This unnerved him and the figures of the elderly peasants simply irritated him. He strode up to Harasymenko and asked loudly:

"How's the prodallotment going here?!"

The cloaks against the wall craned greedily forward and froze.

"What do you mean?" Harasymenko did not understand straight away. "You mean the produce allotment?"

"Yes, yes — the produce allotment," Horobenko explained impatiently and reddened under Druzhynin's gaze.

"It's proceeding slowly, counter-revolution is still seething here . . . There are saboteurs — you could say they hinder us a lot . . . There are a lot of kulaks left. There's a problem with them. It's like living in the middle of a road — they stop us from organizing a good Communist cell. We had three new ones sign up here, but whenever there's a general meeting they don't turn up out of fear. What we need to do with the kulaks here is . . ." Harasymenko brought his hand heavily against his chest and firmly clenched his fist. The men against the wall look attentively at the fist, without blinking an eyelid. Harasymenko lowered his hand onto the table.

"You can't deal with them peacefully, and they refuse to accept any notion of authority . . ." he said in his usual mishmash of Russian and Ukrainian.

Harasymenko struggled hard to choose the necessary words, but kept running out of them, and so he spoke with pauses, droplets of sweat appearing on his forehead, under the cracked peak of his velour cap. Horobenko liked the way he spoke. He looked at his stocky, masculine shoulders and they seemed to him like a bridge between them and the peasant cloaks against the wall. There was still only a handful of these Harasymenkos, but how strong they were! What would the Soviet regime have done in the countryside were it not for these Harasymenkos? The rural areas would have become a continuous impenetrable jungle. While there was even one Harasymenko in the village, there was no need to worry: he would not betray, he would not say 'I'm not a local', he would not leave the village. New incomprehensible words had agitated his brain, set fire to his soul, and he would continue with them along his village path in his heavy boots, without straying. 'How impor-

tant these Harasymenkos are to us . . .!' Looking at Harasymenko and listening to his unwieldy speech made one feel more at ease, calmer. Horobenko pulled a tobacco pouch from his pocket and offered it to Harasymenko:

"Let's smoke some city *makhorka*."

Harasymenko wriggled his fingers and, as if excusing himself, said softly:

"I don't smoke . . . I've no need . . ." Then he raised his bearded head over the table towards the dark corner and, in the tone of a superior, said to the Executive Committee secretary:

"I want the election roll ready for tomorrow."

Slavina buttoned up her small rumpled jacket and leaned over to Dryzhynin:

"It would be nice to dine in some kulak's home tonight . . ."

XII

The sun struck the small window, but was unable to completely penetrate the house. It had marked out its acquired place on the earthern floor with a golden shaft of light, however in the stove niche, on the dirty plank bed covered in black trash and in the corner from which several gilded gods looked sternly — there remained a stubborn twilight. Horobenko rubbed his eyes and sat up. Druzhynin and Slavina were still asleep on either side of him. Druzhynin lay spreadeagled on the hay, crumpled sacking underneath him, while his right leg, pierced at the big toe by a ray of light, had made its way to the earthern floor. On the very edge of the sacking Slavina lay rolled up into a small senile fist, breathing imperceptibly. Horobenko glanced at the small ball of her body and felt sorry for her again.

'During a disaster at sea the women and children are given first place on the lifeboats. So why the hell does Krycheyev plug the hole in our ark with such miserable, forlorn women . . .? At best, this is ridiculous, perhaps even downright cruel . . .'

The owners were not in the house and only a small tousled blonde head and a pair of black eyes below two mouse-tail plaits peered down curiously from the stove, with baited breath. Seeing that Horobenko had woken up, they stopped breathing completely, afraid to move.

The room was heavy with the smell of sweat, baked bread and

something unfamiliar, the stench of which hung in the air and pressed down on the lungs.

Horobenko dressed hurriedly and went outside.

All around him everyday village life was proceeding in its usual languid, unhurried way, without ardour or feverishness.

Horobenko startled a chicken and made his way to the gate.

With a heavy step, Harasymenko was moving across the street towards him, in the company of a blond, full-faced man in a soiled well-worn jacket.

"Good-day . . . This is our teacher . . . Perhaps before they all assemble there you could look at the school and reading-room. It's not too far away."

The fellow in the jacket looked at him askance, ran his gray eyes searchingly over Horobenko's face, and offered his hand hesitantly:

"Mykola Batiuk."

"Good, I'll gladly come along. Where do we go?"

Batiuk studied his face once more and coughed.

"Please, I'll show you."

"Well, you go on then, while I stir things up in the Executive Committee office." Harasymenko turned back and made off towards the square, slightly dragging his right foot. Against the green background of trees his deep red velour cap blazed away like a large thistle under the sun.

Batiuk moved along in silence for a while, summoning the words to make a start. Occasionally he would drift away to one side and give Horobenko's profile sideways glances, sizing him up.

He felt uneasy in the silence, wanting to say much to this Communist, who was a Ukrainian after all, but he did not know how to go about it.

The way out was provided all of a sudden.

Horobenko felt an unpleasant twitch in his stomach, and forgetting himself, he whispered:

"Ah, to hell with it, I forgot to grab some bread."

Batiuk flinched joyously.

"You haven't had breakfast yet? Follow me then, please . . . This is my house . . ."

His youthful, pimpled face immediately became naively sincere, appearing even younger. He no longer looked askance. His slightly crafty eyes looked straight ahead and a smile lurked in their corners.

"We'll have some of our maize gruel . . ."

At the table Batiuk completely shed his timidity and countless complaints streamed forth over the maize gruel.

"... It really is quite difficult here. The party cells are dominated by Russians, and even when there is one of ours like Harasymenko, they're Russifiers all the same."

Horobenko smiled involuntarily: Harasymenko — a Russifier! This really was funny. What kind of 'Russifier' could he be, when he couldn't string two Russian words together! He simply did not care about either language. He was totally committed to social problems.

But Batiuk would not agree with this:

"That may be true: he may be just as coarse as us all, however his politics are sometimes worse than those of an inveterate *Russky*. Take this for example: there was a pamphlet in the reading-room by Charlemagne titled *Protect Your Native Flora and Fauna* ... I should add, by the way, that this Harasymenko checks through all the new books himself. Well, do you know what? Harasymenko confiscated the pamphlet."

Horobenko placed his spoon on his plate and peered at Batiuk in surprise.

"*Da, da*, he confiscated it! Said: what is this about 'native' flora and fauna? Flora and fauna are international everywhere. This is an independence-oriented publication. It should not be made available."

Horobenko burst out in loud laughter. Batiuk did not like the laughter. His concealed, timorous hostility was now surfacing.

"It may be something to chuckle about, but when you have to work among such 'activists' each day, it makes you want to cry sometimes. I don't understand: there are Ukrainians in the party, after all — why don't they do anything?"

Horobenko looked intently at Batiuk and his gaze passed right through the stout jacketed figure.

Batiuk let himself go further and further, he not only complained now, he also accused, reproached and ridiculed.

Horobenko stopped eating, folded his arms on his chest and listened without saying a word.

All this talk was actually nothing new to him. Hadn't he heard all this from Pedashenko, Kovhaniuk and all those other sectarians who formed the miserly handful of 'conscious Ukrainians' in the district town! Those operetta characters with a sentimentally romantic soul and sorrowfully sarcastic eyes, who in the blossom-

ing of their zeal and pathos could only create Prosvita, this new temple built on the ruins of the Ukrainian Jerusalem . . .? None of this was new. They knew only how to complain and sigh: 'On our own, but foreign land'. . .

Well, yes. And this Batiuk was quoting these words now, just like hundreds of others. He was one of many. An average representative of the Ukrainian intelligentsia. Admittedly, it was rural, but what other one was there? There was none. Those who had led the Haydamak detachments, who had filled the UNR[1] ministry's departments, travelling on diplomatic missions to represent Ukraine — they were different. An extract. Equivalent to those who were sitting in the forests with sawn-off rifles.

The Batiuks were not of this calibre. All they could do was complain. Maybe even furtively, in quiet corners, hissing at those like Harasymenko. At Shevchenko's anniversary they would announce at school that Shevchenko was a revolutionary, that he had fought against Muscovite (they would emphasize this point) aristocracy, that he loved Ukraine . . . And with these dispirited words they would smuggle through a disguised nationalism, satisfied that it had turned out both Red and national . . .

They were the eternal servants of God and Mammon.

Batiuk's doleful, primitive words, his face red with temper and pimples, and his soiled embroidered shirt with its blue button under his jacket irritated Horobenko. 'What insolence they have . . .! These pimple-faced rural teachers, who are not up to any act, except perhaps as a nonentity, these small people who through the ages have borne anemia and treachery in their blood, they still considered creating a state! Having nothing more behind them than sentimental sorrow and mouldy 'national sacred relics', they could still complain! They still wanted the authorities to hear them? The authority of those who bought their right to exist with blood and the suffering of the tortured on countless fronts? No, this was at the very least naive!'

Horobenko felt the disgust awaken and grow within him. He moved away from the table a little and tried not to look at Batiuk . . . Now, a bandit, that was another matter. He was a savage, inveterate enemy. And he was active. He had to be mercilessly fought, but he could still be made sense of. But these . . . They

1. UNR — Ukrainian National Republic. The Haydamaks were volunteer units formed in response to the Bolshevik threat to Ukraine in December, 1917.

were eternal enemies. This might be paradoxical, but it was true: wild activity, temperament, fury were all probably closer to the point than this indifferent coldness. Even from purely national interests these Batiuks needed to be shot dead, for a young nation could not be sentimentally rotten, infected with pustules . . .! It had to be made of iron.

And once more a paradox entered Horobenko's mind.

The new, young Ukraine would be composed of others. Not these. But of the Harasymenkos. Those same Harasymenkos who were now throwing out Ukrainian books for the word 'native', who crippled their speech by selecting new, strange words for those notions which had uprooted their lives and pushed them from their beaten ancestral path. Yes, the new Ukrainian nation would be composed of Harasymenkos. And this wasn't even a paradox, if only in fact national consciousness was not an invention, an illusion, but a totally real thing. If there was something biological there.

Actually, was it biological or economical? Batiuk would not allow Horobenko to think through his thoughts. He wiped his chin with a towel and then sighed:

"This is our historical fate: we are being swindled and we don't even notice it."

This time Horobenko looked Batiuk in the eye with an openly hostile stare.

He itched to scream: 'You're a bitter nationalist! I'm going to arrest you . . .!'

But Horobenko screamed nothing of the sort. Instead he said dryly:

"You don't understand the historical process of social struggle. Take me to the reading-room. Where is it?"

They moved briskly along the fresh morning street without saying a word. Batiuk fell a short distance behind him. He looked hangdoggedly at the dust kicked up by his feet and was obviously suffering. The snubbed candour and the meek shadow of their intimacy had been left behind in his home, by the plate of maize gruel, and here, when something needed to be said to this now reticent, unfathomable Ukrainian Communist, he could find no words. Batiuk picked at his brain, but all the words which surfaced were not the ones he needed. And yet with every step that took them further from his house he realized that he badly needed to say something. After all, he had to unravel that remark: 'You don't understand the historical process of social struggle.'

The reading-room was already in view, and Slavina and Druzhynin were hurrying to join them, when Batiuk finally plucked up the courage. He stopped, and in confused fear, blinking, mumbled quietly:

"You must forgive me . . . I obviously had no desire to offend you, comrade. I spoke to you from the heart, as a Ukrainian . . ."

Horobenko replied in a cold, distant voice:

"I'm a Communist, comrade."

Slavina drew up to them at a trot, threatening him coquettishly with her hand.

"What is this? You went off without a word! We barely managed to catch up to you . . . You off to the reading-room? Let's go."

Druzhynin was waiting for them on the porch.

The reading-room was impressive with its neatness and order. Announcements, posters, portraits of Shevchenko, Franko, Drahomanov — all this had been assiduously nailed up, adorned with towels and branches of greenery.

A large red canvas in the middle immediately caught one's eye with the words:

'Through the national to the international!'

The tattered books and some papers were neatly stored in a cupboard.

Batiuk stood downcast by the door. He looked so forlorn and miserable, as if these three Communists, who had come to inspect the reading-room out of curiosity, had broken into a kulak house to requisition chests acquired over the years and empty the grain bins, and he was the owner. Batiuk watched Horobenko and Slavina askance, but their praises seemed not to reach his ears.

Slavina ran about the reading-room like a hen, poking her face everywhere, as if pecking seeds:

"The portraits have been nicely adorned . . . But why is there none of Illyich? I will definitely send you one from town . . ."

Druzhynin tarried for a long time in the furthest corner, examining something on the wall. At last he turned around and asked Horobenko languidly:

"So Mazepa* was a revolutionary too?"

Something gave a jab inside Horobenko. He came up to Druzhynin, anxious.

* Ivan Mazepa was a staunchly nationalist hetman who opposed Russia's domination of Ukraine and attempted to win freedom for Ukraine by siding with the Swedes against the czar.

"No, of course not. Why, what's the matter?"

Druzhynin turned away calmly to face the wall:

"He's on the wall here. I wasn't sure. I thought hetmans were like our tsars."

Dressed in a gold-embroidered *zhupan* mantle, Mazepa's face appeared young and majestic on the wall, framed in oak.

Horobenko flushed crimson for no reason at all. This Mazepa seemed to be hung here by his own hand, not Batiuk's. And now he had been caught on slippery ground. For some reason he solicitously read the inscription on the portrait, then turned sharply to face Batiuk and call out irritably in a raised, superior voice to the door:

"I really think, comrade teacher, that you could have found something more appropriate to hang here, instead of this Petliurite trash . . .!"

Slavina became rooted to the spot and opened her mouth in fear.

The stairs outside creaked under Harasymenko's heavy boots.

XIII

Even before the start of the meeting the overcrowded school was breathing heavily with sweat-soaked bodies. The black mass of bearded human flesh surrounded the presidium table on three sides and weighed down on Horobenko with its uncombed, muddy enormity. The eye had nowhere to escape it. Except perhaps by looking at the ceiling, but even there, in the *makhorka* smoke and vapours, its drunken wheezing spirit was beating convulsively against the blackened whitewash.

This gray mash of peasant rags had flooded the large classroom and lapped threateningly at one's very feet. The ninth breaker would strike at any moment and smash the tables, the benches, crushing the unfortunate re-election troika and the party cell in one swoop, flooding the villages, roads and forests with torrid insurrection . . .

The assembly of Soviets was only about to begin, but a hostile mood was already darting across the room like a snake and hissing ominously behind the backs, where the faces merged into a single wrinkled stain.

Harasymenko stood at the side of the table, solemn and stern. He studied the long, entangled rows of people and a shadow settled on

his forehead.

Without turning around he addressed Horobenko, speaking almost under his breath:

"*Da*, there'll be trouble with the rich ones. They're provoking the crowd already."

The calm Druzhynin and silent, taciturn Slavina were sitting at the table. She was irritated and angered by the unceremonious, inquisitive and slightly derisive stares of the peasant men. Many wide-open eyes had become fixed on her, examining every spot on her, as if she was some marvel.

Druzhynin sucked on his 'goat's paw' cigarette and looked wearily into the crowd. Harasymenko tinkled a small school bell, but the ringing crashed desperately only against the front rows, melting in the stormy din. It made no impression on those at the back.

Harasymenko desperately waved the bell over his head and shouted something. It was his waving hand which probably placated the crowd gradually until it became silent. The middle and back rows pricked up their ears. Horobenko stood up, and it suddenly became much too quiet in the classroom.

He was even a little awe-struck by the guarded, thick silence and Harasymenko's stern, solemn figure seemed so small and helpless.

Horobenko had prepared himself for a background of human voices, and so his voice now rang out needlessly high-pitched and piercing:

"In the name of the re-election troika I pronounce the Fedorivka Rural District Congress of Soviets opened . . .

"Comrade villagers! You have gathered here today as the masters of your rural district, to solve the burning issues of your life. Our congress is taking place under unusual circumstances. Our glorious Red Army has thrown the Polish aristocracy back across the Dnieper and Budenny's invincible cavalry is charging towards the palaces of Warsaw . . ."

As was customary in such instances in town, Slavina began to clap energetically. The crowd transferred its surprised eyes to her and the presidium became disconcerted. Slavina blushed in embarrassment but continued to clap even more enthusiastically. Druzhynin joined in, then Harasymenko began pounding his strong palms together. Those in the front row closest to the table hesitantly made a few confused noiseless claps and then Horobenko continued in his loud voice.

His words were an ordinary speech with pathetic expressions alien to the rough peasant mind, but this was only a beginning. This was only the foundation which would break through the sand to the firmament beneath and then a solid wall would be raised upon it.

Hundreds of intent eyes faced Horobenko, catching his every word, his every move. They really seemed to be listening with their eyes and not their ears. Each word that he uttered swung the scales of their mood. Everything which would follow depended on his speech. After all, this bearded body which had filled the classroom and stifled the air might not let them out of here. Horobenko could not catch them with his eyes — they melted into dashes, commas, splashed contours — but he could intuitively sense those hostile looks which pierced his face from every direction. Horobenko knew in his heart that this was the same crowd which had passed through the whole of human history with the shout: 'Crucify him!'

Horobenko's nerves tensed like the string of a crossbow, and his will to overpower the crowd grew, he wanted to defeat it. Above all else — overpower it! He drifted away from the hackneyed crumpled official terms and hit at the crowd with his own, which flowed from some secret inner source, from his heart, his nervous tension.

The crowd remained deadly silent. There was not even any wheezing or creak of footwear. Horobenko could sense only the hundreds of heads craning towards him, catching and devouring his words.

Was this crowd sympathetic or disaffected? It did not matter. The important thing was that it had already encircled him, it had unlocked the heavy bolts of its interior with Horobenko's words, and the initiative for action was now in Horobenko's hands.

"Long live Soviet power, the power of the workers and the peasants throughout the world . . ."

Exhausted, dripping with sweat, Horobenko returned to his chair with a slight tremor on his temple, while the rows stirred and splashed with applause.

"I propose we sing *The International.*"

Harasymenko had risen to his feet and announced this in broken Russian. Benches creaked in unison from all sides and several people began hesitantly in a hoarse, prayer-like voice unaccustomed to this melody:

"Arise ye, wretched of the earth . . ."

After the last 'mankind will rise' reached the open windows and

dissolved somewhere in the street outside, being followed, as usually happened, by an awkward silence, a cunning oldish voice called out from the crowd:

"Comrades, allow me to ask you a question . . ."

All heads turned around and at the end of what seemed like a passage appeared a pair of piercing eyes with a thin beard of flock. A bony, talon-like hand tugged at this beard, as if picking through the individual hairs.

"Well, as the comrade from the city just told us before, we are in control here, and indeed that is so, only we would like to . . ."

Harasymenko rose anxiously to his feet and looked sharply at the small beard. His clenched fist softly drummed the tabletop. He seemed keen to say something, while the beard cringed a little under his gaze, but continued:

"So that, of course, our matter can be placed on a business-like footing, we would like to sing the Lord's Prayer . . ." The beard turned around and scooped at the air with a hand holding a cap. "Am I right or not? I've finished . . ."

A wave of agreement spread through the back rows: "He's right! The Lord's Prayer! We request it!"

Slavina giggled hysterically, but her mirth was squashed by a roar which had exploded somewhere near the far wall and was already engulfing the middle rows.

Harasymenko slammed his fist down on the table and for a moment his voice rose above the din:

"No paternosters here! The kulak scum are staging a provocation . . ."

But his last words were drowned in a new, savage, louder outburst: "The Lord's Prayer . . .!"

". . . So the devil's 'national is permitted, but not prayers . . .!"

". . . Skrypnychenko, you begin . . ."

". . . Out the window with the sons of bitches . . .!"

The crowd was working into a frenzy. Hands flashed before Horobenko's eyes, twisted lips, someone's thrust-out chest. On one side he could already hear a furtive:

"Our Father, who art in Heaven . . ."

Horobenko rose sharply to his feet and raised his hand high. The crowd immediately became silent and the singing broke off. Druzhynin was tugging at his left sleeve:

"Let me speak to them . . . They'll understand . . ."

Horobenko called out sharply:

"Worker (he clearly emphasized this) Comrade Druzhynin has the floor."

A whisper spread through the crowd and died away. Calmly, without hurrying, Druzhynin left his seat and moved in front of the table.

"Comrade *radiany* . . .! At first Horobenko was puzzled by this form of address, but then he understood: though speaking in Russian, Druzhynin wanted to adapt his language to the specific rural conditions, and this *radiany* of his was a combination of two Ukrainian words which he knew — *rada*, the Soviet, and *hromadiany*, citizens.

"The point, *radiany*, is not that it's the Lord's Prayer. Who is forbidding that? Go ahead! But the church exists for that . . ."

Druzhynin's gaunt, sallow worker's face influenced the mass. His poise and calm were transferred to the crowd. The crowd cooled down and became silent. No one had any objections, and Horobenko suggested they elect a congress presidium.

"How shall we elect it, comrades, by list or personally?"

And again the wall behind the crowd answered with an importunate and stubborn shout:

"Parsonally! Parsonally!"

A second time the room filled with a racket, and the school resounded to shouts of:

"Parsonally!"

"No need for lists!"

"We don't understand here what this 'parsonally' means."

"Without lists! There's no need for that . . ."

Nearby a voice said: "We request that lists be used! The party cell proposes the following list . . ." and was swallowed up.

Harasymenko became sullen and pale.

"I told you there would be a problem with the rich. They've already incited the people . . ."

Horobenko raised his hand and, just like the first time, the commotion immediately subsided.

"All right. We'll do it personally. Please make your nominations."

Once more the wave burst forth, once more the fiery steed of the crowd broke its bridle:

"Pokotylo! Pokotylo! . . . Sydorenko . . .! Pavliy . . . We want Pokotylo . . .!"

Someone's booming voice called out:

"Teacher Batiuk, Mykolay Fedorovych!"

As if conspiring, the crowd roared in unison:

"The teacher! The teacher . . .! Mykolay Fedorovych!"

Batiuk stood by the door, smiling.

The smile was like finely crushed glass in Horobenko's eyes, and scratched at his lungs. 'Aha, so that's it! In a united front, chaps? This should have been expected. But no, to hell with him a hundred times! This will not be! No!'

However the reins of the meeting were already being snatched from Horobenko's hands.

Batiuk came up to the table and, without asking for the floor, simply addressed the congress:

"Respected community! I thank you for the honor, but I cannot accept. I have the school, the reading-room, a family . . ."

The crowd blustered louder even than before:

"We want Mykolay Fedorovych! Mykolay Fedorovych!"

Horobenko dashed out from behind the table and yelled at the top of his voice:

"Keep quiet, Citizen Batiuk! Resume your place!"

The people in the front rows became silent from the yelling, those at the back followed suit. Batiuk stepped aside in fright, but immediately afterwards smiled again. Horobenko took a deep breath of the crumpled, dirty air and addressed the crowd in a sharp tone:

"As the head of the re-election troika I forbid the candidacy of teacher Batiuk! This is no place for disguised Petliurite sentiments . . .!"

After these words Horobenko finally lost all control over the meeting. The room was swallowed up in a passionate lament.

It became impossible now to tell who was shouting what. To add to this, several dry shots cracked in the distance from the village outskirts and the sound of horses' hooves could be heard outside the school.

The classroom was bursting with a frenzy of confusion. And in this hell Horobenko suddenly sensed a passionate and fervent death. It breathed like hot coals at him from the contorted sweaty bodies and had already stretched its hand out towards the presidium. At any moment it would have the last say and then something terrible would happen.

Harasymenko hastily removed his pistol from its holster and pointed it before him. Slavina let out a shriek and backed into a

corner. Filled with horror, her eyes were riveted to Harasymenko's pistol.

But a strange thing happened: the crowd suddenly became silent, shrank back and wilted. A live path cut its way through the crowd, and along it hurried Popelnachenko and Drobot, together with three Red Army soldiers, all of them armed.

Popelnachenko clenched the strap of his rifle and whispered into Horobenko's ear:

"Clear out with us right away. A gang is entering the village."

A few more shots echoed outside again, this time much closer.

Popelnachenko turned sharply towards the meeting:

"The congress is being closed. A Revolutionary Committee will be appointed here. But remember — if anyone so much as lifts a finger to help the gang . . ."

He didn't finish. A blaze of gunfire erupted close by. A window pane tinkled merrily and broken glass crashed onto the sill.

The crowd rushed away from the windows and gushed in a torrent towards the door.

"Stop! Mother God . . .!"

Drobot jumped up onto a bench and raised his hand, holding aloft a coniform Austrian bomb.

"No one make a move! Mother! Mother!"

The crowd froze. The Red Army soldiers cocked their rifles. Popelnachenko took a step forward and ordered calmly:

"Communists, follow me!"

Outside, right next to the school, there was a feverish palpitation of gunfire.

XIV

"I guess we could begin the meeting?"

Like a saint on an icon, Khanov placed his hands on the table before him and surveyed those present.

Makaron nodded in agreement, looking phlegmatically at an inkstand. Gander wriggled nervously on his chair, stretched his neck upwards, as if his collar was troubling him, and sneaked glances at Horobenko. Borysenko sunk back into an armchair and was strangely silent.

The 'staff room' was far too restless. Something prevented the

pedagogues from beginning to chew on mollified words as usual, to feebly drag along the uninteresting and quite enchanting talk about the state of instruction at the teachers' courses. Each of them imagined only too well the absurdity and futility of speaking now on an empty stomach about some new educational plans, seeking new approaches, when there was nothing to eat, no textbooks, no notebooks or even pens. Each of them appraised their participation in meetings and conferences as a game of dupe, however when they assembled they pretended to be working, pondering and searching. This never worked for them, because they wanted to learn about their ration, the latest fresh rumours and to quickly hurry off to their gardens to plant cucumbers and potatoes. For this reason the pedagogues never lingered at the meetings . . .

However on this day the meeting was not to their liking.

Khanov supported his temples with his fingers, cast his eyes over his glasses and addressed his colleagues once more.

"Well, perhaps we could begin?"

Borysenko hastily jumped to his feet, as if stung, and measured out the 'staff room' with a nervous step.

"Actually, I first wanted to ask . . ." Borysenko paused and looked Horobenko in the eye. "*Da* . . . yes, I wanted to ask whether my respected colleagues consider it . . ." Borysenko faltered, stroked his pointed beard, and said with emphasis, "normal for a lecturer of Ukrainian, Comrade Horobenko, to allow himself to report secretly what we discuss here . . .?"

Horobenko forced a smile, but immediately felt his cheeks flush red and the air became stifling.

Gander hissed maliciously in the silence: "*Da-a* . . ."

"Viktor Semenovych, perhaps we could postpone the matter . . .?" the alarmed Khanov tried to defuse the incident which hung threateningly over the "teacher's room", but Gander firmly objected in Russian:

"*Nyet*, how can we? It's impossible . . . This concerns us all, we can't . . ."

Makaron gave Horobenko an indifferent look with his cold, micaceous eyes and noiselessly chewed on his spittle.

Horobenko crossed his legs and tried to bear up to Borysenko's look. He even mumbled mutely:

"Well, well . . . please . . ."

This angered Borysenko. He turned to the pedagogues and sang our in a melodramatic languid baritone:

"I'm asking whether we can agree to be spied upon, to be informed on?!"

Gander ground his chair into the floor:

"That is simply vile . . !" he said in Russian.

Horobenko rose and stretched out a hand towards Khanov:

"I'd like a word."

Borysenko sat down and raised his head disdainfully:

"Precisely. Please, explain yourself to us, Comrade Horobenko!" he continued in Russian.

Gander raised an eyebrow at Makaron: "Interesting, indeed . . ."

Khanov once again wriggled anxiously in his chair, not knowing where to bury his eyes: "Comrades, perhaps we can settle this matter somehow . . ."

But Horobenko had already moved away from his chair and grabbed its back with his hands.

"Well then, please. I don't, of course, intend to justify myself here, I just wanted to say . . ."

Gander flinched and hastily interrupted in Russian:

"It seems to me that it is a little inconvenient, that a lecturer of Ukrainian speak Ukrainian here . . . Since we don't understand . . ."

Khanov stood up and drummed his fingers impatiently on the table:

"Excuse me, Nikolay Ivanovich, in our republic each citizen can speak in his own tongue . . . Besides, we do live in Ukraine . . ."

Horobenko shuddered and pressed his lips tightly together. Khanov awaited his words with horror. Horobenko waited for a minute, rubbed his cheek and heavily ran his eyes about the room, as if this had been his first time here.

"Ye-e-es . . . This is very good that we've come to an understanding . . . Now everything is clear . . ."

The 'staff room' sank into a tense silence. And then Horobenko exploded with unprecedented force:

"There is real counter-revolution sitting here!"

The pedagogues flinched and froze. Horobenko lashed out again:

"I will take steps to scatter this clique . . . Enough!"

Khanov jumped from his place and stretched his hands out to Horobenko, pleading:

"I beg your pardon! Konstantin Petrovich! Why this? My dear chap, this is an obvious misunderstanding . . ."

Pale-faced Gander hastily pattered over to Horobenko on his

short, bandy legs:

"No, Comrade Horobenko . . . allow me . . . you completely misunderstood . . . I in no way wanted to . . ." he gabbled in Russian.

Horobenko tossed his shock of hair back, and then said in a triumphant drawl:

"I've finished. I have nothing further here to discuss with you. There is only work here for the Cheka . . ."

Horobenko turned sharply and left the room. The 'staff room' froze in the last scene of Gogol's *The Inspector General.*

One last time Horobenko pushed open the spring-loaded front door of his former gymnasium and it crashed shut behind him, loudly and ungraciously.

'Yes. I'm finished here. There is no middle line nor can there be! I'll write an appropriate report tonight and hand it over to Zivert for the Cheka . . .'

Horobenko walked briskly along the deserted midday streets, still feeling lighthearted, and hurried away from the pedagogical technical school.

'Yes, yes . . . Fine examples! What more can be said! At least they had reached agreement. And what impudence! What certainty, to hell with them . . .!' Ah, it was so clear: though Horobenko was a Communist, he was an intellectual all the same. Where had anyone seen an intellectual tell on others! He was treated like a member of their corporation, as a 'decent fellow'! Ah, the scum! 'Decent fellow'? I'll show you decency! Yes, yes — I'll write to the Cheka today, precisely the Cheka!'

Popelnachenko was right when he had said that Horobenko needed to be sent three or so times to deal with the kulaks before the intellectual would be shaken out of him.

'Only you were wrong, Popynaka — once was enough . . . That trip for the re-elections was enough to set me against them. Was it not symbolic then that Popelnachenko should have saved me from the gang and the delirious peasants then? The gang, and the old peasants, and Batiuk — they were 'ours', Ukrainians! They were 'for Ukraine'. And these damned beadles — they were on the other side too, but they were different enemies, enemies of both Ukraine and the revolution . . . Ah, why can't Popynaka and Krycheyev, and all of them not understand that in Ukraine the matter of nationality is so closely bound to the social question . . .! Why won't they realize that the Ukrainian national question is a com-

pletely real, vital notion, and not a mere fantasy . . .? But then — no, the time will come and they will understand. It has to be so. It can be no other way!

'All this is leading to something better. Both that Party Committee reference in my file and their suspicion towards me — all this is for the better. You are no longer the same person, Horobenko. No, no, not the same. The Rubicon has been crossed. And there is no turning back. There are only extreme courses. No middle line. There or there. Don't escape that which pains you, the complicated and incomprehensible. That is the way of the intelligentsia. Take it by the roots and chop into it. Simplify all those damned questions to an axiom, to $2 \times 2 = 4$. Shoot down all intellectual prejudices in you with machine-gun laughter, prejudices which were once fostered. They are only an encumbrance. To hell with this mill-wheel around your neck, which only drags you down to the bottom of counter-revolution. Yes, Horobenko — counter-revolution! Because now there is revolution or counter . . . Without an intellectual middle. So uproot this trash and throw it into the refuse heap, together with the Batiuks, Husaks and Borysenkos.'

These thoughts raced through his mind with centrifugal speed, intoxicated his brain, headily misted over his outlook. And suddenly in the very centre of it arose a wavering, naive, almost childish question:

'Is this you, Kostyk? Can it be you . . .?'

Kost Horobenko replied joyously to that inner voice, as if it was that of an idiotic, long familiar fool:

'Yes, yes, don't be amazed my friend — it is me. Actually, not me, but that which was once me. Kostyk has died, or, to be truthful, he has been dying gradually and that which has not yet died will in any case soon be dead. But then, what is death? I'm not a philosopher, but even without philosophy it is evident, without much thought, that the death of one is at the same time the birth of another. Therefore, death is unable to interrupt the eternal kaleidoscope of life . . .! Do you understand any of this, my friend? It is so simple and clear. You must realize that Kostyk no longer exists, just like there is no more Nadia, no father and his two buildings, nothing of what existed then. Now there is 'Comrade Horobenko'. A member of the CP(B)U. Understand what a beautiful life this is, the devil take it! How beautiful it is . . .! And I thank the revolution, I thank the Party for teaching me to love it so strongly.'

XV

Druzhynin seated himself down on the chair in front of Krycheyev's desk and tapped the punch against the filer.

"Comrade Krycheyev, no Marxisms can justify simple human inanity! There's no need to tell me stories . . .!"

Krycheyev smiled faintly and twirled the pencil in his fingers. Druzhynin turned away from Krycheyev offendedly and addressed Popelnachenko:

"This is great! I'm walking past our theatre this morning, you know, when I stop: I hear hammering coming from the roof above. What's going on? I thought perhaps Radchenko had found a way of repairing the theatre. I looked up, but they were ripping off the iron sheeting, the sons of bitches.

"Do you follow me, Popynaka?"

Popelnachencko smiled and coughed:

"No, so far I don't understand a damned thing."

"Well, get this brother, this in fact is our construction. Radchenko is reforming it. The idiot ordered the theatre to be dismantled and cinematographic booths to be built on the outskirts from its bricks and iron sheeting! What a head, brother!"

Popelnachencko moved up closer to Druzhynin and slapped him on the knee:

"Don't beat about the bush, Druzhynin. Something isn't right here. You'd better tell me . . ."

Druzhynin became indignant:

"What do you mean, 'not right'? I went myself to ask Radchenko."

"And?"

"Here's your 'and'! He says what other alternative can there be. The theatre is centrally located, it will always be at the service of the bourgeoisie, it needs to be moved to the masses. Lenin said: cinema is the best way of educating the proletariat, well then, sacrifice the bricks from the theatre for the booths. That's what he's stirred up, brother!"

Krycheyev was surprised and did not want to believe him:

"You're exaggerating, it couldn't have been like that."

"It's a fact! A whole cartload of tin sheeting has already been carted off to the Svynarka district . . . I even asked him: 'Comrade Radchenko, what if I or anyone of our members wanted to take his wife and kids to the theatre — then is that also 'theatre at the

service of the bourgeoisie'?"

Druzhynin spat on the ground and shook his head:

"No, my dear comrades, this is no way to shave . . .!"

Party committee members stood around him and smiled. No one seriously believed that such an outlandish plan of reconstruction could really have entered Radchenko's head. For this reason they failed to comprehend why Druzhynin had seized onto the theatre so passionately. All this seemed more like an anecdote to them, than something from real life, and their outbursts of laughter and jokes gradually shifted from the nature of the incident to Druzhynin himself, his ardour and gesticulation.

But Druzhynin could not calm down. He was pained and fervently defended the old slovenly building of the town theatre, stranded next to the putrid stream under the willows; it was as if they were discussing the ruin of his own ancestral home.

". . . Lenin said that 'film is a good thing' — correct. But you must understand, you blockhead, what it means and where to apply it. You are given power, you idiot, then use it respectfully, instead of performing tricks . . ."

Horobenko listened to Druzhynin from afar and marvelled at him. He liked both Druzhynin's frank indignition and his simple candidness, and the fact that this outburst was directed against Radchenko (that meant that finally Radchenko would be deciphered!).

Druzhynin was a small, contemporary sketch of the future proletariat. The whole proletariat would one day be like him. Druzhynin had now come to the rescue of the distant theatre, quite alien to him. What had it given him? Former 'Little Russian' plays, Prosvita concerts and *The Bayadere*. Still, Druzhynin wanted the theatre, attempting to rescue it from Radchenko's experiments. Therefore art too, the abstract art of tomorrow and the putrid today, was not at all alien to him. Eh, you nice, good Druzhynin . . .!

Krycheyev finally put an end to the conversation:

"I'll investigate this, Comrade Druzhynin. Comrade Birynberg, summon Radchenko tomorrow for four o'clock. And now . . ." Krycheyev made himself more comfortable in his armchair, "let's begin our meeting. Today we have a talk by the chairman of the State Publishing House branch. Comrade Miliutin — the floor is yours."

The Party members reluctantly drifted away from Druzhynin and scattered throughout the room.

Rotund Miliutin monotonously and disinterestedly drawled out the endless figures of books and magazines received from the centre and again pulled out new ribbons of figures on the dissemination of literature in the outlying districts. Each of those present seemed to be thinking their own thoughts and no one listened to Miliutin. Only Popelnachenko, his elbows resting on his kness, looked askance at Miliutin's tiny gray sloppy eyes and Krycheyev occasionally jotted something into his notebook.

After Miliutin had finally finished, Popelnachenko was first to seek the floor with a question:

"I would like to know why the State Publishing House branch is disseminating portraits of Drahomanov and where they obtained them?"

Miliutin's eyes darted about guiltily:

"This actually isn't the branch . . . From memory, Comrade Horobenko brought them to us from the former Prosvita, or something like that, and we . . ."

Popelnachenko twisted his lips sarcastically and smiled. Those present transferred their weary gazes in surprise to Horobenko. Once more Horobenko felt his heart pound away uneasily and his cheeks turned stupidly red. He stretched his hand towards Krycheyev:

"May I have the floor . . . Yes, it was I who handed the State Publishing House branch the portraits of Drahomanov. As you are aware, Drahomanov is an old Ukrainian revolutionary. I see nothing criminal in my actions . . ."

Horobenko wanted to return Popelnachenko's sarcastic smile, but it turned out far too miserly. Up near Krycheyev the district supply commissar, Drobot, was asking someone in a bass:

"Who is this Drahomanov? I don't seem to recall his name . . ."

Popelnachenko rose to his feet and smiled malevolently. Then his face became serious and the yellow bloodless skin bulged out on his cheekbones, shining:

"Comrades! I declare that Drahomanov is a well-known Ukrainian nationalist. These portraits must be removed from the reading-rooms and schools. And Horobenko needs to be grabbed firmly by the snout . . ."

The people stared in silence at Horobenko, as if he had just been convicted. Horobenko moved hastily up to Krycheyev.

"I protest against such misrepresentation. In the end we can refer this to the centre, since Comrade Popelnachenko doesn't know himself . . ."

Once more Popelnachenko declared firmly:

"I propose these portraits be removed."

Krycheyev stopped him.

"Popelnachenko, don't get hot under the collar. We won't be settling the matter now. I'll think about it myself. Comrades, are there any more questions concerning the speech?"

On this day Horobenko did not go to the Communist dining-hall, but went straight home along back streets and climbed into bed.

Once more he felt broken inside and the small room nestled alone somewhere in the very pit of life.

Horobenko buried his face in a pillow and covered his head with his jacket. He shut his eyes tightly together, pressed his hot hands between the knees of his drawn-up legs, but it was no use:

Popynaka's twisted face was still there and his ears rang with the words 'this is a well-known Ukrainian nationalist' . . .

The calm he had felt after his trip to the village and the scene with the pedagogues had gone. It had been completely annihilated and could never be regained.

'So, nothing has changed in their view towards me. They still distrust me as before, to them I'm as much a nationalist as the imagined Drahomanov.'

Again his heart ached deep inside and stopped him from lying still in the one spot. Horobenko turned over and thought in despair:

'All right, then, if they consider me to be a Ukrainian nationalist, why don't they throw me out of the Party? This would be so logical . . .'

Horobenko scraped away the jacket from his head and the gloomy soiled wall posed him a question:

'What would you do outside the Party . . .?'

'Fool! What are you asking about? Your ships have long been burnt, and there is nothing for you to do outside the Party. Understand — there is nothing to do. Beyond it there is only a desert for you.

'It makes no difference what they think of you. What's important is what you think. Do you already know yourself? You aren't the fellow you were, Horobenko. No, no — not at all. You know the importance of things. But who are you? Have a good think first — have you eroded away everything which does not relate to Communism, which flits about inside you from your past? Why

the hell did you need Drahomanov, who although a Ukrainian revolutionary, was still Ukrainian. And what does Drahomanov's Ukrainian ethos stand for in mankind's universal conflagrations, in that great fire which will sweep the earth in preparation for a new life! Well then, Horobenko? Speak up . . .!'

'Aha, Horobenko, so now you remember? That's just it!'

The Central Rada*. Teachers, 'Cossack' soldiers and other party intellegentsia . . . And suddenly some bishop arrived before the white bastions of the Pedagogical Museum, claiming to be a Ukrainian. He said a few words in broken Ukrainian and blessed the place. And what happened? The naive 'topknots'† went mad with joy. 'We have a bishop too! We are a real nation, not just peasants and teachers!' . . .

You are like them, Horobenko — only from the opposite pole:

'We Ukrainians had revolutionaries too! Here is Drahomanov for you. Isn't the root of this, the essence, an embryo of nationalism? You want to emphasize that Drahomanov was a Ukrainian? Well, own up — isn't it true? Yes. Isn't it all the same to a Communist what nationality Drahomanov, Zheliabov and Khalturyn are? To a true Communist, Kostyk, it is all the same. And Popelnachenko is thrice right, he even caught you at it today. Perhaps he was wrong in his assessment of Drahomanov, he may have distorted the facts on purpose, but in the end Drahomanov was a revolutionary, perhaps even a cosmopolitan (you know full well, Kostyk, that you don't even know Drahomanov all that well!), but you, Horobenko, whether you like it or not, are a Ukrainian nationalist after all, be it only one quarter, or an eighth, a tenth or even a hundredth part. You still haven't eradicated that. And besides this, you're also a petty intellectual. That's what it is. That is the splinter sitting inside you, thwarting you. They're quite right about you.'

Horobenko slipped a hand under his head and tried to argue:

'But no! Aren't they proud of the fact that Lenin is a Russian, that Moscow has become the heart of world revolution? Don't they have that too?'

And once more the sudden unwhitewashed wall posed him a question:

'Who are they? After all, Popelnachenko is a Ukrainian by

* Central Council set up in Kiev on March 17, 1917 as an all-Ukrainian representative institution, soon becoming the centre of the Ukrainian liberation movement.

† Derogatory term used by Russians when referring to Ukrainians.

descent, so is Nestorenko, and Harasymenko too, Drobot doesn't know himself who he is . . .'

The door was quietly opened by Paraska Fedotovna. She ran a furtive eye about the room and, convinced that there was no one else in the room apart from Horobenko, she entered smoothly.

"I've come to you. You wouldn't like to taste some fresh patties? Please. I've just baked them myself . . ."

Paraska Fedotovna placed the plate of patties on his table and sat down on the edge of the chair.

". . . It's simply stewing today! Working towards a fine storm. You've probably noticed, it's always like that — once it's humid during the day, there'll be a storm in the evening . . ."

Horobenko sat up in bed, lowered a foot to the floor and scowled.

"What did you say . . .? Patties . . .? Aha — patties, all right."

Paraska Fedotovna brought the plate up to him.

"Take one, please."

Horobenko languidly took a pattie, bit off a warm piece of it with some meat and suddenly sensed how terribly hungry he was. Greedily, without realizing it, he emptied the whole plate. Paraska Fedotovna smiled amiably at him.

"Well — were they tasty?"

Replying with a smile, Kost said childishly:

"They were delicious. Very delicious . . ."

He got up from the bed, stretched to his full height and involuntarily noticed Paraska Fedotovna's slightly sagging, but still firm breasts under her blouse. Paraska Fedotovna folded her hands on her knees and was tickling Horobenko merrily with an immodest, carnal gaze.

Horobenko paced across the room, but could no longer help but return to the full-faced, stout woman with soft plump breasts. He turned around slowly and sensed even more distinctly how this mound of jiggling meat reeking of cooking fat and onion attracted him so irresistibly. Paraska Fedotovna gave a small wink with her left eye and said languidly:

"You must find it tedious, all alone . . .? How is it that you're on your own?"

Horobenko slid his hands in his pockets and approached Paraska Fedotovna with sweeping steps. His voice was hoarse and trembled a little:

"I *am* lonely, Paraska Fedotovna!" He involuntarily covered her broad shoulder with his palm and Paraska Fedotovna rested her

tousled head against his belly.

Horobenko looked savagely at her naked shoulder and whispered unconsciously:

"Yes, I'm lonely, very lonely, the devil take it . . .!"

Paraska Fedotovna stroked his thigh and chuckled passionately:

"Ooh, my impetuous one! My wee little Communist . . ."

★ ★ ★

How it had happened — Horobenko could not work out. Flushed and bare-headed, Paraska Fedotovna lay on the bed beside him and was stretching sweetly.

"Ooh, how impetuous you are . . .! Tired granny right out . . ."

Horobenko looked with disgust at her corpulent bared knees, unable to tear his gaze from them. The wave of passion had passed in a cloudburst and he now felt slippery and dirty.

'Why doesn't she go?' Horobenko thought irritably.

Taking her time, Paraska Fedotovna wiped herself with the hem of her soiled skirt and got up slowly.

"Well, now I have to go and feed the porker . . . Ho, ho, I'm tired out . . ."

Paraska Fedotovna tied her hair into a knot at the back and sailed up to Horobenko. She paused before him for a minute, cocking her head as she admired him, and suddenly hugged him and loudly smacked her lips against his cheek.

"My nice little Communist . . .!"

This was so unexpected that Horobenko even drew back towards the wall. He looked with wide-open fearful eyes at the place where Paraska Fedotovna had been standing until a moment ago, and through the door he heard the echo of her slippers slapping away down the passage.

The tortured bedding lay crumpled against the wall.

And once more a caressing, gentle voice spoke inside him. It was not reproachful, only melancholy:

'Is this you, Kostyk . . .?' And Nadia's live bust appeared near the window, two large transparent tears on her cheeks. Only two. There were never any more. This was the first and last time that Kost had seen them on Nadia's face as he hurried off from the warm evening twilight of Nadia's bedroom into the frost outside, into fields on sad, unknown travels. That evening the Directory's detachments were leaving the city, that evening he saw Nadia alive

for the last time. The last time . . .

Two tears. Two pure, limpid tears . . .

And suddenly his memory was invaded by the repugnant, vulgar dissonance of Paraska Fedotovna's shameless chuckling and her passionate utterance steeped in kitchen smells: 'My impetuous little Communist!' . . .

Horobenko grabbed hold of his jaw, as if a tooth was suddenly troubling him, and limply collapsed into a corner.

And as a last reproach a voice seeped deep into his chest and did not melt away immediately:

'Woe! The best theories can coexist so simply and easily alongside the filthiest practices . . .'

How ugly life was, after all!

XVI

What he had seen before this — Kost had forgotten. All that had suddenly plunged into oblivion, like the boring part of an uninteresting, insipid film. Instead the darkness divulged a short, surprisingly vivid, stunning fragment.

The first thing to register was the rhythmic clicking of military boots against pavement.

"Hup! Hup . . .! Hup-two, hup-two . . ."

It was some military unit marching along. Perhaps a company, a battalion, or even a whole regiment. Only they weren't Red Army soldiers. No. They didn't move like this. These steps reflected every faultlessly connected nut to a well-tended age-old mechanism.

Nothing would fly off here, there was only . . .

Click! Click! Hup-two, hup-two.

Iron heeltaps had probably been nailed onto the heels of their boots and the boots themselves were a little too heavy — that was why it sounded like that.

But why were they wearing peakless caps? That was incomprehensible. Peakless caps had long since disappeared, but yet — where had he seen this picture?

Roughly shorn heads, courageously wide-open eyes and frozen stony elbows supporting rifles resting on shoulders.

'Ah — how could I? Well, what kind of Red Army soldiers are these!?'

Kost strained his eyes and noted with horror the white cockades on the peakless caps and the front chain of red epaulettes.

"Eyes front! Draw up to the right . . . Gentlemen officers . . ."

Kost looked harder and saw that the clicking against the pavement was only a clot, but that in fact a crowd of richly dressed, festive people was advancing towards him. Who was there? No, he could not make anything out. A white dress with a white bouquet of roses. Why such weird harmony — a white dress and large white roses? And anyway — why roses . . .? A priest's golden vestments, a police commissary with a silver sword-belt. Who was the commissary? Aha — Slatin! The same Slatin he had known from the gymnasium. And here were gold buttons on a blue tunic and the red ribbons of decorations. That looked like Khanov. What was his former aunt screaming, the one who had married the neophyte merchant? What was she doing here?

The thuribular chant of past litanies engulfed the street, the footpaths, the houses and the crowd. There were no more people. They had merged into a frenzied roar, in which the ear could barely discern the unpleasant, chapped reedy voice of the cathedral choirmaster, Suprunenko.

That damned, nauseously familiar singing drew closer and closer. Kost retreated and saw that he and the crowd were separated by a completely empty distance. It grew smaller every instant.

Where was this? Was Denikin's army entering Kiev, or something . . .? Then why his former aunt, who was married to the neophyte, and the police commissary, Slatin? And why such low buildings, and what was this old wooden bridge under the willows . . .? Ah, no. This was not Kiev, this was his district town, and here on the right was the putrid creek into which he had tossed the physicist's microscope.

Kost backed off, and without turning around he had already stepped onto the rotted planks of the bridge, while the distance between him and the crowd kept getting ever smaller, catastrophically smaller. He should kick up his heels and run. Run without looking back. Without thinking. The hell out of here. Away from the devout roar and the sight of the crowd. But he didn't have the energy to run. He couldn't even turn around. The crowd had fixed its thousand-eyed gaze on him and was riveting him to itself, paralysing Kost. Kost was already at the far end of the bridge, while ahead of him the crowd had reached the bridge. Both stopped unexpectedly.

Suddenly a swift wave surged through the crowd, an indecisive sharp movement, and then a Russian chant rose over the bridge, the willows, right up to the church domes: 'Beat the Jews and the commissars! The Jews . . .!'

Could Gander really have shouted that?! Could they really stoop so low . . . and phlegmatic Makaron was moving alongside Slatin, stooped, holding a lasso . . .

Kost flinched. He became tense and — yes: he would not retreat now, but would make straight for the crowd! He would come right up to its monstrous snout and, like a captured inveterate horse thief at a village lynching, would spit at the crowd:

"Here! Beat me . . .!"

Kost had already moved his feet forward to take the first firm step when on his right he suddenly saw a small Jewish boy sitting peacefully on the bridge railing between himself and the crowd, thoughtlessly swinging his feet through the air. He was holding a small red flag and waving it joyously somewhere at the crows above, or the green treetops, or at the sun.

"Stupid little kid!" Kost exclaimed involuntarily. This boy had not seen the crowd at all and was smiling joyously. Kost wanted to call out to him to run away. But his jaws were frozen together and he could not utter a single word.

This unfortunate child would die. It would be crushed by the savage crowd or it would fall headlong over the railing into the water. It could not be left there. It and its small flag was all that remained of 'that', it was the last thing forsaken between Kost and the crowd.

"Rescue it! Rescue the child!"

Kost strained every muscle and dashed off towards the boy, and at that very moment hooves sharply struck the opposite end of the bridge . . . jet-black horses . . . peakless caps . . . the sudden gleam of a sword . . .

★ ★ ★

Kost opened his eyes, sat up in bed and surveyed the room in amazement. A crumpled pillow hung off the bed and his blanket had fallen to the floor.

The wall was lightly painted with dawn silhouettes of trees.

Kost dropped his feet to the floor but still could not regain his senses.

'What a strange and exceptionally vivid dream . . .!'
A pale sunrise illuminated the window.

XVII

"Just wait a minute, Horobenko, I'll be with you presently."

Mysha Chernyshov moved his briefcase aside, together with piles of 'cases', and immersed himself in the minutes. He pressed his palms against his temples and this made his whitish hair ruffle up at the top, making Mysha Chernyshov appear like a poor helpless pupil who could not solve an exercise. These were all thrice-damned judicial section matters. With invisible saboteur's hands they ceaselessly wove an intricate lace of judicial definitions, from which one could never break freee. Mysha Chernyshov had tried to rend them apart, but nothing came of it. This was all very confusing, but it was complicated further still by Lawyer Terletsky. Occasionally Mysha Chernyshov thought: why was it that Lawyer Terletsky had to hang around him all the time and waffle on? Why the hell did he need Terletsky with his Roman law and old statutes? Terletsky had a sow's lips and a white, browless face. At times Mysha Chernyshov looked at Terletsky and a thought immediately sprung to mind: what if they took one of these swinish mugs with its fleshy neck on which the fat collected in folds, shoved a red egg into its mouth and placed it in the window of the smallgoods store . . .!

Then Mysha Chernyshov forgave Terletsky his petty-bourgeois background, the boring figures of the clauses with their endless points, and looked mirthfully into his mouth. Without blinking an eye, Terletsky recounted anecdotes and adventures from his judicial practice, and Mysha Chernyshov listened to his witticisms, thinking:

"Obviously scum, but a man after all . . ."

However Chernyshov understood perfectly: Terletsky was a terrible blade and undoubtedly was deceiving him and the whole judicial section in something unseen. Truthfully speaking, Terletsky should have been liquidated long ago.

But therein lay the tragedy: Terletsky — a saboteur and counter-revolutionary, who might even be accepting bribes from the kulaks — was nonetheless indispensible. And when some 'business' seemed quite simple to Mysha Chernyshov, that one could grab the

swindler by the gills and toss him to the wind without a second thought, Terletsky would calmly and peremptorily point to articles of various codes, falling back on VUTsVK* resolutions, People's Commissariat of Justice decrees, and in the end Mysha Chernyshov had to give in to his infinite black magic.

Because of Terletsky, like it or not, he had to pore over codes one more time, immerse himself in instructions and decrees, and without realizing it, lower himself into a clerical quagmire. This was quite an unnecessary bother and it angered him that in fact Terletsky, without really dictating, was in fact dictating and by his mere presence prompted him, Chernyshov, the director of the judicial section, to become bogged down in this red tape and paperwork.

"Just a minute . . . there's only a little more work here . . ." Chernyshov said hastily to Horobenko and knocked his knees together impatiently, attempting to comprehend the very essence of some protocol.

The door creaked open and half the courier's frail figure appeared, and behind him in the twilight of the passage was Terletsky's browless forehead and someone else's questioning, meek eyes.

The courier's treble tittuped:

"Comrade Terletsky is here asking to see you. Is that all right? Then there's also someone from Kupriyanivka . . ."

Without looking up from the protocol, Mysha Chernyshov yelled out angrily this time:

"Give them all the boot . . .!"

Taking his time, the courier firmly closed the door, while Chernyshov mumbled in outrage:

"The rotters never let one finish reading . . .!"

Chernyshov had wanted to finish the protocol, but after the interruption he could no longer summon his scattered thoughts, becoming sidetracked by trifles. Chernyshov threw the protocol aside and waved his hand:

"Ah, to hell with it! I'll do them tonight!"

He rose from the table and went over to a desk. He turned his key around twice in the drawer marked 'secret matters' and sucked on a greenish bottle, like a child at its mother's breast. Thirsty gulps

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bubbled away merrily and Mysha Chernyshov let out a satisfied groan.

"Listen, Chernyshov — what's this in aid of?" Horobenko said gently and reproachfully.

"I can't otherwise, brother. The rotters would get me in a knot."

"You're undermining your authority . . ."

"Come on, drop it! A fine professor you are to read lectures!" Chernyshov barked back, locking the drawer.

"Sooner or later they (Horobenko pointed at the door with his eyes) will find out about this . . ."

"What?!" Mysha Chernyshov turned sharply towards Horobenko. "I'll show the rotters to 'find out'! I have my ways!"

Chernyshov described a complicated knot with sweeps of his hand and again lowered himself into his armchair.

"Well, to hell with them!" And Chernyshov immediately forgot about them.

"The point is this, Horobenko. I heard that you've organized an art workshop."

"That's right."

"You see, I have a young buddy. The son of a bitch draws very well! I wanted to send him to you, get him to improve himself. How is the workshop coming along?"

"That's possible. The workshop . . .? Still limping along. We lack funds."

Mysha Chernyshov asked seriously, with genuine interest:

"Do you have a teacher?"

"There's an instructor. Some slovenly artist. There's only a problem with models. There aren't any."

Mysha Chernyshov thought a while. He scowled a little, screwed up his eyes and suddenly brightened again:

"Know what, Horobenko, I've got an idea . . . I'll help you. Brother, I've got two officers' wives steaming away in the DOPR,* sent there by the Cheka. They're good for nothing, aristocrats — we could send them off to you as models . . .!"

Mysha Chernyshov turned red and rejoiced at his resourcefulness. There was a gentle, naive twinkle in his eyes. But Horobenko became sullen. As if not comprehending, he asked again:

". . . As models?"

* Russian acronym for House of Correctional Labour.

Chernyshov leaned over enthusiastically towards Horobenko:

"Well, *da*! They're beauties, see! One, Shyhoryna, is the wife of the cavalry captain . . . and the other . . . man, oh man! No one's ever drawn models like these!"

Horobenko listened gloomily. Mysha's enthusiastic words circled like bats in his head, unable to settle down.

'Two officers' wives for models . . . Shyhoryna, the wife of the cavalry captain . . . steaming away in the DOPR . . . Naked female breasts . . . The workshop . . .'

Horobenko shifted in his chair and asked in a stammer:

"But perhaps, this will be . . . that is . . . hard for them . . .?"

Mysha Chernyshov was surprised, but then waved his hand about:

"What's this 'hard'? On the contrary. Besides, they're doing forced labor — there's nothing to discuss . . .! You know, Shyhoryna isn't too hot, but Kanonova — she's simply . . . (Chernyshov stopped to find a suitable simile) . . . as if she's stepped right out of a painting! I've never seen a woman like that, brother . . ."

Horobenko's eyes grew large and stared at Chernyshov in fright. Thoughts swirled around in his head, but Horobenko was unable to shape them.

. . . To take two women and, without asking their consent, just because they were captives, to force them to pose naked before his worker-soldier auditorium . . . That was much too brutal. It was even plain savage!

Eh, you Mysha Chernyshov! A small likeable, naive boy who played by cutting a sick cat's tail with a blunt knife . . .!

And suddenly Kost thought:

'And what if Chernyshov had selected Nadia like that, to become a model?'

A lightning bolt of cold darted down his back, but Horobenko roused himself, rose sharply and said firmly:

"Good. Send the two officers' wives. They'll come in handy . . . Come on, let's go. We're probably already late for the meeting."

Horobenko turned abruptly and made for the door, while Mysha Chernyshov hastily stuffed papers into his briefcase.

XVIII

It was stuffy and smoky. The *makhorka* tobacco smoke had shrouded the large hall in a blue mist and gave rise to a dull pain in the head. The wiring was faulty and there was no electricity. Candles were burning. They burned solemnly, mysteriously and almost with a warning. Moonlight struggled timidly through the opened windows on the right and became lost in the room. The large candles illuminated a few faces, carving deep wrinkles into them, maintaining their expressions and so, as if compensating for this, the backs of heads were outlined even darker and the shaggy silhouettes of many people floated out of the darkness. The candles flickered quietly and their flickering left its mark on the faces just as silently. The faces grew brighter, then darker. Someone was speaking. Yes, Zivert, the head of the Political Bureau, was speaking (actually it was better this way: there was no confusion with the district Cheka). But the silence of the candles was so great, so triumphal, that it seemed Zivert was not saying a thing. A large, mass pantomime was taking place. The sharp features of faces illuminated by candles were brimming with sounds and the open lips — with silence. For this reason the Party organization's general meeting seemed conspiratorial, and Zivert's words were like a distant echo, exploding towards the ceiling, the windows, his resounding cries sounding almost prophetically.

". . . There will be victims, there will be great losses. We must be prepared for this. The gangs have become much too insolent. They even threaten the city now. Only the day before yesterday they tore the produce-allotment activists — Communist Kirpichnikov and Komsomol member Feihyn — to pieces. We had to execute half the hostages in Zhuravne, but this will have to be done again and again. There's no need for kid gloves, comrades. The banditism must be burnt away with red-hot iron . . .!"

Zivert's gaunt face, with its protruding cheekbones and sunken cheeks, became lost and disappeared under his large, glistening eyes. The eyes swallowed up the face. The pallor of his face seemed to exist solely to frame in light grief that renunciation of everything irrelevant and the firm steadfastness, which burned in his eyes. Horobenko could not see Zivert's figure behind all the heads — only a torso dressed in a field jacket and the sweep of a hand united into an unrestrained determined movement, into a steely dynamism.

The meeting had been going for four hours already, but there was no feeling of lassitude. What lassitude? Where was it? The squabbles had disappeared, the petty accounts which rustled through the organization's weekdays — it seemed as if they had never existed. Instead something unanimous was growing, something great and unusual. Perhaps heroic? Maybe simply inevitable? Steadfastly growing, one could physically sense it filling everything, pouring into the brain, the veins, making the muscles resilient. And it was impossible to distinguish where it ended in you, and where in your neighbour, in Krycheyev, Druzhynin, Popelnachenko. It was something universal and each person in it was a tiny, but necessary part. And this was understandable: storm clouds were appearing in black billows. At present one could only hear the distant roar of the thunder, but the silence was growing thicker all around, and it could be rended by a fiery arrow at any moment. Who knew what was happening at this moment out there where the villages clustered together in small flocks amid the golden fields and green woods? Was Harasymenko still alive, and the many others like him scattered beyond the town, dispersed in a chaos of disorder, rebellion and ruin? Where are you, how are you, our distant rural comrades . . .?

The silence in the room became thicker still, and the candles flickered more mysteriously. Meanwhile Zivert's voice continued — business-like, deliberate and calculated — without ranting or even a note of pathos:

". . . But first of all we must extract banditism's sting, tear out its tongue. We must finger well all these Prosvita members, these former members of the Ukrainian National Alliance . . . We must finally drag out into the light of day these manufacturers of the forest ideology . . .!"

After these words something palpitated once again inside Horobenko and began to thump in his bosom, but he immediately squashed it. He even craned forward a little and once more listened greedily to Zivert. The man's tempered words attracted him, forced him to listen. He grabbed at his words while they were still alive, before they had taken hackneyed root in his memory, like various other words from countless other speeches. Horobenko importunately strove to grasp who he was. No, he wasn't wondering whether the fellow was a Latvian, a Pole or a Jew (this was indeed another race!). No, it was not that at all. But this. Where had it come from? Where had this dynamic figure appeared from, with its

burning flames of eyes and tempered words, as brilliant as the blade of a dagger? From the catacombs? From a Roman taverna where gladiators gathered for deliberation, or from an Inquisition tribunal, or from the fires of the Taborites, or perhaps from the underground National Freedom* . . .?

That was not it at all. What comparisons could there be! It was realistic and simple: Zivert was the quintessential embodiment of this whole room, in general, of the thousands of rooms lit by electricity or candles, with night-lamps and without, those rooms which suddenly sprouted fresh buds on the dried wood of the old life. This was the nerve which reacted most strongly when the instinct of Party self-preservation was aroused.

Horobenko looked intently into the lively, large sharp eyes while his thoughts continued to paint a picture of Zivert.

'. . . Zivert is one of the few who have already completely crossed yesterday's limits. Both I, and Chernyshov, and Drobot — we all are still only trudging along our paths, while he is already far on the other side. For this reason Zivert (without posing, but quite naturally) has in him the poet, the accountant, the gentle lyre (yes, yes — who have I heard that from? — Zivert plays the violin beautifully, he is simply a virtuoso) and the bloodied sword. And so it finally makes sense why the temperament of a savage and higher mathematics are indivisibly intertwined in Zivert.'

These were people who, despite everything previous, had a fixed habit of bringing matters to a conclusion. They had to conclude them, or die. Actually, not die. That was the thing, they would never die. No matter what happened, they would continue to live in people's imaginations as a legend, as brave, iron conquistadors who dared to be the first to step on the unknown shores of social truth.

In their tracks, drenched with their own and others' blood, would grow the chrysanthemums of poems, novels and folk tales.

In the memoirs of future generations these small Ziverts would join the line of Marats, Robespierres, Dombrovskys, Delescluzes, Gontas and Zalizniaks. Herein lay the strength and beauty of Zivert, and with him this whole confusion, all these disturbing, current days, mobilized to the last minute . . .!

Zivert brought a glass of water to his mouth with his small hand and took several energetic gulps. Then his face tensed once more,

* Russian revolutionary group engaged in populist propaganda.

all the wrinkles drifted to his eyes, seemed to take aim, ready to pounce forward.

". . . The bandit must be squashed, otherwise he will squash us! We must send our best comrades to the villages without delay. The whole Party organism must be flexed and each of its members must be severely accounted for."

Zivert's sharp gestures were redolent of an enormous charge of energy and importunate obstinacy. It was somehow strange to watch his small, insignificant figure and it became simply incomprehensible how such strong forged will and inexhaustible energy could fit into it. And it seemed that this figure was here quite by accident, seeming to be sewn onto Zivert's eyes through some misunderstanding, and one felt sorry for this weedy body which was unable to take in all of Zivert's power, and for the oversized field jacket which dangled about like a scarecrow in a strong wind . . .

Like two miniature headlamps, the lenses of a pince-nez flashed at the front table, and Krycheyev rose slowly to his feet.

Horobenko stopped breathing and became all ears. Each surname fell in an echoing drop and disappeared.

". . . Zavadsky, Khomenko, Chernyshov, Kitsys, Druzhynin . . ."

'All right, Chernyshov and Druzhynin, but where's my name . . .?"

The drops continued to fall. Measured, distinct, resonant:

". . . Frolov, Potriasov, Khudoliy . . ."

And once more Horobenko recalled Zivert's words: 'we must send our best comrades'.

Horobenko asked himself once more:

'The best ones? Well, yes — Druzhynin, Khomenko, who else is there?'

Krycheyev's lenses flashed once more:

"All the aforementioned comrades are to come to the Party committee office tomorrow to receive their mandates and weapons. The meeting is closed . . ."

Horobenko could still not comprehend that the list had all been read out. The flames of candles danced all about him.

Only after the whole room, right up to the ceiling and out through the open windows into the street, became filled with *The International*, the singing reflecting a stubborn will to struggle and overcome, did Horobenko realize that the list of those who had

been mobilized had been exhausted and did not include Kost Horobenko . . .

He did not want to return home. A full moon, etched at the edges, placidly continued rolling up over the square, to its eternal aimless goal, and the soul felt easier and calmer from this aimlessness and eternity.

The silvery-green stream which came in at an angle from above, deathly and continuous, inundated the square, the provincial houses and the lindens, making the town look a little fanciful, mournful, nicer. Kost went past the ramose lindens surrounding the church cemetery, and continued blindly down Staro-Kievska Street.

The hour was late. The street stretched out before him empty, dead, and only somewhere in the distance where the moonlight had woven an exacting, magical crypt out of the trees, was someone's dog barking lazily, hollowly.

There was martial law and the plebeians — some fearfully, others submissively — were long since asleep. And that was very good. Kost would not hinder them, and they would not hinder him.

Sleep your peaceful sweet sleep, plebeians! You probably don't even dream what an essentially good thing peaceful, carefree sleep is . . .! However Kost Horobenko would not fall asleep this night. There was no need for sleep. The houses could nap and the dog bark out of boredom. Kost wanted peace. The moon would continue its silver, silent downpour, while the familiar, taciturn, empty street would tell Kost so much. Kost would gladly listen to its very simple, provincial account. This might appear funny viewed from afar but in the end each person was free to do whatever brought him pleasure and joy.

Kost walked along quietly, deep in thought, along the edge of the footpath, and behind him the moon struggled to slip out of the trees, to continue rolling towards unknown heavenly maelstroms — without a travel certificate, without any troubles or thoughts.

XIX

Why he had come to the art workshop today, Kost Horobenko did not know himself. Certainly not because today the workshop would be having live 'models' for the first time and these models would be naked White Guard women. What did Kost care about them? Wasn't it all the same how this White labor was utilized? Whether these women were washing floors in offices, or peeling potatoes, or posing? Indeed, it made no difference at all to Kost. And besides, this was a matter decided by the judicial section, the political bureau or whoever else. It was all the same to Kost — he had simply come to check on the work of the studio.

After all, since its opening, since the meeting at the opening, he had not been back here.

The students had already arrived. For the most part they were Red Army soldiers from the local guards company, several young Komsomol faces, and two elderly workers. They sat down on the low, uncomfortable school desks which had been brought here from some school, and began sharpening their pencils, bringing out their erasers. The youngish pug-nosed workshop commandant, Kolka Nosov, handed out paper to the students, as if they were pupils, and the workshop prepared to begin work.

Awkward in his movements, unshaven, flabby in appearance, Fitskhelaurov, the workshop instructor, deemed it necessary to warn his auditorium (in Russian):

"Today, comrades, we will be sketching two women. I would ask you to work quietly . . ." He had wanted to say: 'without any joking or jeering', but looking across to Horobenko, he changed his mind and corrected himself: "so I would ask you not to disturb the comrade women posing for us. Now please get ready . . . Comrade Nosov, please . . ." he addressed the commandant.

This warning, and a certain shade of solemnity in Fitskhelaurov's words, did not please Horobenko. 'He should be doing it simply, straight away!'

Fitskhelaurov walked in front of the desks with a heavy elephant's gait and threw a sideways glance at Horobenko once more. It was no ordinary look: at first wrinkles gathered around the corners of his eyes (obviously the small muscles were working actively under his skin), and then the eyelids rose automatically, revealing two sweet raisin pupils. Horobenko hated this look even more. He thought: 'Seems a very uncertain type . . . Where did he

appear from in this town?'

Behind the door in the adjoining room the workshop commandant Kolka Nosov was fussing about, explaining to someone. He had fashioned a curtain at the side near the door and when they heard the rustle of a woman's dress behind the curtain, the faint crackle of clasps and hooks, the auditorium pricked up its ears and became more serious. Everyone's face narrowed and even grew a little pale.

And then a woman in a gray bathing robe quietly stepped out onto the dais from behind the curtain. Pale-faced, without raising her eyes from the floor, she took several steps and stopped. The large clumsy robe covered her as if she was a hospital patient. The woman was nervous.

Fitskhelaurov hurried up to her and politely offered her a stool.

"If you please. Will you allow me to take it off?" Without waiting for a reply Fitskhelaurov touched the shoulders of the robe and it fell to the floor, baring the whiteness of breasts, hips and legs. The woman flinched and involuntarily, bashfully covered the pink buds of her breasts with her hands. She looked at the auditorium apprehensively and her cheeks flamed red.

Though much too courteous, Fitskhelaurov was meanwhile adroitly pottering around her.

"Your surname, if you please?"

The auditorium had become rooted to the desks and stopped breathing.

The woman blushed even more and whispered barely audibly:

"Shyhoryna . . ."

"Please, Comrade Shyhoryna . . . If you please — move your head a little to the left and back . . . no, no — only a little back. Please, allow me to correct you."

Like a surgeon, Fitskhelaurov stiffly grabbed the woman's temples and twisted them around. The woman turned her head obediently.

"Thrust your breast out more . . . Like this. Great. If you please, maintain this pose."

Fitskhelaurov intently studied the woman's pose once more and then turned to face the desks:

"We will begin, comrades! Please . . ."

The students began to draw indecisively, their hands uncertainly roughing in the outlines of her nice shoulders and hair. Meanwhile the woman had calmed down and was slowly becoming accustomed

to her pose. Her black unplaited hair was tied at the back with a ribbon and fell heavily behind her back, but one lock had strayed and fallen on her breasts. This obviously appealed to the woman. She sneaked a look at it, as if checking the effect this would have on the onlookers, and then ran a curious, experienced eye over the students.

Fitskhelaurov came up to her once more.

"How long can you last in this position?"

The woman became embarrassed and replied hastily:

"No, no, please . . . I'll ask to rest when I'm tired."

Fitskhelaurov shuffled off among the desks to correct the students' works. Horobenko sat down on a chair against the wall, near a poster. The woman stopped her curious black eyes on him and Horobenko imagined that she shook a shoulder, lightly flirting.

Their gazes suddenly fused together and the woman felt as if she had been scalded: unable to stand it, she transferred her gaze to the dais.

Now Horobenko knew why he had come here. 'A little to the left and back . . . no, no — only a little back.' Yes, he had to come. He had to look into these black eyes, into their very vacant depths to hate them. Yes — hate! As an intellectual, Kostyk, you lacked hatred still, that sacred hatred, without which there can be no great love. But now you will have it. You will! This woman before you is a petal of the reactionary lily. Do you remember her? She too is a small but vivid fragment from your past. Remember? The hussar regiment in this very same town, parades, grand officers, New Year's Eve and Easter balls, and a masquerade on Epiphany. You never saw that. Only knew about it. Heard about it. And then there was the district cinema, where new films were shown every three days.

'Eminent, drama, comical.'

The only difference was that they were either 'excellently eminent' or 'painful drama', or 'powerfully comical'. And so it went on every three days. Again and again. Remember, Kostyk? Those were your gymnasium years. You didn't know Nadia then.

There you were, a small, shy gymnasium student, staring at the third row from a corner of the foyer near the door, eyeing the black astrakhan furs and the broad brims under the ostrich feathers. You could only look at the brims, for those black eyes never looked at you. Spurs tinkled around them, hussar shoulder-straps flashed, and the gaze and smile of the black eyes was for them.

And one day, in this very cinema, as people were leaving the seance, the lady in the astrakhan dropped her compact. You rushed to the ground, grabbed the compact with trembling, childish hands and handed it to her. Only then for a moment did the black eyes look at you and smile sweetly, as if tossing you some 'tea money'. That was the only time . . .

And now these eyes had looked at you a second time. But you can clearly see for yourself: she was no unattainable queen of enchanting dreams, as it had seemed to you at the cinema. She was now an officer's wife. The owner of precious wares — a beautiful body and black eyes. She had nothing else apart from this. Once someone nationalized this last property of hers, she would become a very repugnant beggar. Just a street-walker. Indeed Mysha Chernyshov was right not to worry about their feelings as nude models. And this nice wild pussycat knew only too well the listed price of her wares on life's stock-exchange in our domestic Soviet conditions. Yes, yes. There.

The woman really was quite herself now and posed without the slightest shame or embarrassment. Occasionally she would involuntarily adjust the sumptuous black hair on her temples, and then her straight, refined hands rose lightly, her nice elbow bulged, and the dark patches under her arms became barely noticeable. This influenced the auditorium. It began to wheeze softly, stealthily whisper, but in any case everyone was now painting briskly and assiduously. Some even let drop witticisms.

With feigned weariness the woman would languidly throw her head back, then her breasts bounced slightly, and after this, with a barely noticeable smile, her eyes wandered triumphantly about the studio until they came across Horobenko or Fitskhelaurov. Then she pretended once more to become embarrassed and ashamed. Horobenko looked disgustedly at her face again and thought:

'Another three sittings and she'll feel at home here. She will begin to flirt with someone or even get together with Fitskhelaurov. If not physically, then at least in her psyche, potentially — she is essentially a true whore.'

Horobenko smiled viciously:

'This is that 'blue blood' . . .!'

Fitskhelaurov helped the woman on with her robe.

'Thank you. That's enough for the first time . . . You tired . . .? Please."

He offered her a hand off the dais and the woman gracefully

disappeared behind the curtain.

Commandant Kolka Nosov called out from the door:

"Ahlaya Kanonova! Your turn. Come out."

Once more a dress rustled behind the curtain, press studs hastily crackled and far sooner than the auditorium had expected, a second woman emerged from behind the curtain. She took a step towards the dais but suddenly, with a sweep, as if remembering, shed her robe like a black pair of wings and stepped haughtily naked onto the dais.

This one was not embarrassed or ashamed. She threw her head back and insolently, defiantly stared ahead, somewhere beyond the wall, over the heads of the students. Her chestnut hair ran over her tender back in waves and light from the window gave it a silvery lustre. Her long lashes slightly concealed her large, azure eyes, but that moist gloam burned with so much anger, hatred and contempt, that even Fitskhelaurov became a little confused. He was standing between her and the desks, nervously rubbing his puffy hands which seemed made of dough. The students opened their mouths simple-mindedly and stared in astonishment at the model.

The woman slightly shook her head about and her small engraved lips twitched at the corners in displeasure.

"I'm ready! What do I do?"

This brought Fitskhelaurov back to life and gave him back his usual poise. He moved agilely about the dais, setting up the stool, transferred his papers from the dais to the window-sill for some reason, as if they might have shielded the woman from the students, and set about positioning her.

Horobenko no longer heard his relentless, professional phrases. This svelte woman almost blinded everyone with her truly exceptional bared beauty. It was hard to look at her beautiful naked figure, and at the same time one was terribly attracted to look. There was something strong in this beauty. Strong and cruel.

Fitskhelaurov stretched his hands out to this model's face too:

"A little to the left . . . allow me to correct you . . ."

The woman stopped him with a slight movement of her hand.

"No. I'll do it myself . . ."

The woman said this simply, but so firmly that Fitskhelaurov's hands immediately fell to his sides, as if someone had unexpectedly struck them with a riding-crop.

Fitskhelaurov stepped down from the dais and ingratiatingly announced in a lowered, muffled voice:

"When you become tired, be good enough to tell me . . ."

"Thank you."

As if tied down, the woman froze to the stool in the instructed position. Her hands held the edge of the stool firmly; her springy, almost girlish breasts were thrust at the students, and her eyes rested somewhere on the cornices above. The woman remained quite placid, she even seemed to be conscientiously carrying out Fitskhelaurov's instructions, but in her whole pose, in that gaze thrown far above the people surrounding her there was so much independence and disdain, that it seemed this was no imprisoned officer's wife sitting here, but some queen from the gloom of the Middle Ages who would presently give orders to her aides and servants.

However, that was the way it was. Chained to her pose on the stool, this woman had immediately captivated the auditorium upon appearing. She had grabbed it with her thin marble fingers and their small pearl-shell nails and pressed it painfully against the stool. None of the students were drawing. Only the two elderly workers set about sluggishly roughing in her forehead, but nothing decent came of it. A patch of light fell on her forehead, but it seemed as if it was a burning star and the woman was not at all naked, but dressed in a thin, priceless tunic. No one noticed her nakedness.

The students looked devoutly at her face, and their eyes misted over, filled with sorrow, became veiled with a desperate grief. Many of them had seen bad and nice women. They had caressed those women, kissed them and taken them. Those women had become lost in the eternal torrent of days, become erased like an old ink-spot. However none of them had seen a woman like this. From the very bottom of their souls, crumpled in the echelons of the revolution, this woman was revealing forgotten fairy tales of long-dead grannies about princesses, faraway kingdoms, the fire-bird . . .

This woman really was out of a fairy tale. She was sitting completely naked before them, but never would this fascinating body ever belong to any of them, not even a smile or a gentle glance could be wrestled from her tightly-pursed lips and open, white forehead prepared for resistance.

This woman could be undressed, but not bent, not thrown to the ground — never.

She had to come to them from a fairy tale, from inanity, and

would return there.

This beauty, the best of all the past shattered years, did not belong to them. This body had given its insane caresses to the one whom they had crushed, laughing and without noticing it. What mighty victor would appear to tame this woman? Who would come up and place this priceless diamond in his pocket as if it was his? It lay here now, exasperating the hungry crowd!

It was melancholy to sit here and watch this haughty, unbroken beauty. Wrong and painful . . .

Fitskhelaurov did not dare upset this tumid silence. He walked quietly on tip-toe in front of the desks and did not bother with the students. Only when turning around did he steal a glance at the model, like some pick-pocket, and thought:

'She would be just right for painting Boyarina Morozova. Exquisite! An exceptionally rare specimen . . .!'

Horobenko felt bad. From his position he could clearly see her full face, and her hard, slightly moist eyes. Even when she had stepped onto the dais, he had thought: she looks like she's climbing a scaffold. The best final clots of corrupt aristocratic blood had probably gone to the guillotine like that during the French Revolution. She was an inveterate enemy. If her side were to return tomorrow, that tender arm with its transparent azure veins would imperiously show these students the way to the gallows; these gentle fingers would grip a parasol and pick out the eyes of the prisoner with it. And these large deep eyes would most certainly laugh then. Oh, they would no doubt laugh! But that was if . . .!

Horobenko looked malevolently at the naked model, but at the same time he felt troubled, something gnawed at him, something disturbed him.

He looked at the end student whose pencil was poised thoughtlessly above the paper, his eyes immersed in the model, and turned away.

This comedy with the naked model had to be stopped at last and Fitskhelaurov needed to be removed first of all. He was quite unsuited. But Horobenko could find no way to break this numbing spell. He felt very small, short, and not at all efficient.

The woman became tired of sitting in the one position and stirred. Horobenko sensed the auditorium come alive for that moment and then freeze once more. Fitskhelaurov stopped near the desks and tugged at the hairs on his chin.

And suddenly a desk lid crashed loudly.

The woman continued sitting placidly in the same pose.

Heavy heels clattered loudly across the floor, accompanied by the creak of swollen soldier's boots. A thin, slightly emotional Red Army soldier was making his way towards Horobenko. Slowly, procrastinating, he dragged his feet one ahead of the other, as if wanting to extend the time before he reached Horobenko. At last he reached him, his eyes darted about guiltily, he scratched the back of his neck and said:

"Comrade administrator . . ." the Red Army soldier leaned his dishevelled head down to Horobenko and said in a low voice:

"You just can't draw like this . . . look," he pointed with his head, "see, people are out of their minds . . . *Da*, we too are, that is . . . All men breathe harder . . ."

Horobenko gave the Red Army soldier a hostile look and said curtly:

"What's the matter? What is it that you want to say . . .?"

The Red Army soldier scratched the back of his neck once more:

"If you could somehow send us some others . . It is simply that . . ."

It was as if someone had struck Horobenko. He bit his lip, rose to his feet and almost yelled out:

"That's none of your business . . .! If you don't like it, don't attend! No one's forcing you to come here . . ."

The Red Army soldier moved his head away and bashfully shuffled from foot to foot. "*Da*, I only mentioned it . . . don't get me wrong . . ."

Fitskhelaurov was hurrying towards them to see what had happened.

XX

Up ahead the two coffins swayed steadily and silently. They would swing a little to the left, then move across to the other side. Then to the left once more and back again.

Like leaders exhausted in battle, the black and red flags progressed quietly behind the coffins. The two deceased seemed to float along more easily under their canopy on this final journey.

There was a long row of wreaths up ahead. Simple, insignificant

wreaths. Out of fir branches, field flowers, and bound with red ribbons. These ribbons fell sorrowfully towards the ground, seeming to leave a red path behind them.

And right behind the coffins rose the shrill lament of Frolova, wrapped in a black scarf, and the quiet, almost fearful sobs of the hunched figure of Chernyshov's astonishingly tiny old mother.

The Party members followed the coffins mournfully and in silence. They moved not in rows, but in an entangled, huddled crowd.

And there were no words on their lips, no songs, there was no monotonous whine of the funereal knell of the church bell.

The feet stepped heavily and softly through the dust and only the orchestra grieved behind the flags with the sorrowful, fallen accords of a doleful march. Those accords were a blend of the thoughts, words and singing of the individual Party members. They combined and carried their murky, melancholy waters somewhere far, far away beyond the azure horizons of existence . . . It was strange to see oneself in a crowd among the foreign and indifferent old-fashioned provincial houses, and the insolently curious looks of the plebeians were insufferable.

Horobenko did not see all this straight away. At first the sight entered his eyes, stumbled about in his brain and only then did it settle in a sticky, warmish vapour. And then one could see: these plebeians were standing by their gates and gawking at the procession.

They were not averse to hearing a brass band, and they wanted to have a good look at the way Communists buried their dead.

There were many of them and the crowd of Party members among them were like a handful of Columbus' sailors on the American continent among throngs of savages.

And one could also see:

Some of them stayed with the procession and ran ahead with a skip, to have a look at the Communist mother and wife. They were amazed by the small, shrivelled form of Chernyshov's mother. She probably even disappointed them, for this was an ordinary old mother, like millions of other mothers who quietly and submissively fretted over their children.

They were not satisfied, and now two of them had come quite close to the coffins and stood on tip-toe to look at the faces of the dead.

Horobenko saw this as an insult to the deceased. Someone should

bawl these curious people out, scatter them throughout their mouseholes.

Up ahead in those two coffins lay the first victims of the latest skirmish between the Party and them. Up there were Mysha Chernyshov and Frolov . . . These were those best ones, as Zivert had said, whom the Party had sent into the countryside. The corpses were covered with red nankeen and luckily the plebeians could not see the faces. But Horobenko knew — he had seen these blood-stained corpses on the carts after they had been brought to the Military Commissariat — Chernyshov's right ear had been torn off and he had a bluish-burgundy stripe across his forehead; Frolov had a gory hole in one eye and horror in the other. That eye had seen only enemies in its last living moments. Inveterate, savage, furious. It felt unpleasant to look at those faces, but at the same time they sucked living eyes into them.

But those tortures, that terrible suffering had passed and the corpses now lay placidly in the coffins, as if resting after an exhausting spate of work. And Horobenko wanted it to be him lying there, not Chernyshov, and let the trumpets weep just the same then and the flags whisper quietly among themselves . . . And let there be no outsiders, no strangers. Not even these Red Army soldiers from the guards company marching behind them.

Let only our own people turn up for this secret, majestic council of life and death, only those soldered into a live steel chain with hot young blood . . .

★ ★ ★

As the procession drew up to the cemetery gates the half-blind ancient keeper hurried off to the bell tower out of habit to welcome the dead with the bells. A bell rang out hollowly, sepulchrally in the low wooden bell tower and dissolved among the pines. Then a second thin one, a third one — thinner still, the fourth — a treble string, and again that hollow, drawn-out octave . . . Bom . . . bam . . . bim . . . di-in . . . bo-om . . .

True chimes of death.

Someone broke from the crowd and dashed headlong to stop the bell-ringer. To immediately put an end to this mockery over the bodies of their comrades!

And then the trumpets wailed again.

It was unusual and strange for the old cemetery to suddenly accept this large crowd of Communists with their flags. And the old crosses with their peeling paint seemed to cower, ready to hobble off into their dark corners. The young slender pines froze in amazement, as if preparing to listen to the speeches.

The familiar old cemetery.

The same paths among the graves, only now they were overgrown with green grass and the odd immortelle.

Immortelles in the cemetery! This was an interesting coincidence: a cellar of bones and rotting flesh, and above it — immortal flowers . . .!

But the revolution had disturbed the cemetery too. On an unbridled mustang it had flown over the immortelles and now overturned crosses lay on the ground, gravestones had been smashed, and from their ovals the photographs of the deceased had been ripped out.

Ruins. Dust.

And this was good. All the cemeteries should be destroyed, so that not one of them would remind people of the past! For the cemetery was not only here. Was not that county town which spread out lazily behind them a cemetery too? Every corner there had absorbed the past and stuck out in full view — as a witness or a dumb reproach . . . And this gravestone lying near the road, it too was from there, from that which was buried in the town. This gravestone had an inscription — Kost remembered it:

The soul will never forget —
You have but only one
Single mother.
Never, never.

Horobenko came up to the gravestone deliberately.

Yes, the words were still there, only they had grown black and become covered with dust. The pine had thrust its top into the distant sky in the same way, and the azure sky peered through its branches with tender eyes, seeming to smile tearfully. And the figure of the inspired girl forever whispering a prayer near the gravestone was now dirtied and her white marble lips had been assiduously made red with a pencil.

Color in these relics of human hypocrisy and lies, you young, insolent, unknown hands! Smash these worthless old crosses and trample the graves! There's no need for cemeteries. Let there be

only the green serenity of the pines. And nothing else . . .

The holes had been dug some distance from the other graves, where the young pines still grew wild, where the grave-diggers had hitherto left the ground untouched. As the procession drew closer and the fresh holes became visible, everyone stirred strangely. A barely audible rustle passed through the crowd and it bunched together, but that was only for a minute. Then slowly it surrounded the holes in a thick living ring . . .

Krycheyev was the first to speak. He spoke loudly, without faltering, but there was something dry and official about his words, as if he was reading a dictum. And the coffins stood here beside the holes, covered in red nankeen. Now one could sense more clearly that these coffins contained Mysha Chernyshov and Frolov. And it seemed incredible that Chernyshov was no more, that he would smile no more, utter that 'crawling rotters' of his, his eyes would no longer burn with a childish twinkle. In the coffin there, under the nankeen, now lay a disfigured strange face. These two corpses were frightening and yet at the same time much too dear. These were not the corpses of Frolov with his bourgeois habits and the flippant soak Mysha Chernyshov, no — they were the sacrifices for a single common cause. Maybe the flesh had not held out and there had been dying entreaties, recantations and groans, but maybe this never happened . . . Death had expunged their faults, and the organization was burying two dear, cherished comrades. For this reason the shoulders pressed closer together and the crowd of Communists looked at the bodies with a single grieving eye.

Zivert pushed his way through the thick of the clothes.

The pines pricked up their ears even more when his clear, chesty voice rang out:

". . . We were much too soft, comrades, much too humane. Now we have to pay dearly for our softness. Our comrades are here. Until recently we saw them among us; they are the first whom we sent to our outposts. What has been done to them . . .! Just look . . .!"

Zivert stretched out his hand and bent over the coffins. One moment and it seemed Zivert would tear off the nankeen to reveal the horrible darkened faces. One felt a chill and wanted to stop Zivert's hand: there's no need . . .!

However Zivert straightened again and proclaimed to the crowd:

"The struggle is not over! The fight continues. For one of ours — ten of theirs, death for death!"

And Horobenko involuntarily repeated to himself:

"Death for death."

He repeated the words and became pensive.

The last to step towards the coffins was Druzhynin. He wanted to say a few words about his fallen comrades, to say that they had performed their duty, that thousands of Communards would suffer their fate, but the words became ponderous and he could not summon them, his throat was unable to master them. Druzhynin was crumpling his soiled cap with his fingers and quite different words fell from his lips:

"Comrades . . .! dear brethren . . . Farewell, comrades . . ."

And suddenly old Mrs. Chernyshov began sobbing quietly on one side:

"Mysha . . . My Myshenka . . . My dear, beloved son . . ."

Druzhynin pressed his cap to his chest, swept the air with his other hand and disappeared in the crowd.

But there were no tears. They sprang forth somewhere inside, from his heart.

The coffins were raised and slowly lowered into the holes. Then Mrs. Frolov let out a delirious scream and scrambled after the coffin. A salute exploded over their heads. Once, and a second time . . . And when the first spadeful of earth fell onto the coffins, the trumpets waved aside the old cemetery church, the crosses and pines and, boldly and triumphantly struck up the peals of *The International.* And they sailed across the fields to the distant taciturn villages, as if after a victory, like a hymn of eternal, immortal life . . .

And for a second time Horobenko remembered something which had occurred to him before:

'Death is unable to intersect the eternal kaleidoscope of life . . .!'

He only had to find that Archimedean lever within him, that pivot of his own self, and hold it firmly in his hands. 'Then there will be a different, beautiful life and simple, logical death. As simple as with the Japanese soldier who, with a smile, salutes his own death before the firing squad. But, there must be blood for blood, and death for death! And this was not stated by Zivert here, but by me.'

Fresh clods of earth thudded loudly into the holes and all around the cemetery the pines rose towards the sky on their slender trunks. Green and young.

XXI

From the plebeian looks — foreign, non-Party, laugh-in-sleeve, from the whispers into neighbour's ears and from the way in which the market hastily broke up and emptied, and lastly from the way in which District Supply Commissar Drobot raced past on horseback to the Party committee office — all this brought Horobenko to the realization that something had happened.

He emerged from the cultural section of the trade union office and prepared to make his way to the Communist dining-hall, however the air was uneasy, burned by the July midday sun. Something sweaty was lurking in it and breathing heavily — something hostile, spiteful and passionate. Horobenko turned left and went to the Party committee office. He hurried across the overgrown square near the cathedral with its protruding dry saplings of the future Socialist Park and the unfinished pedestal of the memorial to the victims of the first October battles, when Radchenko came running up to him.

"You off to the Party committee? A state of readiness has been announced . . ."

Radchenko unbuttoned his shirt down to his hairy chest, sweat dribbled from his shaven head, he wiped himself with his sleeve and tried to catch his breath.

Horobenko stopped to let Radchenko rest and asked:

"What in fact has happened?"

Radchenko looked at him in surprise:

"Don't you know yet?"

"Nothing at all."

"There's a gang in Koziyivka. Six miles from the town . . . Three have been killed on the road, as well as Harasymenko from Fedorivka . . . His chopped-off head was found in the forest . . ."

The Party committee yard was crowded. There were a lot of armed people and Nestorenko's figure, laced up with straps, flashed past and disappeared into a door. Drobot was giving someone orders. Slavina moved uneasily from group to group and wordlessly listened in on the conversations. Druzhynin was sitting on the stairs and wearily smoking a 'goat's paw' cigarette. Fresh Party members arrived off the street.

There was no need to ask questions. From snatches of conversation, from separate words, from everyone's inner seriousness, which could not be shattered by anyone's laughter,

everything became immediately clear to Horobenko.

The town organization was passing into a state of readiness. All the Party members were mobilized. The gang might be bold enough to attack the town. But the initiative must be wrested from it. The guards company and some of the Party members assembled a detachment which was to take Koziyivka that night. The rest would be defending the town.

Horobenko ascended the stairs to the second floor to Krycheyev's office.

Krycheyev was deliberating about something with the chief organization instructor and Nestorenko. He was listening attentively.

Horobenko came up to Krycheyev.

"I'd like a few words with you, Comrade Krycheyev."

Krycheyev tore himself away from the conversation with displeasure and turned the lenses of his pince-nez towards Horobenko.

"What's the matter?"

"I'd like to speak in private . . ."

Popelnachenko looked in astonishment at Horobenko.

Two deep wrinkles came together on Krycheyev's forehead. He rose from the table and apprehensively accompanied Horobenko to the window.

"What's the matter? I'm listening . . ."

Horobenko looked intently through Krycheyev's pince-nez and into his eyes, paused for a moment, and then said firmly:

"I've come to ask you, actually, not ask, but demand — send me with the detachment to Koziyivka . . ."

Krycheyev raised his eyebrows high, then screwed up his eyes suspiciously:

"Why are you — I don't understand — asking such a thing? We need people here too. The town is in danger too."

Horobenko repeated obstinately:

"Send me to Koziyivka. It must be this way . . .! For me. Understand?"

Krycheyev rubbed his cheek and, as if seeing something new and unknown to Horobenko, looked intently at his face.

"Of course I have nothing against it. If you want to go — please, I'll tell Nestorenko to enter you on the list."

Horobenko announced forcefully:

"Yes, that's what I want!"

Krycheyev returned to his desk, while Horobenko made his way to the door. He heard everyone move from their places behind him and whisper to Krycheyev. Popelnachenko's sharp, questioning gaze pressed against his back. He wanted to turn around to face that gaze, but refrained from doing so and stepped outside.

Slavina was pestering Druzhynin. She was telling him in a whisper:

"I don't understand, why include the women in the state of readiness? We won't really be shooting at bandits!"

Druzhynin answered reluctantly, in Russian:

"It's better for you. Indeed if we all keep together, then after all, it will be somehow more loyal, yes, and in general . . ."

Zavalny drove into the yard with two carts. He had brought beef and tobacco for the Party members.

The laced-up Nestorenko slid out of the door. On his head he wore a squat Kuban hat, a Cossack sabre hung at his left side, and on his right was a sawn-off rifle. He was all at attention and seemed to have grown taller. His face was stern, his voice sharp, commanding.

"Those who haven't yet received rifles — get them from the organization instructor."

Slavina asked timidly:

"The women too?"

Without looking at her, Nestorenko answered angrily:

"*Da, da*! You were told — everyone."

Nestorenko swung around on his heel in military fashion and disappeared in the doorway.

Holtsev was giving out the rifles. After the incident with the Party committee reference for the guberniya, Horobenko had somehow not noticed Holtsev. He seemed to have disappeared from the town. Holtsev assiduously counted the cartridges, carefully took a rifle from the corner, spent a minute examining it from the stock to the front sights, as if admiring it, and only then handed it over to the Party member.

"Please. It's not loaded."

As soon as Horobenko entered, Holtsev noticed him at once, as if he had specially been waiting for him. He joyously took off his cap for some reason, hastily threw on his mask of a smile, and greeted him like an old friend.

"A-ah! Comrade Horobenko! Please, please . . ."

Horobenko sedately returned the greeting.

Holtsev selected a smart cavalry rifle and handed it to Horobenko.

"This one will be fine for you. It's light. What about a cartridge pouch, have you got one . . .? Wait. I'll find one. I've put one aside here for you."

Holtsev brought up a chair and climbed up to rummage about under the papers on the cupboard, while Horobenko wondered once more:

'Why is he so sickly sweet towards me . . .?'

Holtsev deftly filled the pouch with cartridge clips, tied the straps and handed it over to Horobenko:

"That's all now. Here you are."

He squinted with one eye and asked in a whisper:

"Where you going — to Koziyivka or staying here?"

Horobenko said stiffly:

"I don't know."

Holtsev leaned over to Horobenko's ear and, spraying spittle, whispered:

"I'll have a word with Popynaka to have you posted here . . ."

Horobenko flinched, looked Holtsev sharply in the eye (Holtsev threw a mask over his face once more) and bluntly beat off every word:

"I in no way authorize you to act on my behalf, and in general, please leave me in peace!"

Holtsev smiled guiltily and minced the air with his fingers.

"Come on, why act this way, by god! It wasn't at all because . . ."

Horobenko no longer heard him. He threw the rifle over his shoulder and was already on the steps leading outside.

Next to the brick woodshed he saw Drobot recounting some obscene anecdote to a group of Party members. He was smiling lewdly with his large thick lips. Someone was breaking into guffaws, while Nestorenko stood silently nearby and listened in attentive silence.

The street kids were up to their mischievous business behind the fence. They were sending someone up and ecstatically yelled out *The International*; suddenly a blond, shaggy head appeared over the fence, small cunning gray eyes darted about the yard, rested on Nestorenko, and a thin childish voice broke out in a wavering soprano:

In a meadow Trotsky sits,
Champing on a horse's shank.
"Oh, what a nasty business
This Soviet beef really is!"

Nestorenko immediately turned towards the fence. The tousled head disappeared. Nestorenko spat and swore. Drobot became silent and looked towards the fence. The same childish voice danced tauntingly behind the fence:

Eh, yes, the apple's little salted,
And Soviet power is demented . . .

Nestorenko called out angrily to someone:

"Catch the brat and tear his ears out!"

Druzhynin answered from the porch:

"Why such reactions, Comrade Nestorenko? Brats should be taught, not beaten."

All became quiet behind the fence.

A machine-gun was brought into the yard and placed near the porch. As if not understanding who it actually had to spit upon, the machine-gun awkwardly spread out its legs and stared ridiculously at the old weathercock on the woodshed. A group of Komsomol members burst into song near the gate.

The rye in the fields
Lies trampled by hooves . . .

The sorrowful, drawn-out motif suddenly broke off and began to skip with a merry refrain:

Under the white birch tree
The Cossack was slain . . .

Horobenko listened to the song. It was an unusual one for the Party committee yard. Someone seemed to have brought it here on purpose from the former Prosvita or the current village school.

Zavalny left the Party committee office, having finished with the food. He heard the song from the porch and joined in with his bass, which was like an untuned club piano:

. . . Slain, oh slain he was,
Dragged into the rye . . .

And once again the song rejoiced for some reason, smiling tactlessly:

A cloth of red nankeen
Covers his fair face . . .

'Our songs are strange,' Horobenko thought and lit up a cigarette. 'They grieve and laugh at the same time. They are strange, just like our whole chimerical history, which began with Khmelnytsky's times and ended with 'mother-country' and Kotliarevsky's *Aeneid*,[1] then woke up in 1918 and turned the pathos of its rebirth into an embroidered farce . . . How odd our history is . . .'

"Communards, fall in!" Nestorenko's orders rang out from the middle of the yard.

The Party men formed up in a disorderly fashion, assembling, dividing into two rows. Horobenko adjusted the rifle sling on his shoulder and pleasurably sucked on the supply commissariat tobacco.

Nestorenko ran a commander's eye over the rows, but on reaching Horobenko his eyes stopped and glinted malevolently.

"And what about you?"

Horobenko failed to understand: "What's the matter, comrade?"

Nestorenko took a step towards him and shouted sternly:

"Get rid of that cigarette! Once the order for 'eyes front' has been given, there are to be no cigarettes. You're standing in line . . .!" he remarked to Horobenko, angry and offended, and moved away.

Like an innocently punished boy Horobenko was unable to make any reply. Subconsciously he immediately threw away the cigarette, as if it had scalded him, and stood blushing up to his ears. And only after Nestorenko began reading out the orders from the right flank did Horobenko's brain sputter:

'A tsarist sergeant-major! A real sergeant-major!'

And then his chest began to burn and his lips wanted to utter:

'Why didn't I answer him! I should have immediately . . .'

Nestorenko continued reading from the right flank:

". . . Solovyov, Bukrabo, Panasiuk, Horobenko, Kolot — these comrades will leave with the guards company for Koziyivka. Two steps forward!"

Horobenko moved forward two paces together with the rest and suddenly felt someone's intent gaze on himself. He turned to the left. Leaning against the doorpost, Popelnachenko was standing on the porch.

1. The Ukrainian writer Ivan Kotliarevsky wrote a "Ukrainianized" version of the *Aeneid*, in which the Cossacks replaced the Greek personages of Virgil's original.

XXII

They set out at close to eleven at night. Up front the detachment of Communards, behind them two carts with machine-guns, followed by the guards company.

The night was dark and wary silence held the district town in its black paws. The town was asleep, and not a leaf rustled on the trees, not a single gate was about to slam shut. Only above their heads, in the dark-green Milky Way, did stellar snowstorms erupt, rushing tempestuously through the heavenly spaces, then dying away, scattering as tiny golden snowflakes, now placidly twinkling on the broken Pleiades or the Dipper, suspended in the sky like a discarded saucepan.

It was strange seeing those snowstorms on the cold sky when one was still surrounded by an August night.

They walked in silence along the familiar district streets. Their steps resounded firmly, like those of old disciplined soldiers. It was hard to distinguish individual people. They all looked the same now. Both Zavalny, who was marching right next to him, and Drobot in the front row on the right, and this woman on the left who was taking larger than normal steps so as to keep up with the men. Who was she . . .? Leontieva, head of the women's section. She had a holster at her side with a Browning, and a small Austrian carbine on her back. The shorn head with the cap was bent down a little: she was looking to make sure she was in step with her comrades.

And once more Horobenko found it incomprehensible: where had this militarism of theirs appeared from? Leontieva was until recently a worker in a large tobacco factory. She should have found this militarism repungant. And yet — there she was, purposefully bending her back in, straightening her chest, as if this had long been an innate part of her military bearing.

'I still don't know them all very well . . .' Horobenko thought. 'Perhaps, in the end, this militarism, those straps of Nestorenko's, to put it simply, Nestorenko's sergeant-majorism, contain an incomprehensible sense of its own . . . Perhaps it is only my intellectual prejudices which stop me from digesting all this as something ordinary, necessary and inevitable . . . Who knows, perhaps . . .'

Nestorenko remained aside from the detachment, riding on a strong, gray mare, looking as if he had grown out of her. The night

had thrown its dark cover over them, making Nestorenko and his mare look like a giant black centaur from afar.

Horobenko strained his eyes to examine their outlines better. He obtained a unique loathsome pleasure from looking at that figure of Nestorenko, imagining the details of his dark face, with its thin chapped lips and small greenish eyes under an overhanging shock of hair. Only he could in no way understand how this tight knot of brute force could influence grown intelligent people so strongly, and lead them off obediently, as if on a rope, somewhere where only brute force was needed? No matter what, but you too, Kost, yielded to this force, it broke you back there in the Party committee yard, with that cigarette, and will lead you wherever it wishes.

They passed the last houses on the outskirts. Here the district town shed its genteel habiliment and gradually tightened its peasant drawstring. On a nearby knoll a taciturn, scowling windmill spread out its long arms, as if hissing to someone in the rear to hide in the fields. The two carts with machine-guns creaked over the potholes behind them.

Nestorenko stopped his mare to await the guards company. Horobenko passed quite close to him. It appeared to him that he had even seen Nestorenko's eyes — they were cold, like tin at night, but piercing, with a savage glint. He wanted to look deeper into Nestorenko's eyes, to fathom his strength and break free of it. Horobenko tried to convince himself:

'It's not at all that 'he is leading', for first and foremost I am going there myself. I am going. Going to liquidate the gang. I am going together with Popelnachenko, Drobot and Leontieva to kill and even execute those last ignorant peasants who are destroying us in the name of their grain bins and chimerical 'Mother Ukraine'. This is something which I've in fact long since wanted, and Nestorenko is here only by coincidence.'

They moved along the road beside the stubble. A large reddish moon crawled out from behind the distant settlement houses. Its wrinkled, bloated disc, resembling a rachitic infant, made a flat wry face and refused to shine. A quail was screaming somewhere in the stubble.

The Communard detachment was moving along freely now, no longer remaining in rows. Only Nestorenko continued riding in the same position off to one side — black and morose. Dew fell in cold droplets onto the rifle barrels, the trodden dust of the road rustled softly underfoot.

Nestorenko stopped his mare again and turned around in the saddle. He looked over the detachment and ordered in a low, hoarse voice:

"No more smoking! Guards company commander Hvozdiov! Despatch a lookout sentry, there could be an attack from the north-south . . ."

'Stupid fool!' Horobenko said to himself. 'From the north-west he means. Can't even differentiate directions. What a commander . . .!'

However Horobenko caught himself out a final time and began to reproach himself again:

'This, Kost, is intellectualism too! Rotten and good-for-nothing. In the final analysis, it isn't that, unlike you, he can't differentiate the points of the compass . . . But the fact is that . . . Exactly what?' Horobenko asked himself impatiently.

In the distance the Vorskla was steaming with mist before the black wall of the forest. The moon had composed itself, climbed higher and released its feeble rays. Foreheads became faintly silvered and rifle barrels gleamed from time to time.

'. . . The fact is Kost, that you are marching against the village. The Ukrainian village. That only certain national watershed for whose sake you once established Prosvitas, acted as an instructor for the Central Rada, retreated with the Directory's armies. Together with these incomprehensible people, you must strike that very target which you recently built with your very own hands as a sure shield. You must shatter this target to pieces, so that no trace of it remains. You must shoot at your former self, Kost! That is the point . . .'

Two Communards were whispering to one side of him. Someone's rifle sights clanked together.

'Do they understand this . . .?' Horobenko thought secretively. 'But what is this — a doubt? Where is it from? Nonsense! It no longer exists and never will. You've composed it yourself out of old trash. Bring this before your eyes once more and smash it once and for all. Be frank, Kost. You can be frank with yourself. In you (just in you, for some reason) these two forces have come together, face to face. From these and those. You strive for equilibrium, but these are fictions! How can they be balanced? For behind these Popelnachenkos, Krycheyevs and Druzhynins stand Spartacus, Munster, Siberia, penal servitude, strikes and October, while ahead lies the future and cycles of world tempests. And behind you, with

yesterday's National Alliance and Prosvita, are entangled the strings of treachery, servility and the props of everyday theatre. How can one equate the boundless spaces of future socialism with the four walls of one's house, where "there is one's own truth, and strength and freedom"! Step firmly forward now, Kost, and strike without blunders. Indeed, life is built far more simply than the affected intelligentsia preaches it to be. Strike simply and resolutely, just like Nestorenko . . .!'

"Mark time . . . ha-alt!"

The detachment stopped in the middle of a clearing. People fell in line again. Once they had stopped Horobenko suddenly felt the unpleasant piercing night chillness pass through his thin shirt and prick his back. 'I should have grabbed my field jacket,' Horobenko thought and lightly stamped his feet. His cheeks were bristling from the cold and his lower jaw was beginning to tremble. 'I really should have taken that field jacket!'

And suddenly someone from behind threw a leather reefer over his shoulders. He turned around, and even took a step back in surprise. Popelnachenko stood before him, smiling, and said, as a close friend would have:

"Cold, Horobenko? The reefer's for you. Take it. I've got a greatcoat."

Horobenko removed the leather jacket from his shoulders.

"No, what's this for? I'm all right . . ."

But Popelnachenko had already leant over and was slipping his fingers into his greatcoat's sleeves. He grumbled angrily, even irritably:

"Stop carrying on! Put it on and let's hear no more out of you!"

Behind them the guards company commander, Hvozdiov, rang out:

"Company, right turn! Quick march!"

Nestorenko croaked nearby:

"Communist platoon, single file towards the forest, march!"

Rifle bolts clicked sharply and feet stamped hastily.

There was no time to refuse Popelnachenko's reefer. Horobenko did up the hook on the collar and stepped into line.

Twigs crackled underfoot, bushes pushed towards him and scratched his hands. The cavalry rifle lay comfortably in Horobenko's fists and pierced the darkness.

Right in front of their line, like the wall of a hostile fortress, stood a dense, sullen copse. It was wary and silent. As if wanting to

let the men come nearer still, so that it could mow them all down in a single salvo. Another step forward. Two steps. Three. The scrub became thicker. Presently the copse would spray them with fire. This moment . . . Now . . .

They stepped over a fallen tree. Here was the first enormous oak. Its branches had become entangled in the stars and the black armour of its trunk gleamed greenily in the moonlight. The oak was threateningly silent, like a sentry on guard. 'Ah, why is it so silent . . .! I wish it would hurry up.'

The trees moved thickly forward. The line of men entered the forest and quickened their step, almost running. The forest flinched and came alive. Brushwood crackled underfoot with a loud echo, and branches painfully whipped the face. Darkness swathed the copse and hid the line of men from view. But Horobenko could sense them all, their every irregular step. Like Horobenko, they too wanted this impossible oppressive silence to be defused somehow, but the copse remained silent. Then feet moved more resolutely and purposely trampled the brushwood. Let there be more noise, anything to replace this silence. Anything but this silence, which perhaps up ahead concealed behind every trunk and every bush the levelled barrel of a rifle. Let those sawn-off rifles fire at last, straight into their chests, only no more of this drawn-out nerve-tingling waiting and the all-seeing mocking silence . . . the sooner they crossed this copse, the better!

Horobenko tripped over some protuberance and jumped involuntarily. He turned a little to one side, took two steps and . . . froze to the spot. Coals were burning on the ground before him . . . Someone had hurriedly covered the fire with earth, but had failed to extinguish it. A little to one side an army kettle gleamed faintly and beside it lay a crumpled soldier's greatcoat.

Horobenko said hollowly for the rest to hear:

"There's a campfire here, and a greatcoat . . ."

There were whispers and the line stopped.

The crackle stopped for a moment.

Horobenko stared fervently at the coals which sorrowfully became covered in ash before his eyes and slowly died away. He itched to finger the greatcoat. They had been here just recently . . . Horobenko stepped onto the greatcoat and kicked the kettle. It tipped over obediently, spilling water onto Horobenko's boot.

Nestorenko hurried up on foot from behind, concerned. He greedlily buried his eyes in the embers and a sharp smile filled his eyes.

"There's been a nice little gang here . . ."

Nestorenko turned over the greatcoat with his toe, stamped about the fire, feeling the earth with his soles, and formed his hand around his mouth.

"Communist platoon! Proceed forward in single file . . ."

Nestorenko ran back behind the trees.

Now, with the deserted fire and the greatcoat behind them, it was easier. Hands held a firm grip on rifles and feet hurried firmly forward. Somewhere nearby horses thudded along a road. Nestorenko's voice reached them from there and became lost in the branches:

"Hvozdiov! From the left flank . . ."

The trees thinned. The predawn sky became a pale gray. Bushes appeared again and interfered with their progress.

Suddenly a shot exploded from the right flank. It was followed by a second. And another.

"Forward, at the double!"

Another packet of shots came from the right flank. And then silence. The line ran out of the copse onto the stubble and was catching its breath. It was already quite light. The sun began rising. Drobot appeared from somewhere, unhappy. Someone asked him a question. Drobot only waved an arm and cursed.

". . . They got away."

The smoky horizon receded beyond the barrow. The early morning cold scratched its way into sleeves and tickled the back.

Nestorenko and Hvozdiov came galloping up from the fields. Nestorenko moved back his Kuban hat and swept the shock of hair from his forehead.

"They got away, damn it . . .! If I had three more horsemen I could have caught the rotters! They probably made off for the settlements."

Nestorenko sharply turned his mare around and ordered:

"Communist platoon, fall in!"

Hvozdiov's tenor rang out some distance away on the plowed field.

The detachment formed up quickly and set off for the road.

In the distance the Vorskla was steaming at the edge of the forest and the willows of Koziyivka loomed behind the windmills.

XXIII

There were six of them. Six of Koziyivka's wealthiest farmers. But they looked like ordinary hick peasants. Weary from work, faces finely cut by wrinkles, dishevelled beards and even soiled shirts. They were phlegmatic in their movements and seemed totally indifferent. Horobenko would never have distinguished them from the poor gray masses. But Nestorenko had chosen them assiduously and painstakingly, as if seeking pedigree stallions for breeding. He spent a long time poring over lists in the village Soviet, questioned the clerk in a lowered voice, then the taciturn stunned chairman, and then visited the houses with three Party members.

Hvozdiov and his guards company had left for the settlements, and Nestorenko hastened to finish with Koziyivka. He would quickly bring a hostage to the village Soviet and hurry off to fetch the rest. Five hostages were already standing near the porch beside the Communard detachmnet. They stood beetle-browed and silent. Neither of them uttered a single word to the Party members, and their bearded faces showed no fear, surprise or despair. They stood without shuffling from foot to foot, as if awaiting the authorities, who would upbraid them for unpaid taxes, for arbitrary felling in the state forest and grazing stock on the landlord's fields. Horobenko tried to look at them. He stretched out on the spurge in the shade of the village Soviet building, lay his cavalry rifle beside him and began rolling a cigarette. However his fingers were trembling, the tobacco spilled out onto the leather pouch, and the thin cigarette paper contorted under his fingers, not wanting to roll into a tube. An anxious feeling was growing in his chest, pressing against his heart and giving rise to a pain in his belly.

'What the hell! I'm becoming more agitated than these hostages,' Horobenko thought, and could no longer control himself. He stole a glance at the old peasants. They stood just as immobile and tightlipped. Horobenko studied their rough, oversized boots and chapped hands and could not understand: they must know that they would answer for Harasymenko, Kirpichnikov and Feihyn, that Nestorenko hadn't dragged them from their homes to instill them with propaganda. They could not but know that! Then why this serenity? Was this prodigious stoicism or bovine stupidity . . .?

The square in front of the village Soviet and the streets became empty. Only some distance away a lone pale-faced woman had

frozen in fear beside a wattle. With twisted hands she pressed two tearful children to her skirt, as if fearing they might be taken away from her, and leaned back against the wattle. In some distant street a woman was screaming deliriously. The screams were so desperate, and the eyes of this woman here so fearful, that it seemed as if this woman with the children was herself screaming and watching with her terrible eyes. The screams were a frightening echo reflecting off a wall in that distant street and carved up Horobenko's heart. Ah, those screams, which made one's hands tremble and a wheel turn over in one's chest! If only these old peasants would scream too! If only they would kick about, bite, punch, escape! Then everything would be solved of its own accord. And this Nestorenko, as if on purpose, was delaying with the last fellow . . . If only he would hurry up . . .!

Horobenko incessantly drew in on the cigarette and meanwhile the uneasiness grew in his chest, pushing up against his throat. One cigarette was not enough: he immediately rolled another. The sun peacefully threw whisps of light and warmth onto the square in front of the village Soviet. As if nothing exceptional had happened and nothing unusual was about to happen. His forehead and neck perspired, salty drops of dirty sweat trickled onto his lips. Meanwhile the hostages stood bare-headed in the sun and did not shield themselves from it. This external tranquility and ordinariness brought on a sinking feeling. Horobenko thought drearily:

'Yes, this isn't like exchanging shots with a gang in the forest. This isn't war with all its aversions. This . . .' and suddenly he remembered Popelnachenko's phrase uttered long ago: "to deal with the kulaks". This was just it. What he was awaiting was drawing near, this was something he had to arrive at, but how frightening it was! They would be executed . . . Horobenko asked himself fearfully: 'Who . . .?' But there was no need for an answer. It was evident *who* was to carry out the executions . . .

The postmaster came out onto the square from the rural district post office; a nice-looking fellow, with a long black mustache. He slid his hands under his rope belt and calmly looked about. He was tired of postal matters and the impossible flies in the tiny room of the rural district post office, and had stepped outside for a breath of fresh air.

Horobenko looked at his clean white shirt, the large forehead without any wrinkles under black hair combed to one side, and immediately it occurred to him:

'Lucky fellow! He has no one to lead, no one to guard . . .'

Horobenko closed his eyes for a moment and knitted his brow. 'Power keeps changing hands, first the Denikinists come, then the Reds, then gangs, then the Reds again, but that doesn't concern him. He stamps letters, sells stamps, occasionally issues postal orders, hands out change, and in the late afternoon he goes swimming in the Vorskla. He is left in peace by whoever is in power, and he observes the events from the sidelines, as if reading the section on criminal news in the capital newspapers. And his life is a calm inlet amid the storm of the revolution. Lucky postmaster!' And as if he was a boy, Horobenko had the urge to accompany the postmaster to his home and drink a glass of tea with raspberries with him . . .

'. . . With raspberries? Perhaps even listen to him playing the guitar, Kost . . .!'

No. What was about to happen had to happen. Life, new life, Kost, is bought with blood, secured with death. This was a new secret strict law which could not be avoided. You know that yourself. To hell with nerves and faint-heartedness!

Kicking up a cloud of dust, they hastily brought the sixth fellow. His unbuttoned shirt revealed a small gleaming copper cross on his chest. The reddish-black, thick, moss-like beard had a stalk of straw stuck in it, the small peepers under his slanting eyelids darted fearfully over the Party members, like baited mice. However when he took his place beside the other hostages, he immediately calmed down and wilted, as if he had returned home after a calamity.

Nestorenko was visibly making haste. He had a quick word to Popelnachenko, ran into the village Soviet, and a minute later raced down the dust-rotten steps. He divided the Communard detachment into two groups, spoke with Popelnachenko one last time, and then turned to the hostages:

"Come on, move!"

The peasants set off obediently, like automatons.

All this happened with exceptional speed. How he found himself in the group of Communards leading the hostages out of the village and why he happened to be walking beside that sixth fellow with the copper cross — Horobenko could not remember, could not account for it. He held his rifle at his side and tried to keep in step with the front man.

Suddenly that same insane woman's screaming pierced his chest and dug about painfully inside it:

"Oh, help me . . .! Mother dear . . .! Semen, where are they taking you? Oh, my God . . .!"

A bareheaded woman was running along the street and waving her hands above her head. Her thin fingers snapped wildly and desperately, as if she was drowning and snatching at invisible threads in the air. Her lament was already affecting the rest of the convoy. The fellow in front of Horobenko transferred his rifle to the other shoulder, shook his neck and quickened his step. However the hostages remained calm, as if they could not hear these shrieks. The woman was already catching up to the detachment. She was tearing at her hair and wailing, as if at a funeral:

"Oh, what am I to do . . .! Oh, my woebegone little head . . .!"

The sixth hostage finally turned around and said in a hoarse, though quite calm voice:

"Go home, Kateryna . . . Don't sell that stallion, but take the ten poods of wheat from Karpo which he borrowed before Easter . . ."

Nestorenko yelled angrily:

"Hey there — no talking!"

Someone behind them held back the woman and she began to lament even more. The old peasant turned away, sighed deeply, and continued trudging behind the others, beetle-browed and silent.

Once more Horobenko was amazed: 'Don't they realize yet? Are these live corpses or dead humans . . .?' He began to feel panicky walking so close to them and involuntarily fell out of step.

There was not a soul in the street, and no one was even looking from the windows. It was as if all the inhabitants had cleared out. Only behind them, some distance away now, a woman continued her wailing, and those screams trembled in a shattered echo under the thatched eaves and clung to the branches of weeping willow.

★ ★ ★

Horobenko did not know how long they walked. They were near the verge of a small copse. Nestorenko himself positioned them. Carefully, so as not to make a mistake. Two paces apart. Then he moved back, shifted his Kuban hat right back and drew a large bulbous watch from his pocket.

"I'll give you another fifteen minutes . . . You can pray, sing, say your good-byes — whatever you wish . . ." Nestorenko smiled malevolently and walked down the line of hostages.

Horobenko did not look at them. He buried his eyes into the ground and cringed.

Something heavy had rolled onto his eyelids and his crown felt terribly itchy.

He felt like removing his cap and scratching himself. Oh, how itchy his crown was . . .! But Horobenko did not move. He stood still and limp, as if he himself was about to be executed.

Nestorenko slowly paced up and down before the silent row of old peasants and held the watch with an outstretched hand.

"Ten minutes left to live . . . I'll knock you off in ten minutes."

The hostages neither prayed nor said any farewells. They stood as if spellbound, silent and still. And their silence made the surroundings seem far too quiet, even eerie.

Nestorenko stopped and slowly looked at the watch.

"Eight more minutes . . ."

Unexpectedly a flustered Drobot ran up to Nestorenko from somewhere and whispered into his ear. His alarmed voice was piercing and his whispers could be heard:

"A gang is crossing the ford. You can see it from there . . ."

The detachment twitched and turned towards the river. Nestorenko drew his pistol and called out on the run:

"Follow me . . .!"

They didn't have far to run to the sand dunes beyond the osier. The Communards bunched together and looked intently ahead. Weaving about in all directions in the valley, the Vorskla crept away into the distant forests. Some crowd really was crossing the ford, taking its time.

Nestorenko brought a pair of binoculars to his forehead.

"It's a herd of cows and nothing more . . .! Really — creating such a panic . . .!" he remarked irritably to Drobot and turned around towards the copse.

"Follow me!"

Horobenko burst through the osier with the others. He looked, quivering, at the edge of the copse and stopped in his tracks. The convicted hostages were still standing there near the copse, in the same positions . . . Up there near the copse six convicted men stood still, like six living deaths.

This time the Communards did not try to maintain their lines. They ran cross-country as fast as they could, as if fearing that the hostages would take to their heels any minute now and might successfully escape. Without reaching them, someone fired, and this

was followed by a disorderly popping of shots. Then Horobenko saw the fellow on the end in the gray jacket roar wildly, jump aside and dash sloppily towards the copse . . . Someone fell to the ground. Two more began screaming. And then a dishevelled fellow with arms wide apart began running straight for the Party members. Horobenko emptied his whole clip. Impetuously he clicked the bolt once more. A brass casing popped out . . . The magazine was empty . . . And then suddenly he vividly saw before him . . . large eyes rent with horror. The small copper cross bouncing about on the shirt. A hand raised in the air. The fellow roared on the run.

Horobenko stopped, grabbed hold of the rifle barrel, scratching his finger on the sight, and swung for all he was worth, with eyes tightly closed . . .

There was a thin crunch before him and a rattling ensued. Something wet splashed onto Horobenko's hand. He let go of the barrel and looked. Before him a body with a smashed skull thudded hollowly onto the ground, like a scarecrow . . .

Shots popped on either side.

Horobenko turned around, caught his breath, and went off aimlessly.

He no longer heard the shouts behind him, nor the groans, nor Nestorenko's order. He suddenly felt empty inside, and relieved in a unique way.

The sun burned his forehead and his crown was still itching. He threw his cap on the ground and was about to bury his fingers in his hair when his eyes fell on the red spot.

"Blood . . .!"

His hand began to tremble and the cherry droplet glistened in the sunshine, smiling at the sun.

And all of a sudden he had a much too vivid recollection, as if it had just all happened now:

. . . Nadia's bloodied shirt and a rusty spot on the sheet . . . Nadia's blood! Chaste, pure virgin blood . . . He longed so much for that which had disappeared for some reason without any return, which had forever torn apart the garland, and he felt tearfully overjoyed that something new had been born, something very intimate, something inseparable and dear . . .

★ ★ ★

Hastily Horobenko wiped the drop of blood on the reefer, wiped the sweat from his face with a sleeve, and threw his head back.

Up above, high above the earth, azure terraces of placid, cloudless Ukrainian sky were escaping somewhere into the endless distance.

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