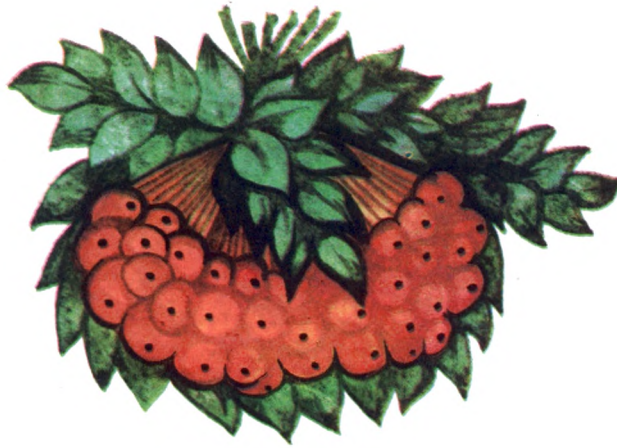


VIKTOR BLIZNETS ❁ In the Land
of the Living Lights ❁
The Singing Gossamer



VIKTOR BLIZNETS



**In the Land
of the Living Lights**

**The Singing
Gossamer**

TALES

Illustrated by *Svitlana Lopukhova*

KIEV DNIPRO PUBLISHERS 1987

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**ЗЕМЛЯ СВІТЛЯЧКІВ
ЗВУК ПАВУТИНКИ**

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In the Land of the Living Lights

*A merry and somewhat sad tale about Graybeard XII,
about forest people — Thickbeards and Thinbeards —
and their victory over their fearful enemies,
the cave dwellers.*

While writing this tale, I used my pleasant memories of the forest around the settlement of Pushcha Voditsya with its Watchtower, pines, birch trees and glades, and of my good friends, Olya and Raya, who used to take me around the forest and who once brought me to a small hill over a lake and said: "That's where he's buried, our poor Curlyhead."

— THE AUTHOR

1

*Graybeard XII of the Thickbeard tribe
welcomes you to his famous museum.*

Each time the sun set behind the forest, a low sound of the distant bell swelled the air:

Bong!

Bo-o-ng!

Bong!

Thus the forest keeper announced that the day was over and that it was time for the forest people — Thickbeards and Thinbeards — to wake up.

First the sun sank behind the mountain, then it faded in the faraway lakes and rivers. Darkness crept into the windows of Graybeard's bedroom, and with it a cuckoo usually flew in. It glided round his bed on silent wings and perched on a tall chest of drawers. There the bird cleaned its bill and from there it admired its master.

As all the forest people, Graybeard XII was a great collector. He was very proud of his collections, but for the time being we won't tell you anymore about them. We'll have a better look around his bedroom instead. It was full of books. You could see them everywhere: on the floor, on the armchairs, on the bookcase, and even on the warm quilt under which Graybeard XII slept. Some of them were leather-bound and so heavy that one man would never lift such a book.

Besides being a book lover, Graybeard XII had a weakness for sleep. He would lie in his bed with a book, light a lamp over his head, and start reading. But the ancient books he read were so thick and so wise that he soon became sleepy and went on reading with one eye. Thus his eyes slept in turn over a book until they both closed and Graybeard XII sank into a sweet slumber.

Graybeard XII, as well as all his aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews, grandsons and granddaughters, of which he had a good dozen, belonged, as you know, to the peaceful forest people. It was their custom to sleep in the daytime and to work at night. Graybeard XII did according to the custom: he slept like a log from morning till evening, when a solemn sound of the bell drifting over the forest woke him up.



Then he got up and went to open his museum. But even there he managed to have his forty winks over a book, though the old forest customs described this as a great sin. He did it when there were no visitors in the museum, of course, and then you could even hear him snoring softly. His kindhearted sister Primpersonia was the only one who knew his secret. (She was ninety but still in good health. May she be alive and kicking for years to come.) Whenever her brother was about to doze off, the tireless Primpersonia brought him some birch sap, lit his pipe for him, and put him on a small leather sofa. To make him more comfortable, she also brought two pillows — a smaller one to be put under his neck, and a bigger one under his feet. When her brother was at it again, Primpersonia put up a notice at the entrance to the museum:

| |
|---|
| I'M AT THE FOREST ACADEMY. WILL SOON BE BACK. GRAYBEARD XII. |
|---|

The notice prevented both Thickbeards and Thinbeards from seeing her brother's shameful behavior (for isn't it a shame, to sleep at night!).

However, we repeat that this happened to our Graybeard only during the boring minutes of silence, when there were no visitors in the museum and he was trying to read a thick and wise book. But as soon as he heard the sounds of a visitor's footsteps on the stairs leading to the museum... Oh, you'll see for yourself what happened then and how our wise Graybeard changed at those happy moments!

The wakening Bong! Bong! echoed throughout the forest.

The cuckoo had cleaned its bill and was looking at the sleeping Graybeard with great admiration. His feet with shiny heels and his chubby legs showed from under the quilt like two cleanly washed pigs which seemed to be grunting with pleasure.

The cuckoo called twelve times which meant: O Graybeard XII! Open your wise eyes! The day has passed and the night has come. Wake up!

Graybeard XII got up and, without opening his sleepy eyes, groped for his pipe. Then, screwing up his eyes and still sleepy, he left the room. He knocked out the pipe against a tree stump, filled it without seeing what he was doing, and lit up. Only after he dragged on his pipe did he really wake up. His drowsiness was gone with the first cloud of smoke he blew out. "Hem, hem," he said to himself. "That's what I call strong stuff! It really gets you! But it's time to get down to work, brother! It's night already."

Graybeard always started by going over to the porch and blowing hard. He blew on a small windmill which stood still on the roof and waited for the owner to come and set it going. As soon as Graybeard blew on it, the windmill came to life, its wings began turning fast, and it started whirring its eternal and merry song.

The working windmill meant that a busy forest life went on in the Land of the Long Lakes. Professor Bestbrain, the wisest of the Thickbeards and Thinbeards, who used to come to the meetings of the Academic Council barefoot but with three

pairs of spectacles, studied the hopelessly complicated flight paths of dandelion parachutes. The man called Sweetfruit worked in his melon garden, watering the most unusual melons in the world: nut-melons and pumpkin-melons. The old man named Whirfast, who lived across the lake, set working hundreds or maybe even thousands of water mills and sand mills.

In short, Graybeard's whirring windmill meant that night reigned all over the forest. Soon Thickbeards and Thinbeards would go mushrooming. Some old men would clean the silted-up springs of the Upper Lake until their water became crystal clear. Then the old men would call boys and girls to come. Music would play, while they would plant willows and fir trees round the cleaned lake so that redbreasts and cuckoos could call in their greenery when spring came.

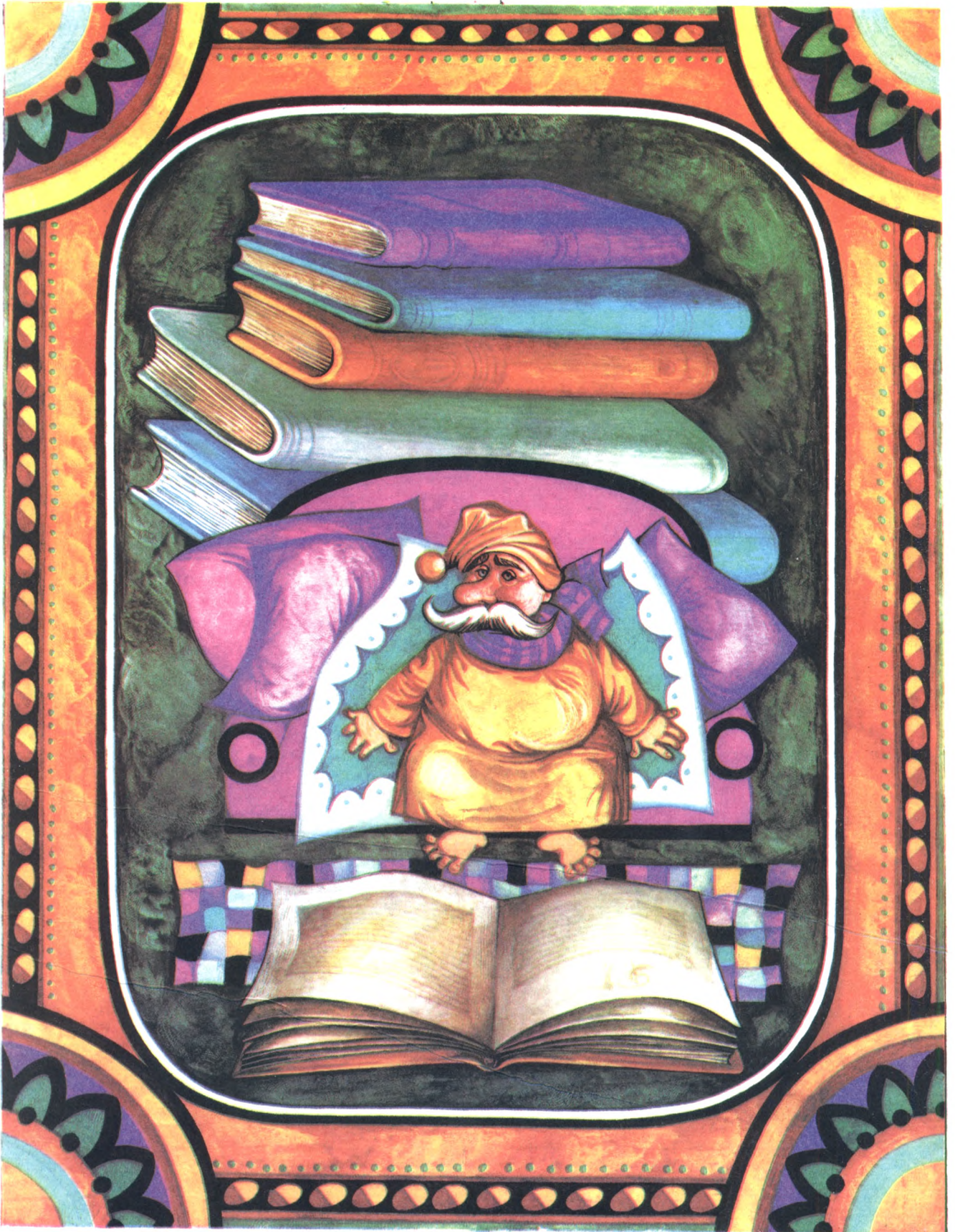
Meanwhile, Graybeard XII put out his pipe and went up to a small gate before a long flight of stairs. Myriads of lights flashed on over the length of wooden steps running down to a lake. A light boat was tied up there, and it was Graybeard's favorite fishing place.

Graybeard's house stood out in the light of the countless lamps. The house was an attractive but rather fanciful structure. A mighty sycamore had stood in its place long ago. It was cut down. The stump that was left was so huge that eight people would have to link their arms to embrace it. The stump had darkened with time but was still strong. Its top was as flat as a table and its thick roots held it firmly in the ground. A door had been made between two of these roots. Graybeard had hung two lamps above the door, and still higher he had fastened the windmill, a present from his best friend Whirfast. Later the strong door made of pinewood had been plated with iron, and still later Graybeard XII had added a brass plate which said in old-fashioned letters:

WORLD FAMOUS MUSEUM OF THE LIVING LIGHTS
FOUNDED BY GRAYBEARD XII OF THE THICKBEARD TRIBE,
DOCTOR OF FOREST SCIENCE (BRACKET FUNGI AND LARVAE).
ADMISSION FREE.
OPEN AT NIGHT ONLY.
WELCOME!

Graybeard went up to the door, breathed on the plate and polished it with his sleeve until the shining brass seemed to be red-hot. Then he opened the door and spoke out into the dark forest, "You're welcome!" His words came out in the nick of time. Two Thickbeards were climbing the long wooden stairs lined with tiny blue and white lights. The visitors were Graybeard's best friend Whirfast and his twelve-year-old grandson Curlyhead.

Graybeard noticed at once that stocky red-headed Whirfast was carrying a rather big parcel under his arm. Could it be another windmill? Graybeard's heart leaped with joy. He liked presents very much, and whenever he got them he was happy as a child. That's why he opened the door even wider and called out...



Graybeard XII shows his guests the underground rooms of his museum and the most magnificent of his exhibits. Nymph's hair and a gulper.

Graybeard called out to his sister, "My dear Primpersonia, will you please open all our rooms! Meet our dearest guests!"

Graybeard and Whirfast hugged each other and kissed three times after the forest fashion. Graybeard stroked Curlyhead's blond mop of hair; it was a long time since he had seen the boy. The old man curled up his mustache and invited his guests into the stump house.

"Well, Graybeard, let's see if you have anything new in there," boomed out Whirfast happily in his strong voice. "I've seen all your wonders, but my grandson has never been in your museum. Just show him around, hem, hem."

Whirfast boasted that his grandson was a smart boy and went to the famous Lunar School of Professor Bestbrain. The boys studying there were called lunar students because they and their professor used to catch seed-bearing parachutes of various grasses by the moonlight. Yesterday, Whirfast went on, his grandson had arrived for his vacation rowing a boat on his own, hem, hem.

As you have noticed, Whirfast never forgot to add his rumbling hem, hem to anything he said.

Talking, they entered Graybeard's mysteriously silent and hollow underground kingdom. They went down the steps in the dim light of the only lamp hanging on the wall. Far ahead, down the narrow passages, more faint lights hardly dispersed the darkness, showing damp walls and vaults. Now and then the visitors' hearts missed a beat, as if trying to hear something in this gloomy silence.

Curlyhead was only in his first year at the Lunar School, but he tried to look dignified, as the best student of Professor Bestbrain should. Soon, however, his curiosity got the better of him. He'd heard a lot about Graybeard's museum from his grandfather. But now that he saw these deep underground passages, these damp glistening walls... After a few moments the alert boy was looking around him with great admiration. The further he went, the more afraid and curious he became. He even drew in his stomach and continued walking cautiously step by step.

"Come on, come on, my dear guests! This way, please! Thank you, Primpersonia. Go ahead, please, and open the rest of the halls," said Graybeard inviting his guests with a sweeping gesture. He let the curious Curlyhead pass ahead of him. "Here's the first hall. It's only the beginning."

Curlyhead looked up and saw a sign illuminated from inside:

HALL I
LIVING LIGHTS FOUND ON LAND: ROTTEN WOOD, FUNGI,
LARVAE AND OTHER WONDERS.
DON'T TOUCH OR YOU'LL GET BURNED!
(DON'T BE AFRAID, IT'S ONE OF THE LITTLE JOKES OF GRAYBEARD XII.)

Curlyhead stepped over the threshold and stopped in his tracks, his eyes wide open. Forgetting his dignified manners, the boy breathed out, "Wow. What's that? That's fantastic!"

Flowing from the hall was a strange hairy light tinged with bluish and greenish colors. It was soft, softer than the luminosity of deep sea waters, softer than the gleaming of dew lit by the new moon. The milky phosphorescent river was pouring onto the boy's head and arms, it went through Curlyhead himself!

"Look! It flows through my body!" gasped Curlyhead and grasped his granddad's hand. Whirfast only coughed softly and, nodding to the host over his grandson's head, said: "See, my dear neighbor! The boy's glowing with excitement!"

And Graybeard! Where was his important look? Where was his dignity of a learned man? Where was his pipe which he never took out of his mouth? He had stuck the pipe under his belt, fanned his white mustache, and was dancing excitedly around Curlyhead. Graybeard was happy as a lark whenever someone was admiring his living lights.

"This way, this way, my dear Curlyhead. Right here. Just have a look at this."

Without giving the boy a chance of recovering from surprise, Graybeard pulled him up to his collection. Now Curlyhead realized that the light was flowing not from the walls, as he had thought, but from glass cases and boxes with glass covers. Could you guess what he saw there? Old bracket fungi, and bits of rotten wood, bark and tree roots overgrown with moss and fungi, partly crumbled to yellow or green and brown powder. Strange, but it was from these rotten bits that the fantastic phosphorescent light was flowing.

"What are these? They stir! They creep! And they're shining, like blue worms!" Curlyhead even laughed pressing his nose against the glass cover of a box.

"Aha, so you fell for it!" exclaimed Graybeard triumphantly. He was as happy as Curlyhead. "These are larvae, my boy, ordinary larvae. That is, not quite ordinary, but the larvae of fireflies." Suddenly he turned on his neighbor. "Didn't I tell you, didn't I ask you, my dear Whirfast, to let me teach your boy! Then you'd've had something to see! That would've been a wow! But what did you do? You sent him to that Bestbrain, that ascetic old man, that queer fish! But all right, have it your own way, let them catch those parachutes of theirs." Graybeard said it as if he had accepted the idea, but there was a bitter note in his voice and he turned away from Whirfast to face Curlyhead again.

"Now, look here, my boy. Why do you think this birch stump is glowing? You think it's the wood? Oh no, brother. Just have a better look at it. The threads of fungi run throughout the stump. It's they that are glowing and shining. But what kind of light is it? See, it's white and cold. And not simply white, but shot with deep blue. Oh, brother, I'll surprise you even more. On to the next hall, to the beetles!"

In a moment Graybeard was pulling the boy further on. As soon as they came to another door the old man stood on the threshold, drew himself to his full height and twirled up his mustache proudly. He knew that whoever looked into this dark room would say "Wow".

“Wow,” whispered Curlyhead. In the first hall the thick hairy light was flowing steadily. But here! What he saw was unbelievable, magic. This hall was dark and frightening, like a deep cave. And there, in that thick darkness, he saw myriads of small wandering lights. They were dancing in the air, flitting, describing circles, and spinning. The darkness itself was glowing with blue and violet colors from these countless flying stars. Some of them died down, while others flashed on. On and off, on and off.

“Well, how do you like this, Curlyhead?” cried out Graybeard straight into the boy’s ear.

“Golly! Are these fireflies, flashing on and off?”

“Yes, yes,” exclaimed Graybeard, jumping and breathing hard down Curlyhead’s neck. “It’s them, fireflies! *Lampyridae* they call them in Latin. Now, listen, my dear boy. Not every firefly can shine like that. Mostly females can do it, and only some males. They have luminous stripes on their bellies, which give out light that can be seen in darkness. Now, look at this! You must know it, Curlyhead! You’ve seen it in the forest.”

Graybeard took out a glowing cinder from his tobacco pouch. The cinder turned out to be a bit of rotten wood from a tree hollow. He brought it close to a table, and Curlyhead saw a night beetle lying in the moss. The beetle was gray in color and seemed an ordinary insect that would have never drawn the boy’s attention. Graybeard put it on the boy’s palm.

“Well, can you recognize it?”

Curlyhead hesitated for a moment, then, avoiding an answer, cleared his throat just like his granddad used to do and shook his head, as if saying: “I would have recognized it, if it weren’t that difficult.”

“Why!” thundered Graybeard. “Everybody knows this shiny beetle. It’s *lampyris noctiluca* and you can find it under your feet anywhere in the forest. People call it Ivan’s worm, haven’t you ever heard of it? My, my! What’s going on in this forest? What does that Bestbrain think he’s doing? What does he teach you, what does he drum into your heads? Well then, come on. I can’t show you all kinds of beetles. There are two thousand varieties only of those that can shine. Two thousand, mind you! And I have nearly all of them. You wouldn’t have seen them even in five days. But there is one that I want to show you, because I’m very proud of it. Look, this is cocujo, a snapping beetle. I brought it from the tropical forests of the Amazon. Well, how d’you like it? Flitting about very peacefully, isn’t it? But if you came across it in a jungle, in the pitch dark of a tropical night? If you first heard a terrible cry of the night bird caw and then saw this flashing blue light coming upon you? Eh, Curlyhead? How would you feel then?”

But the boy’s full lips parted in a smile. He had recovered after those shameful moments when he couldn’t recognize the Ivan’s worm. He pointed to a corner of the dark cave-like hall and asked, “What’s that over there? Those writhing fiery threads? They look like hair flowing down onto the floor.”

“A-a, that. That’s a rare thing, brother. Those are earthworms which I brought from a distant land. I call them nymph’s hair. Besides, I have many other small

things — springtails, shrimps, centipedes. They can all shine, the small devils! But we must hurry up, my dear. There are more halls to see with fish, jellyfish, and squids. Between ourselves, there is something to see there!”

Until these words — “there is something to see there!” — stout, surprisingly calm and dignified Whirfast had kept in the rear, casting casual glances at some exhibits and skipping the others so that Graybeard wouldn’t notice, clearing his throat from time to time, rolling his eyes, and drawling thoughtfully in his booming voice: “Hem, hem! That there are such things in the world!” But as soon as he heard Graybeard’s promising “there is something to see there!” his dignity was gone and Whirfast rushed ahead, stamping along the underground passage, then swerved into a dark cave where a dim blue light could be seen.

Curlyhead followed his granddad. As soon as he entered the hall, he heard the sound of water flowing from above. It was rushing and gushing like a mountain stream running down steep rocks.

Aha! Now he knew what it was. There were huge aquariums in this hall. They were made in the shape of underwater grottoes with small rocks and bushy corals which pushed upward like desert cacti or fancy star-like flower buds. All around were water plants bent to one side, as if by the powerful winds of deep sea.

The underwater world! And a soft sparkling light was flowing from the sea bottom.

Curlyhead squatted down beside an aquarium. He didn’t notice that his granddad was crouching beside him. The boy’s eyes were glued to a strange fish which had just appeared from behind a grotto. The fish had a long nose, like a rod, with a light glowing at the end. This light looked like a small lamp, or a candle. The cunning fish moved its long nose left and right, and the lamp at the nose’s end danced slowly in the water, as if looking for something. There! A tiny fish peeped out of a hole in a rock. The fish was evidently fascinated, hypnotized by the light which was sailing gracefully among the waving silky water plants. Oh, that luring light! The simple-hearted tiny fish came quite close and touched it with its nose just like Curlyhead touched the glass wall of the aquarium with his own nose. The tiny fish examined the light: what could it be? Perhaps one of those small stars shining at nights above the vast ocean? Maybe this time it lowered down to the sea bottom?

Oh, the light was so marvellous, so attractive!

And then snap! The long-nosed fish closed its jaws like a flash of lightning and gobbled up the tiny gullible creature. In a moment everything was quiet over the rock hole. The fascinating light was glowing again as if nothing had happened, and no fish would suspect that it was so treacherous.

“Just fancy that! This brute gobbled it up!” cried out Curlyhead, a note of naive indignation and amazement in his voice.

“So it did, ha-ha!” laughed Graybeard moved to tears by the boy’s innocence. “One gulp and that was it! That’s why this brute is called an angler fish. See, how cunning it is, and how good it is at luring its prey by light and even dancing. There comes one more of the same kind. Sssh! There it’s swimming out from behind the corals! Fantastic creature! It’s a gulper. Please note: its lamp is not on its nose, but right in its mouth! I don’t think I have to tell you how strong its jaws are. And the

mouth — well, you can see for yourselves — it's a huge trap, it is! Fish are going in there like anything, lured by that light."

"To hell with them! Those brutes'll eat up all the fish! I hate them!" Curlyhead sniffed softly and turned away from the aquarium. He caught a glimpse of a peaceful moonlit night, and seed wings slowly descending from the tops of lime trees and maples.

"They won't, they won't!" Graybeard objected loudly. "It's the other way round! There're so few of these precious light-producing creatures in the seas and oceans, so we've got to take great care of them. But if you don't like them, here's a peaceful one for you — a squid. I'll touch it with a reed, and let's see what happens." Graybeard leaned over the aquarium, dipping his gray mustache in the water, and put a reed into it. He did it with a mysterious look, as if performing a miracle. He even showed the tip of his tongue in anticipation.

The great squid was lying on the bottom. It was almost transparent, with short tentacles protruding from its head. Apparently it was as fond of sleeping as Graybeard when he came to reading his wise books. The squid was sleeping, half-buried in the sand, and looked like a greenish glass tube with feelers. Before the reed touched the squid, it jumped, as if from an electric shock, and expelled a thick luminescent cloud. That was something Curlyhead had never seen. The cloud was growing larger and larger, glowing with various tints of sky blue. The squid hid in this cloud of light, which screened the creature from the boy's eyes and carried it away.

"Well, how's that for a squid? Look and learn, my boy. And to do that, you should come and see me more often than you do... Now, will you stop here, please, and have a look at that squid's brother. It's a famous Japanese squid. Just imagine fishermen tired after their hard day's work and sailing through the pitch dark of night. Suddenly they all forget their tiredness, fascinated by a large shining plate lying deep on the sea bottom. The dazzling blue light can be seen from afar. A squid! That's where this wonderful shining comes from. Fishermen call it the sea moon... Come on, come on, Curlyhead! There's more wonderful things to see here: sea stars, sea cucumbers, sea lilies. And all of them are shining and flashing, as if using their lights to talk to each other. Oh, it takes a poet to describe every shade and hue of the strong and glorious light produced by a sea cucumber alone! But it must be a bit too much for one visit, eh? This way, please, then, into this small room. That's where we can relax a little."

Graybeard XII introduces us to his sister Primpersonia, asks her for three cups of the Forest Special coffee and expresses several wise thoughts. Then he and Whirfast exchange unusual presents.

They entered an anteroom with a low ceiling, which looked like a cellar, and sank into soft armchairs.

“Primpersonia,” Graybeard called to his sister. “Will you please bring us something from our stock, I mean those living lights which we show to the most welcome guests. And please, make us three cups of Forest Special.”

At these words, a tall, upright and lanky woman entered the room. She didn’t look her ninety years, but seventy at most. She was dressed all in black, except for a close fitting white collar round her scrawny neck. Her silvery hair was swept back neatly. They said she had studied in a royal college in Prudishland and returned rather haughty and reserved from there, differing greatly in her manners from the Graybeard tribe.

“Will you please make us some Forest Special,” repeated Graybeard. “Just the way I like it: very very thick, and with a yellow film on top.”

“Do you mean to say that I should pour in some birch sap?” asked Primpersonia matter-of-factly.

“Exactly, some birch sap.”

“And add a drop of sloe milk?”

“Sloe milk is the very thing.”

“And put in some caraway seeds?”

“Right you are. I certainly meant some caraway seeds.”

“And flavor it all with crushed nutmeg?”

“Precisely, Primpersonia! It’s just what I meant to say. Bring the coffee to a boil and wait until it thickens, and then top it with nutmeg powder, especially round the film’s edge. But see that you don’t put on too much of that nutmeg!”

“Now!” Primpersonia tossed her head back and looked down at Graybeard. “You needn’t tell me that. I’ve known how to make it since I went to a royal college at sixteen. I do want you to understand that it’s not a proper thing to teach your sister how to make Forest Special. I’ve been making this kind of coffee all my life. In my time I used to serve it to Breakneck himself.” With these words Primpersonia sailed out of the room, her lips pursed. There was a whiff of cold air after her.

“Grandpa,” whispered Curlyhead. “Who was Breakneck?”

“Oh!” exclaimed Whirfast bristling his eyebrows. “He was an acrobat. The most adventurous person in the world, a real daredevil. He used to swing across gullies. The tricks he did! I watched him once in spring, hem, hem. A lot of forest people came to see his performance. He swung like a whirlwind over our heads, and suddenly — whoosh! — he snatched Primpersonia and carried her across the canyon. Just flew over it! Well... there’s no more flying for him. He broke his neck. People say they were engaged. Eighty years have passed since his death, but Primpersonia still wears her black dress as a sign of mourning.”

They sat silent for a time, each deep in his own thoughts. One was recalling the fish with a treacherous lamp on its nose, another was watching mentally nutmegs being crushed and powdered on thick and aromatic coffee. And the third was thoughtfully studying the ceiling and murmuring to himself: "Hem, hem. Of course, you can't try your luck forever when you come to think of it."

After a long pause Whirfast cleared his throat and asked bluntly:

"There's one thing I always wanted to ask you, Graybeard. Why do you grow these living lights? You're traveling around the world, though you lost your new rubbers in the swamps of Barbary, and a crocodile ripped off half of your cloak and swallowed your hat. And yet you keep traveling and collecting those shiny things and growing them in your hothouses, and then..."

"What!" Graybeard jumped up and his gray hair bristled angrily. "What!" he repeated. "Did I hear you right or was it my imagination? Did you say 'Why?' Excuse me, but I don't ask you 'Why?' Indeed, why do you make your windmills, why have you been making them for forty years already, why have you made five thousand seven hundred, or rather seven thousand five hundred of them? Just tell me, why?"

"We-ell," boomed the embarrassed Whirfast, who evidently did not expect to provoke such a storm by such a simple question.

"'Well' 's not enough! You were never ashamed to ask me 'Why?', but when it comes to answering my question your poor 'well' is all you can say. Ha! He's asking why! Let me tell you then..."

Graybeard even lifted himself on his elbows and gave Whirfast a piercing and indignant look. His silvery hair bristled up. (When in Africa, I was once told by the famous hunter Steadyhand: "If you see a lion with his fur and his mane bristled, keep clear of him, for he is not in a kidding mood." Our Graybeard looked very much like that lion now.) Graybeard dropped back into his armchair suddenly and laughed. When he spoke, his voice was calm, but there was a bitter note in it.

"As to myself... With your permission, I shall explain a couple of things to those who need a long time to think them over. Now. I can flood the whole earth with light and do it without noise, smoke or wires at that. Yes, yes. Don't be surprised and don't you raise your brows, Whirfast. The halls in this museum and the steps down to the very lake are all illuminated by what do you think? By the lights living in our forest. If I grow enough of them, I'll illuminate every stump and every nook in this forest, all round the Long Lakes, and even further, to the Jagged Rocks. And with what light! Not with that noisy and smoky and choky one, but soft and genuine. That's one thing. Now for another. I can catch fish enough to feed the whole world. And it'll be the most tasty and the most nourishing fish. Don't you stare at me with big round eyes, because I mean it! You saw those fantastic glowing sea fish that I keep. They can lure into my nets whole shoals of the best Pacific saury, pilchard and saurel. If necessary, they will save the same fish for our children, scaring them away from the predators. I can also..."

You shall never see our wise Graybeard bending his third, fourth, fifth and so on fingers, and you shall never know what else he could have done, for here his sister



Primpersonia reentered the room. She held a silver tray with three cups of coffee in one hand and a pearl box covered with a white cloud in the other.

She put everything she had brought on the table and took off the white cloud of cotton. There!

Curlyhead blushed with confusion and excitement, as if his face had caught fire. He couldn't take his eyes off the box. For in that box, nestled in white cotton, small lights were lying... No, not just lying, but shining, glowing and beaming with carmine, cherry red and lemon yellow colors. The lights were simply small bits of wood, but their strong radiance and play of colors were most unusual.

"I grew them myself, I did! In my underground hothouse. You won't find such lights in the forest, not even in the whole world!" Graybeard said in a loud whisper, looking lovingly at his lights lying side by side in their cotton nests. "Oh, Curlyhead, there are even more wonderful things in my underground hothouse. Sometime I'll show them to you. But how do you like these?"

Did he need to ask? Curlyhead's eyes were glued to the magnificent bits of wood glowing like hot coals with blue, gold and purple.

"Well then, that's your present, Curlyhead! Take them to your stump and put them in your lamps on the walls. You'll have a kingdom of night lights at home. Here! Only don't forget to keep the cotton damp."

Curlyhead took the box carefully in his hands and, utterly confused, turned to his granddad. The boy was suddenly glowing like a living light in the dark. Perhaps it was the reflection of the radiance coming from the box, or Curlyhead's unexpected happiness.

"Graybeard," said Whirfast rising to his feet. "I hope you'll forgive me, hem, hem. If I talked nonsense, it was just because I'm so simplehearted. Sometimes it happens with me. My boy is so happy, and I'm glowing with happiness too. So will you please accept our modest gift. It's for you and for our dear Primpersonia. Here, take it."

Whirfast unwrapped his package and put it on the table. Graybeard and Primpersonia saw a lively golden windmill. Its color was golden because it was made of reeds well dried in the sun.

"This is a trick mill, I must tell you. I've been racking my brains over it for twenty-two years. You just blow on it and see what happens. How do all the windmill sails turn? They turn with the wind, on my word of honor! I was making and remaking this one, adjusting those sails this way and that until I had what I wanted — I made them turn against the wind! Now, just try and blow a bit harder. Don't be afraid!"

Graybeard blew, then Primpersonia went up to the table, puckered up her lips, and also blew gently on the windmill. However, she stepped back at once to show that these childish amusements were not for her.

The windmill began whirring and its sails turned into a golden singing wheel.

Graybeard bristled his eyebrows happily and there was no telling whether he was happy because he believed he was really seeing a mill whose sails were turning against the wind, or just because he had another nice mill. He promised to take good care of it, to put it on the roof of his stump beside his old windmill so that they would turn together, one with the wind and the other against it.



Meanwhile, the reed windmill was whirring merrily, the golden wheel softly spinning out its song.

Then Primpersonia suddenly remembered herself and turned to her brother, "Don't forget your guests. The coffee's getting cold." She stepped aside with an important look and a towel over her shoulder.

The coffee was delicious indeed. Their lips stuck together as they sipped at it and their heads swam from the rich aroma. I tasted such coffee only once when I was in Baghdad. A snake charmer offered it to me. He used to add some ten drops of resin to it, and we drank our coffee in the shade of his camel. That was some taste and some aroma, but this coffee was even better! Curlyhead kept smacking his lips, his granddad was drinking in silence and puffing, while Graybeard XII was sipping at his coffee and tears of joy were rolling down his cheeks.

Having finished, they thanked Primpersonia and placed the empty cups back on the silver tray. Then Whirfast invited Graybeard to visit him on the Upper Lake and promised to show him his new windmills. Graybeard, who only recently called them those rattling things, stood up, gave Whirfast an affectionate kiss and said that there was nothing that would make him happier than to relax on the lake shore, to feel its beauty with his heart, and to listen to the simultaneous humming of hundreds of Whirfast's mills.

The three of them were about to leave the room when Primpersonia called Graybeard back and told him strictly to put a scarf round his neck. It was summer of course, but with his throat... And then, let them watch out. Someone was sneaking around their yard like a thief.

Primpersonia saw her brother disappear into the tense silence of the night and stood in the doorway for a long time, worried and sad, listening to the echoing steps on the stairs and to rustling sounds in the bushes. Nobody could see her now, and she put her scented handkerchief to her eyes. But don't you believe that she had a cold and proud heart. Her brother Graybeard was the dearest person to her after the death of her beloved Breakneck, who broke his neck before her very eyes. She would sit over her brother throughout the night or rather all day long, with her knitting in her lap, guarding his sleep and his peace and seeing to it that his quilt didn't slip down, his pillow remained in place, and the window shutters in his room didn't squeak. She would jump protectively at the softest sound, even if it was the sound of a fly over her brother's bed. As to her pride, her haughtiness, her reserved manners... Well, that was something she must have picked up in that Prudishland college.

Primpersonia glanced at the bramble bushes where she had once seen the lurking shadows. Perhaps her heart told her that her poor Graybeard was in for a troublesome night.

Graybeard XII, Whirfast and Curlyhead row toward the Upper Lake. "I won't let you pass like that! Come over here!" Sweetfruit calls from the shore. In the kingdom of melons.

Graybeard and his companions passed through a small gate and thick darkness closed in on them. Suddenly Curlyhead looked back and cried out in surprise, "Oh! Who can that be over there, behind the bush, blinking and staring at us?"

"Really!" said Graybeard and stopped. "It must be wolves. But where did they come from? Wait a moment, I'll catch them one with my oar. Take that!"

Graybeard swung his long oar, and two shaggy figures jumped high into the air and then rushed crashing away into the brushwood.

"So! These prowling beasts have reached our parts," said Graybeard in a worried voice. Then he laughed, remembering how those two dashed into the forest. None of the three companions could see in the dark that the figures they met were far more dangerous creatures than the wolves.

Soon the serene lake scene made them forget about their adventure. Who would think of anything bad and frightful when his soul is filled by the silent beauty of the night? A full moon was drifting across the sky like a red-hot ball, casting dark shadows of pines on the water. The golden moon glade ran from shore to shore.

As they reached the lake they saw a light boat with a pointed bow slumbering on the water, tied to a tree. Frogs croaked in the lake, and crickets chirped away in the shore grass.

Whirfast sat at the oars, Curlyhead settled in the nose, still holding in his hands the pearl box with its treasures — the glimmering lights. Graybeard occupied the stern, where he could puff on his pipe in peace and watch a long stream of smoke drifting behind over the surface of the water.

They pushed off the shore and went ahead.

The full moon followed, the shadows of the pines also started moving, and the golden moon glade ran shimmering after them. The small waves lapped against the sides of the boat and the streaming water was bubbling in its wake. Sleepy fish jumped from time to time. The silent scene was so charming that Whirfast cleared his throat and said, "What a beautiful night." Then, gently working his oars, he began singing in a low voice, droning like a bumblebee before rain.

The boat glided over the sleepy lake like a bird. The red-hot moon glade seemed to be a golden chain on which the playful moon was holding their boat.

On a night like this you wouldn't like to be silent. You would like to speak, to call to the mysterious shadows near the shore, to say a kind word to your neighbor. Graybeard and Whirfast remembered the past, and gradually their conversation drifted into a quarrel. It was an old quarrel over a sore point: who was the first to settle on the shores of the Long Lakes — Thinbeards or Thickbeards? Graybeard was deeply convinced that Thickbeards were the first settlers, or, to be more precise, it was his forefather Graybeard I of the Thickbeard tribe. It was he who had discovered the

first tree stump in this remote place, stuck his chief's staff into the sand and declared: "This land with its water and mushrooms shall be ours from now on." (According to the chronicles, Graybeard I was fond of honey agarics.) Later another Thickbeard, Bestbrain, settled at the Three Pines. Then came old Bigfoot followed by the rest of the Thickbeard tribe.

At these words Whirfast slapped himself on his knee and thundered angrily that everything had been the other way round. His forefathers, Thinbeards, were the first to arrive, and not at the left shore where Graybeard's stump was, but at the right one over there, where you could find his, Whirfast's, windmills and Sweetfruit's garden. That's how it had been! The Thinbeards were the first to come here, and it was Whirfast's forefather, Whirfast the Miller, who laid a stone on the shore and announced: "This is where I shall put up the first water mill."

It was Graybeard who jumped up now, rocking and nearly overturning the boat. He knocked out his pipe angrily, moved over to Whirfast and seized him by the collar. They shouted into each other's ear clashing over the origin of the names Thickbeard and Thinbeard.

Whirfast puffed and boomed like a cannon, saying that his forefathers were of more ancient origin and looked more like the forest king Oh, and had thick beards and long red mustaches since time immemorial. But from the opposite shore these thick beards seemed to be thin to Graybeard's forefathers.

"What!" Graybeard stuck his pipe into his mouth and froze with indignation: in other words, Whirfast said Graybeard's forefathers were as blind as bats, if not silly. The face of the insulted Graybeard seemed to have caught fire from the red-hot ball of the moon. He grabbed Whirfast by the collar again and roared into his ear, "Do you know what the chronicles say? The chronicles say you're thin-skinned, not thin-bearded!"

"What about you? You're not Thickbeards, you're thickheads then!"

"Oh, we are, are we?"

"As much as we are thin-skinned!"

Both men jumped to their feet. Graybeard pulled his best friend, then his best friend pulled Graybeard. The boat rocked dangerously and took in some water.

Plash! Splash! The oars stuck out of the water for a moment. Whirfast went overboard crashing into the water on his back. Graybeard shot up his hands, as if trying to hold on to the moon, then clapped them desperately and toppled over sending up sprays of water.

There was silence. Only a gurgle could be heard followed by bubbles where Graybeard's mustache floated on the rippled water.

Then Curlyhead's ringing voice rent the air, "The lights, my lights! Mercy! Save them!"

The frogs resumed their croaking and the crickets went on chirping as before.

Curlyhead's lights were drifting on the water, bobbing in their white cotton nests. The golden moon glade was also bobbing, and the red moon seemed to be smiling down from the sky.

Huge Whirfast was the first to appear on the surface, water rushing down his face

and gushing out of his ears and nose. He sneezed, and the sound echoed from shore to shore. Then he said, "Blast it all! I seem to be wet a little," and looked around. The overturned boat was in the middle of the lake, its pitched bottom gleaming in the moonlight like the back of a shark.

Whirfast reached the boat and turned it bottom down. He took another look around, but there was no sight of his companions. Only the living lights continued bobbing up and down, their cotton nests resembling white saucers.

"Graybeard! Curlyhead! Where are you?" Whirfast called out.

There was a splash: Whirfast took a deep breath and dived down. Soon he came up holding his grandson who got rather cold. Then, with a groan, he helped plump Graybeard into the boat.

All three were glad to be safe and sound. Without catching their breaths or wringing out their wet shirts, they rushed to pick up the sailing lights from the boat. As they did it, Graybeard kept dragging on his wet pipe and comforting Curlyhead:

"There's nothing to be afraid of, sonny, they won't sink. True, the cotton is rather wet, but it's even for the better — the light will be stronger. That's what I usually do. I dampen them just when the moon is high and there's a mist over the lake."

Having recovered all the lights, the three companions rowed along the dark wall of pine trees or under the overhanging canopies of mighty oaks. Once a small river used to run here. Spring waters flooded the old riverbed, bringing clay, sand and fallen trees and forming several dams along the current. It was then that the three long lakes appeared one after the other. They were deep and clear. When a yellow aspen leaf lowered to the bottom of the lake, it could be seen however deep the place was. Our travelers were rowing along one of these lakes named the Lower Lake.

Silence reigned in the world. The round moon was shining brightly. Tender and lonely words of a song came across from the forest on the far shore:

*Oh, come out, you moon, full and shining bright,
Charming orb of night...*

Someone was sending her heartfelt song up to the silver-footed queen. Perhaps a young girl of the Thickbeard or Thinbeard tribe. Her melancholy voice was so high that it sent ripples across the lake and gave shivers to our travelers.

"Graybeard," boomed out Whirfast, moved by the plaintive singing. "I do hope you'll excuse me if I blabbered some nonsense. Sometimes it happens with me, you know, hem."

Graybeard made a hopeless gesture with his pipe. "I expect you'll forgive me too, dear Whirfast. I just popped off, I did, and now I'm sorry. I'll tell you what. Down there in that cold water, I thought it was the end of me. But then I suddenly remembered what one old chronicle says. It says that our forefathers had reached this lake simultaneously — yes, simultaneously, on the same day."

"That's it! I've heard the same thing. They did it at the same time! Your forefathers came from that direction, and ours came from this. And they met right here, took off their helmets, and knelt down. And this is what they said: 'From now on there

shall be neither hostility nor disagreement between us.' So there was no point for us in...picking up a fight."

Graybeard even grunted with disappointment. Cautiously, he held out his hand, as if to take his pipe. Suddenly, in a burst of friendly feeling, he squeezed the broad Whirfast's hand. There they stood with their hands clasped, linked by something that moved their hearts to tears ('...neither hostility nor disagreement...'). Dripping wet, they sat shoulder to shoulder, and there was sincere devotion in their eyes gazing into the sky.

Meanwhile, the boat was gliding silently under the moon, cleaving the shimmering sheet of the lake. They passed a steep shore with old rotten tree roots hanging out over the water, with sticking stumps, dark holes and caves made by the battering waves. This is the hiding place for sorcerers, ghosts, imps, pixies, bogies, and other evil spirits of the night, thought Curlyhead.

Suddenly the shore became level and changed into a white sandy spit. The smell of smoke coming from the low green hill beyond the spit reminded the travelers of home comfort. A man with a big watering can in his hand was standing on the spit and calling out, "Where do you think you are going? Shame on you! I won't let you pass like that! Come over here! You can't pass my stump without calling in! I'd rather let my legs wither than let you go on!"

Whirfast made a happy and hopeless gesture with his hand: there was no passing this place. When Sweetfruit spotted a traveler, it was no use trying to escape. Whirfast would certainly make him pull in to the shore and would act as host to him and treat him to a lot of melons in spite of all his excuses and pleas.

So they turned and went straight to the place from where came the welcoming voice of merry Sweetfruit. The man was standing by the water almost naked, wearing only a red loin-cloth. A large bunch of parsley stuck out from behind his ear. It was evident that unlike some other people, he did not spend his life in underground museums, but in the open air, in his garden. He tanned in the moonlight and his tan was dark blue, even violet. This, as well as his potbelly, made him look like a choice eggplant. Like all fatties, he was a great one for eating and was good-natured. To any of your words, funny or not so funny, he would answer with laughter. But his was not the usual kind of laughter. It was a sonorous Ho! Ho! which used to roll downhill to the very edge of the water, leaping and bouncing like a huge wheel.

Sweetfruit was a man of action. Before his guests realized what was happening, they found themselves in his summer hut. And before Curlyhead opened his mouth to boast of his living lights, the host had pushed in a huge melon from his garden.

"That's the queen of the dinner table for you!" Sweetfruit announced laughing. "It's a stuffed melon! You've never tasted anything like it. Just make yourself at home, and let's begin. The melon is stuffed with dumplings! I saved it for you."

Sweetfruit slashed the melon in half and emptied the stuffing into a large bowl. Real steaming dumplings! Graybeard was about to ask, "What! How on earth did you get them in there?" But he managed only to move his long mustache, for Sweetfruit was already giving out sharp wooden sticks and urging his guests to start, "Come on! Have a taste! Eat your fill! Pick up three dumplings at once, for two is not enough.

And don't ask me how I did it, because I won't reveal my secret. I put those dumplings into a budding melon, and so they grew together."

With these words he jumped to his feet and said, "Just a moment! This was an appetizer. Now I'm going to give you something more substantial."

Soon he rolled in another melon. "Isn't it a beauty! Look, it's a camel melon! I grew it on pure sand and watered it only in the moonlight."

Curlyhead was stunned. The melon was indeed like a big camel with two humps. Its soft skin was covered with golden hairs gleaming with cool drops of dew.

"Go ahead! Treat yourselves!" invited Sweetfruit. "You can have the skin too, and those golden hairs. They, and the dew — that's where the real taste is. It smells sweet, and it melts in your mouth. Just try it and you'll know. Yummy! This is a dream, a miracle! I spent two years planting, selecting and watering so that the melon would develop those fragrant golden hairs."

While speaking, Sweetfruit was cutting off and handing out slices of formidable sizes. "Take some more," he kept repeating. "Isn't it delicious! This is the slice that'll make you happy! You can never have enough of it! This one is specially for you. It's so tasty! It's a real blessing!"

It was something unbelievable. Listening to Sweetfruit's prattling, they didn't even notice when they finished off the huge melon. Not a single bit of skin was left uneaten.

Meanwhile, Sweetfruit pushed in the third melon. But was it a melon? Curlyhead even touched it to make sure. It certainly was not. It was a huge pitcher.

"Right! Perfectly right you are, sonny!" agreed Sweetfruit happily, grinning from ear to ear, his violet skin shining and his bunch of parsley swaying with joy behind his ear. "It certainly is a pitcher. I make thousands of them on the shore and grow melons in them. My dear Whirfast, will you please help me break it."

The two men lifted the pitcher and hit it gently against the earthen floor. The vessel cracked. They peeled off one piece, then a second and a third... No, Curlyhead had never seen a melon with such tender, transparent skin of lemon color. The whole fruit seemed to be filled up with honey and was as brilliant as the sun. Even the yellow seeds were illuminated from inside, and you could see them through the thick honey-like flesh.

"Please, treat yourself. This stuff will do you good. It's tasty and balmy, so let it go into your tummy. This will keep you busy while I get another one..."

Presently Sweetfruit rolled in the fourth melon. This time it was a water melon. This wonder of nature was to be eaten as follows: first you should give it several hard slaps, then make a cut and suck out the thick juice that would make your lips stick together, then take out the red core, covered with silver frost and called "grandfather", and eat it up. After that you could start on slices, each a foot long, with a sweet smell of the water melon and the autumn fragrance of a honeydew melon.

They had hardly been through with the fourth, when Sweetfruit pushed in the fifth melon which he called the Whirfast melon. It looked like a giant with hands on hips and a yellow belt in the middle. The host said it was named in honor of dear Whirfast. With these words he hacked the melon into huge slices and they fanned out taking up half the hut.

The guests managed half of the melon and then...

“Enough,” moaned Whirfast. “Thank you ever so much, my dear Sweetfruit. Thanks from the bottom of my heart. We’ve had our fill. Of course, this melon bears my name, but enough is enough. You have to draw the line somewhere.”

“Of course, of course!” confirmed Sweetfruit enthusiastically, piling up more slices in front of his guest. “You’ve put it very wisely. But it would be even wiser if I say that we can push that line and still feel very fine.”

On saying that, Sweetfruit rolled in a witch melon, followed by another miraculous fruit — a melon that had grown in a pear tree.

“But I can’t!” cried out Whirfast at the top of his voice. “I’ll burst any minute now! My eyes are about to pop out of my head!”

“Don’t worry, you’ll manage,” assured the persistent Sweetfruit. “Easy does it. Just push those slices in bit by bit. You can’t imagine how much room there is in your stomach. It’s like a big party, you know. When you have a lot of people at the table, there’s always room for one more.”

“Mercy! I’m bursting!” bellowed Whirfast turning his head left and right like a bear at bay. Then he glanced at his grandson. The boy’s eyes glazed and it was evident that one more slice would turn him into a melon.

Graybeard was moaning, sprawled in a corner. From time to time he gasped out, “Oh, brothers, light the pipe for me... I can’t...I can’t raise my hand. I’m fed up with these melons. I’m falling asle-ep...”

When Sweetfruit ran out for one more melon, Whirfast whispered, “Friends, let’s get out of here. Creeping or crawling, we have to do it now if we want to escape with our lives. This was only the beginning, we’re still in for a real treatment...”

Sweetfruit was rolling an elephant melon with his hands and pushing forward a coconut melon with his foot at the same time, when he saw his dear guests in the distance plodding along in zigzags through his melon garden, supporting each other and tripping now and again over the trailing stems. Once they looked back, nodding to him silently (their lips were stuck together and their sleepy eyes half shut) and mumbling something, apparently saying thank you, goodbye, we’re in a hurry, we can’t stay any longer.

“What! Where are you going?” Sweetfruit even slapped himself on his knees in annoyance. “You’re hungry! You didn’t have a morsel! How about a cherry melon? And what about a pot melon? I say, a melon stuffed with sparrows is delicious!”

Sweetfruit raced after his guests, rolling in front of him a flat green champignon melon. The three companions glanced back and streaked across the garden, through the weeds, over a ditch and across the swamp, never stopping until they reached the shore and flopped into the boat one after another.

“Whew!”

“Phew!”

“Ohhhhh!”

Sweetfruit stopped running. He stood silent and offended, his hands raised toward the heavens in a pleading gesture. When the boat was off the shore, he shouted again:

“What kind of people are you? You call it visiting? They are in a hurry! The idea!

Where to, I'd like to know? Wouldn't it be better to stay a bit longer and have a nice little talk? Hey! Can you hear me? Next week I'll hold a great melon show! I invite you all! And bring along your neighbors! We'll get together in my hut and make a night of it!"

Sweetfruit heaved a sigh and slowly went back home. What about showing them around? he remembered suddenly. What a great pity! He didn't show them his gar-



den! He was so eager to show his guests, the boy at least, all the places where he grew his melons: the fence, the roof, the well windlass. One melon had even crept into the chimney and was sitting there like an owl in a hollow, and he had to let the smoke out through the door. He was also going to show them his barrel and bottle melons. Even that wasn't everything. He had a gate melon which was so big that it blocked the gateway. And they didn't have a chance of seeing his wife, Melonia!

Sweetfruit turned toward the high crest of the sand spit and shouted cupping his

hands to his mouth, “Hey! Come back! There’s something I want to show you-u-u!”
“You-u-u!” echoed the dark forest.
Meanwhile the boat sailed along the golden moon glade toward the Upper Lake.

5

*On the way to the Upper Lake. Wild beasts calling in the
dark. The travelers talk about the wild intruder.
In the kingdom of windmills.*

The travelers hit the old dugout with such impetus that it raised a high wave which reached Curlyhead’s nose. They nearly capsized the boat, and if that happened they would have hardly come up, being so overloaded with melon.

“Keep quiet, will you, hem,” Whirfast murmured. “I’ll work the oars gently.”

As they reached the middle of the lake, the overloaded boat slowly went ahead like an old beaver showing only its dark back and the tip of its nose from under the water.

“Dear Graybeard, do you happen to have a rope?” asked Whirfast in a low tone.

“What on earth do you need it for in the middle of the lake?”

“I need it for myself. All my buttons have come off and I have to hold up my pants with my hands.”

“That Sweetfruit! May he live in clover all his life! He stuffed us full with those melons of his.”

“That’s real hospitality for you! So you wouldn’t say you had to leave his home hungry.”

Graybeard and Whirfast laughed. Curlyhead was silent. His fingers, lips and even eyelashes were sticky with thick and sweet melon juice. He dozed off, leaning against his granddad’s back, but never forgot to keep an eye on the box with his treasures: what if those living lights were out on the water again? Suddenly he startled and blinked his sleepy eyes.

“What’s that?” Curlyhead asked in a puzzled voice. “Look, Granddad! Over there in the bushes... Something like two large lampyrises.”

At these words Graybeard and Whirfast turned and looked at the high shore. Two ominous lights were glaring in the dark thick bushes.

“Well,” said Graybeard lowering his voice. “It must be those beasts that we drove away from our yard. What are they doing actually, following us? Just look at that one on the right. His eyes are so fierce, you’d think he could jump into the water any minute.”

At that moment a long howl rose over the lake, “Uhoohooooo! Crash! Crash!”

The beast (or whatever it was) was standing over a steep slope and howling at the moon, at the boat, and at our travelers. Whirfast rowed hard and away from the dangerous place.

Suddenly the same cruel eyes flashed at them again from under a washed out tree stump on the other shore. And again a howl rose over the lake, “Uhoohooo! Uho-

hooohooooo! Crash! Crash!” It looked as if evil creatures kept calling to each other and warning: “Watch out! Here they come, the forest people! They are passing us!”

A cuckoo flew out of the dark, as if frightened by the ominous voices, and circled low around the boat, brushing its wing against Graybeard. Was it a warning? But against what?

“What kind of creatures are these? Could they be wolves, as Primpersonia says?” Graybeard asked in a worried voice. “It’s a long time since we saw them in our parts. Besides, their voices are different. First they howl and then comes that ‘Crash! Crash!’, as if someone crashed a knife against a stone.”

Whirfast rowed still harder and boomed out, “Did you hear that old story about a wild intruder that had once appeared at this lake?”

“You bet I did! He strangled my grandfather, Graybeard the Sharpeye in his own house.”

“Really! Please continue and tell us how it happened,” said Curlyhead moving closer to Graybeard.

“It did unfortunately, hang it all! Now, listen. Once, a night monster appeared in our parts. He must have come from some dense and gloomy forest or from a swampy land — nobody knew exactly. Anyhow, he was awfully fierce and cunning. He smelled of a wolf, but he wasn’t by the sight of him. He used to walk upright, had shaggy fur, and his head was like that of a man. But the most terrible thing about him was that he killed every living creature he came across in the forest. An old man went mushrooming, let’s say. This monster would sneak up in the dark, touch him from behind, and in a moment the old man would be charred and dead like a burnt tree stump. Whatever tree the monster would touch with his paw, that tree would be dead at once. If he opened his jaws and breathed into a bird’s nest, the poor nestlings died immediately. So, at nights this intruder would run around in the depth of the forest, snorting angrily and trampling to death every living thing. And he devoured his prey at once. That’s why we used to call him Death Jaws.”

“Unbelievable!” said Curlyhead and looked around dumbfounded. “And did it last long?”

“Rather. And he made plenty of trouble. There was only one thing the cursed monster was afraid of — light: living lights and especially big merry fires. Being an evil creature, he liked darkness and silence most of all. He knew that wherever people built a fire they brought along lively talks and songs, life that is. So, on seeing a fire in the forest and Thickbeard people around it, the shaggy intruder would hide behind a tree and snort angrily looking away from the fire. As soon as the people would leave the glade, he would leap out of the dark and trample the living lights with his paws, and then he would throw earth on the fire to put it out. He was terribly afraid of the living lights. What is more, he even gnashed his teeth at the moon. As soon as the moon would appear in the sky, he would hide in the thicket, scrape the soil with his paws and throw it into the sky. It looked as if he wanted to put out the moon itself and plunge the forest into darkness and terror.”

“Perhaps he was a swamp werewolf,” said Whirfast in his booming voice. “People

say they live in bogs and are terribly afraid even of a small spark, to say nothing of stronger light, which makes them blind and kills them. Just put fire under his nose, and he will petrify, become as still as a rotten stump.”

“It’s pretty hard to say,” Graybeard remarked shrugging his shoulders. “As I have said, at first we took him for a wolf or a werewolf. But no. He must be something worse. He must be some night killer. Wherever he saw even a little fire or a glow-worm, he always sneaked up to it, trampled it and then, in the dark, pounced on people.”

“Crazy creature,” muttered Whirfast. “What can it be, I wonder. And what happened to him finally? Or did he disappear?”

“Disappear! Such monsters don’t disappear by themselves. Our people dug out a pit beyond the Wild Boar River and threw in a coat of one old man there as a decoy. Then they said loudly, ‘You just rest here in the shade. Or you may gather mushrooms over there in the glade. Meanwhile, we’ll go further, beyond the river.’ So they went away. Only they didn’t abandon the old man. They wrapped him up in a cloth and took him along. The shaggy killer overheard them and, as soon as they left, he pounced on the coat and — into the trap! People came back, beat the hell out of him and said he was as good as dead. What do you think happened then? The next night they came to the pit to have a look at their bitter enemy and found out that he disappeared into thin air! He left behind an ominous sign, though. He put a stick into the ground over the pit, tied a ball of singed black fur to it, and put a reed arrow through the ball so that it would point to our forests and lakes. Old Bestbrain (he had been a wise man, and our Professor Bestbrain takes after his grandfather) looked at that sign and his face darkened. ‘It’s a bad sign,’ he said. ‘Do you know what the savage killer wanted to say? He gave us this warning: I shall come back even in a hundred years and I shall bring along more cruel intruders, and we shall kill you all and trample down your forests!’ ”

“Oh, come on, that’s an old story,” said Whirfast dismissing the terrible idea. “Even if all those awful things had really happened, the adventure is as old as the hills. We live in different times. Our children go to school, and we, hem, we have changed a lot, too. To think only of your museum, and of all my windmills.”

“Oh no, brother. Old tales are not necessarily far from the truth,” remarked wise Graybeard. “Sometimes they are closer to it than our present adventures. I also thought it’s a moth-eaten story, but you’ve heard that mournful howling yourself. It makes one remember those bad days.”

The howling died away in the depths of the forest. Curlyhead even thought it might have been just a bad dream.

Presently the travelers approached a broad dam. The turned up roots, trunks and tree stumps which had been brought here by the flood made a gloomy sight. Darkness lurked among those dead pieces of wood, and only the bubbling of a little stream running from under the dam disturbed the overall silence.

Silent and cautious, the travelers went ashore. Whirfast lifted the dugout onto his shoulder and, with muffled grunts, carried it up the steep slope.

They bypassed the dam and came to the Upper Lake. It was larger than the previous

one, and the moon seemed to be brighter here. Along the shores dark clumps of willows lowered their branches to the surface of the water.

Soon the travelers reached a shallow sandy beach. They heard a faraway low humming, as if coming from a bee garden. That was Whirfast's domain: thousands of mills working simultaneously. The pat-pat-pat of the millwheels, the singing, rattling and whirring sounds blended into a steady and low buzzing. Whirfast cheered up, cleared his throat, quickly fastened the boat, and turned to Graybeard, as if asking: Well, how do you like my music?

Whirfast had chosen a beautiful spot for his home. A high hill of fine white sand stood out in the moonlight. Perched on the hill open to all winds was an old tree stump the likes of which you could never see. Windmills were everywhere: on the door, on the window shutters, on the chimney, on the roof. They were of various sizes and sang in various voices, because they were made of various things: wood, reeds, bark, birch bark, red bast, maple seed wings, dried leaves, and acorns. Besides, there were also mills made of various kinds of shells, fish scales, and even of swan feathers. But these were only the mills which Whirfast used to decorate his stump, darkened with time and rather shaky because of the constant winds.

Beyond the stump there was a kingdom of water mills. Whirfast had washed a lot of sand and used it to build old-fashioned fortresses, towers and bridges. He had dug channels and filled them with water from the lake, and on those channels he had put up exactly two hundred water mills. Just imagine two hundred channels and two hundred wooden wheels beating and churning the water simultaneously and the never-ending pat-patting and noise of the rushing water.

Finally, there was the pride of Whirfast's household—two rows of sand mills. Pure, as if sifted, sand was rushing downhill along narrow headraces and turning the wheels which were rattling merrily raising golden sand dust. Whirfast liked to sit here on a moonlit night, listening to the never-ending noise of water and sand and talking to himself in a philosophic way: "Certainly there's always something worth giving it a thought, when you come to think of it." And he invariably ended this deep thought with an important "hem."

So the travelers chose the same place to relax a little. They were rather tired from that melon eating, their escape from Sweetfruit, and their unexpected swim in a lake. All three were daydreaming on the sand and listening to the rushing of water in the channels and the whirring of the windmills on Whirfast's stump house.

The Big Dipper was lowering its handle slowly, and the sky in the east began to lighten. Tiredness and sluggishness overwhelmed Graybeard. A silent shadow of the cuckoo passed over his head. He knew it was a warning: he had to hurry home, for dawn was at hand. Whirfast also knew he couldn't hold up his friend any longer. They would all drop onto the sand with the first rays of the sun and fall into a heavy sleep that would last until night.

Graybeard was leaving in a hurry. Whirfast helped him take the boat to the Lower Lake.

The stars, high in the sky, were growing pale, and a light mist was steaming over the water. Graybeard rowed hard not to be overtaken by the sunrise.

He fastened the boat at the bottom of the hill where his house stood. Then he lit his pipe and went puffing upstairs. The steps were numerous and squeaky, with small benches to rest on, carved handrails and lampposts. Graybeard was climbing up slowly, often stopping and looking into each lamp. And each time he did so, he said, "It's time to go to bed." At these words, the living lights went out one by one, as if dissolved in the twilight.

As Graybeard came up to the porch of his stump house, he puffed deeply on his pipe, held out his hand and with the long stem stopped the mill turning with the wind, then the one turning against the wind. The merry whirring died down. Graybeard wished pleasant dreams to the stump, the windmills and the lake.

He stepped on the threshold and... No, he wasn't dreaming! Quite near, he saw a couple of cruel tense eyes watching him from the dark bushes.

6

*Bad sign: birds and mushrooms flee from the forest.
A meeting at Professor Bestbrain's place.
"Can you walk with royal steps?"*

"Dear Primpersonia," said Graybeard XII waking up from a sound sleep and habitually reaching for his pipe. "Will you be so kind as to examine my ear. Something is humming there like a bee in a bottle."

Primpersonia took a pair of tweezers (she wouldn't touch your ear with her bare fingers for the world) and pulled aside the hairy lobe of Graybeard's ear. However, she saw nothing special, except for a wisp of hair growing from the tender wax-like skin.

She put the tweezers down and asked Graybeard in a dignified manner to look into her own ear. She also felt some sort of humming which had kept her awake throughout the night. Graybeard had a look and saw that his sister's ear was as clean and rosy as an apple blossom.

"Dear Primpersonia," he said. "Frankly speaking, I've noticed nothing special, except for the sweet scent of the perfume you had brought from Prudishland." Primpersonia responded to the compliment with a cold silence and tightly pressed lips. Then she repeated that for the second day running there had been a droning sound in her ear, as if the wind had been blowing a pipe. But Graybeard could find no explanation of this mystery.

Presently he dressed and left his stump house.

The wakening sound of evening bells drifted over the forest. The sun had sunk behind the mountain, and dark silence descended upon the nearby pine woods and the faraway misty swamps.

It was the third night already that he could hear that noise and the annoying long howlings. The sounds came from god knows where, probably from as far as the Jagged Rocks. There was no need now to ask his sister to look into his ear. It could be well heard and seen that the whole forest was on the move: dark clouds scudding

across the sky, low flying birds, racing hares, and fleeing roes. Someone saw ants moving over in great masses. Another was frightened in the forest by a flash of fire, smoke and a long-drawn-out creak of a tree. The frightened old Bigfoot came running from beyond the birch grove and said he had seen ink mushrooms running away toward the lakes.

The heavy clouds brought a pungent smell from the Jagged Rocks. Alarm spread throughout the forest country.

It had been a long-standing tradition with the Thickbeards and Thinbeards that the learned hermit, Professor Bestbrain, and the object of his studies, blowballs, were always mocked at. But as soon as trouble occurred, everyone ran to him for advice.

This time it was the same old story.

Primpersonia prepared her brother for his visit to Bestbrain's place. She tied a scarf round his neck, combed his magnificent mustache and saw him off to the gate.

Graybeard walked puffing on his pipe and lighting the path with a glowing piece of rotten wood so as not to fall into a pit or stumble over a stump. As soon as he reached the first thicket, where Primpersonia's prying eye couldn't see him, he untied the scarf, twirled up his mustache and said, "That's what I call good tobacco, hem, hem!" He looked at the distant stars twinkling in the sky, and his thoughts wandered far away from the mud or puddles where he could soil his shining shoes, polished by Primpersonia. He walked and kept wondering about the rumbling sound coming from the Jagged Rocks. Could it be true what old Bestbrain had said? That some savage intruders would break into their peaceful valley, trampling down their forest and stump houses and filling their lakes with dark clouds of ashes? Could this terrible thing happen to their beautiful land?

Graybeard was not surprised to see a lot of people at Bestbrain's house. Thickbeards and Thinbeards were sitting on the benches under a huge birch tree, where Lunar School classes usually took place. There was Sweetfruit (slyly hiding a melon in a sack), Whirfast, and silver-haired Bigfoot — in short, the whole forest community had come together. In front of them, Professor Bestbrain was sitting barefoot, surrounded by his students. Driven into the ground, there was a forked stick before him with three pairs of spectacles hanging on it. From time to time, their lenses glittered in the red moonlight. Besides, there was a bunch of dry dandelions dangling from the fork, the wind blowing off the white fluff and carrying it over the heads of the crowd. These parachutes caused most of the humorous stories about the professor. He was said to be blowing off the heads of dandelions with a most serious look wherever he was: as a guest at a dinner table, in conference, or at a celebration. However, Thickbeards and Thinbeards were probably inventing these stories for the sake of some fun.

Bestbrain patiently waited until everyone had sat down and then nodded importantly with his bald head with a wisp of hair at the top, giving the floor to talkative Sweetfruit.

"Dear friends," began Sweetfruit, nonchalantly whisking the bunch of parsley from behind his ear. "What do you think of those clouds, that noise and those flashes

of fire in the night? I think there's going to be a heavy rain. So let it rain, and let it shower. It'll be nice weather for ducks. That is, I mean for budding melons. In this connection I'd like to tell you something. Tomorrow, that is on Sunday, I'm arranging a great show of melons. I invite you all, young and old, to my place. We shall have a nice party and shall eat some of this delicious fruit. That's what Sunday is for."

With these words Sweetfruit rolled a huge spotty melon out of his sack. A rustling murmur ran through the crowd. People were smiling, winking at each other, nudging their neighbors, exchanging humorous remarks.

"That Sweetfruit has a one-track mind indeed!"

"And his invitation this time is really neither here nor there!"

Then the gloomy Whirfast stood up, cleared his throat, and boomed out that it was not the time for joking, for the sky looked really ominous. He pointed to the dark jagged wall of the forest standing out against the dimmed moon.

"Can't you smell it, hem? It smells of burnt moss. I think we are in for a great draught. Peat is burning in the bogs, and every living thing is fleeing toward our lakes: birds, squirrels, martens..."

Someone butted in, "Trees moan, as if they sense something. I've heard them myself. There was not a whisper of wind, but a pine gave out a really sorrowful creak."

Old Bigfoot, still frightened by his adventure in the forest, lisped out, "I was walking when suddenly there was a flash of black fire right over my head. I ducked with fright, then glanced at my shirt and saw it was singed. Great trouble is coming."

Tense silence fell over the crowd, waiting for the word of their wisest man, Professor Bestbrain.

The professor put on one pair of spectacles, then another. The third had to be placed on the tip of his nose. His students immediately became serious and concentrated and turned as one man to their teacher. Meanwhile, Bestbrain was standing deep in his thoughts, staring into the night sky. Presently he began to speak in a low and surprisingly quiet voice, full of wisdom and keenness.

"Why do the clouds race? Why do the trees creak? Why are there flashes of fire in the forest? When nobody knows why, then nobody knows what."

As if in answer to the professor's enigmatic words, there was a rumbling sound following a dazzling flash of fire somewhere in the depths of the forest. Then came a depressive and sorrowful howling.

"Uhoohoo! Uhoohooohooooo! Crash! Crash!"

The crowd was overpowered with fear. All the Thickbeards and Thinbeards jumped to their feet.

It was then that Graybeard puffed on his pipe and said thoughtfully, "Since we don't know why, someone has to go... I think I will go... There!" He pointed with his pipe toward the forest and the Jagged Rocks from where the rumbling sound had come. Without further delay, Graybeard bent over to retie his shoelaces and then calmly walked away, into the tense and ominous darkness of the night.

Suddenly Curlyhead cried out, "Uncle Graybeard, Uncle Graybeard! I'm going too! Take me with you!" The boy rushed after the old man.

The people stood stockstill, looking at a dark cloud drifting over the forest and watching those two, followed by the moon, as they disappeared, like two small boats, into a vast sea of the forest.

Massive pines towered toward the sky like huge columns, their crowns interlaced in a dense canopy. Here and there the moonlight penetrated it, casting long straight shadows of the trees onto the earth. To Curlyhead they seemed giant forest warriors



lying in ambush. It was easy to walk among the pine trees, which receded from time to time forming large glades. The walk put Curlyhead into a merry mood, and he asked the old man, “Uncle Graybeard, can you walk with royal steps?”

“What steps did you say? I’m afraid I didn’t hear you quite well.”

“Royal. Look.”

Curlyhead leaped into the air easily, like a bird, and jumped along the path, first raising high one leg and then making two long steps with the other.

“One-two-three! One-two-three! Try it! Your body will fly through the air!”

“Ha-ha! All right, I’ll try. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Well, here goes! One... No, I better start with the other foot. One-two... Ha! One-two-three!”

“Let’s do it together! Let me take your hand. One-two-three!”

“Fancy that! I feel as if I’ve grown wings!”

“One-two-three!”

“One-two-three!”

Hand in hand, they flew along the path, one young and tiny like a sparrow, the other old and fat, like an owl, with a luxuriant white mustache, a scarf around his neck and large shoes on his feet.

“One-two-three! One-two-three! We all walk with royal steps at the Lunar School, you know. And we’ve taught Professor Bestbrain! Now he hops up to us only like this: One-two-three! One-two-three!”

“Well, that’s enough. I’m winded a bit. Whew!”

They slowed down. Graybeard took off his scarf and, not knowing what to do with it, fastened it to his leg like a bow. “That was some nice hopping! I’m in a sweat, so help me I am! Now tell me, Curlyhead, that Professor Bestbrain...er... What does he actually teach you by blowing those parachutes?”

“O-o-h!” drawled Curlyhead, his eyes stretched wide with surprise. “Our professor...! You saw the dry serpentroot, didn’t you? It has a long style. So, you let it fly, and you walk after it among the trees, and you watch it drifting in the moonlight until it lands slowly. It always descends seed first and always on damp soil. Clever, isn’t it? Now take sycamore wings. These just fall down, but they whir and they curve and swerve as they fall. Now, a lime tree parachute spins into the earth, while a knotgrass sends its parachute hopping and jumping over the ground. As to a poplar parachute — oh, the wind may carry it even to the other end of the world.”

“It’s all very well. You follow your professor, and keep blowing on those fluffy things of yours, and watch them flying. But why do you do it? What can you see there?”

“Well,” Curlyhead was surprised even more than before. “Our heads swim with what we can see! Just listen. Suppose we blew off a cloud of parachutes, and we watch them descending and dancing in the air, turning and twisting and swerving, going up and down. And I’m following their paths until I feel dizzy and can’t trace them anymore and fall down perfectly at a loss. So, there’s really much to see!”

“Well, Curlyhead, I think we can’t trace our path either. We’ve just lost our way. Let me see. There must be a track here leading to the Wild Boar River.”

*The charred trees. A pack of monsters using their
foreheads to break through the thicket.
The escape, the pursuit, hiding underwater.*

Graybeard took a piece of rotten wood out of his tobacco pouch to light the way. A hardly noticeable track made by the wild boars led to the river through thick bushes. Crouching, the old man and the boy forced their way through the bushes and found themselves in a bog. Fortunately, there was a trunk of an old tree brought down by the wind, and they used it to cross the Wild Boar River. Stretching beyond the river was a gloomy forest, where the Thickbeards and the Thinbeards were reluctant to go. More than one innocent soul had disappeared without trace in its bogs and thickets.

The further they went, the gloomier and thicker the forest became. There were more and more wind-fallen trees overgrown by a thick layer of moss.

“Wait,” said Graybeard. “The shoe hurts me.”

He reached out toward a pine for support and was about to look what it was that pressed his heel. But as soon as he touched the high tree it collapsed in a heap of black ash. Graybeard could hardly believe his eyes. He stood there motionless, his hand still outstretched into the empty darkness. A cloud of dust with a pungent smell of burnt wood hung above the travelers, tickling their throats. They exchanged glances. What could it mean? Only now did they notice that the trees around them were strange. They looked as if they were dry. Or petrified.

The Thickbeards could see very well in the dark, and their ears were sharper than those of the owls. While they were making their way toward the river, Curlyhead often called out: “Oh! Did you hear that? Five fledgelings woke up in their nest!” As they were going on, the boy had heard a bat flying overhead, a larva making a cracking noise under a tree bark, a spider dropping from a branch into his web hammock and swaying in it. The forest had lived its own, everlasting and concealed life. But now this life seemed to have stopped. Trees stood close to each other as usual, but no birds could be heard among them. Woodpeckers and bark beetles were also silent. Every living thing must have escaped from the forest — even caterpillars, even mushrooms.

“Uncle Graybeard, look,” whispered Curlyhead. “Over there, it the hollow... Those young squirrels are dead... They’re burnt.”

Curlyhead remembered the old stories about a terrible intruder, the one whom people called Death Jaws. His breath had killed young birds, and a tree would become dry and dead as soon as he had touched it with his paw. But could this all be true?

They stepped closer to the aspen with a dark hollow. There was nothing peculiar about the tree: real bark, wide reaching branches. Even small leaves were trembling, though there was no wind. Cautiously, Graybeard touched the trunk — and the tree went down with a dry rustling sound. The inside of the aspen had been burnt out. This reminded the travelers of lightning, which burnt the inside of a tree from top to bottom but did not fall it, and it seemed alive from afar.

Graybeard and Curlyhead wandered in the dead forest, and whatever they touched — lime, hazel or maple — it collapsed in a smoking heap of black ash.

“It’s like a bad dream,” Graybeard said under his breath as he walked on. “Someone’s burnt out the inside of every blessed tree and left behind a kind of a mock forest. Even leaves are in place and green, but they crumble at once as soon as you touch them.”

“Caw, caw!” The sudden cry came from a black bird as it whizzed over the tops of the charred pines.

Graybeard startled, his brain working feverishly: where did he see this bird, where did he hear it? He remembered this ominous cry and these widespread strong wings of a predator... Yes, yes, it must have been in the jungle — dancing lights, and an ominous cry of a Caw in the dark...

Graybeard stood deep in his thoughts looking down at the earth. Curlyhead gave him an impatient tug.

“Uncle, Uncle, look over there. Someone’s sneaking up on us!”

Graybeard looked in the direction where the bird had disappeared and saw shaggy shadows flitting among the charred trees. One, then another and another. After a while they stood still, hiding behind the trees. Suddenly Curlyhead grew rigid from what he saw. Making straight at them was a terrible tall monster. He looked somewhat like a bear, but had a human head. There was a crashing sound, and the monster sent something whizzing to a pine — the only one that was alive and under which they stood. An arrow struck the tree. Black flames leaped up and the roaring fire went boring through the tree from top to bottom like a giant infernal drill. The roaring stopped and the tree stood still and hard like graphite. Only its needles hummed like wires.

Graybeard felt that his shirt was singed.

“Here they are, the dwarfs!” yelled one of the monsters with a hideous laugh. “Hiding under a tree, miserable midgets! Take them! Now we have something to roast on the fire!”

The monster waved his hand and a dozen or two of big shaggy creatures stamped toward the travelers. They evidently wanted to capture Graybeard and Gurlyhead alive. Dry burnt branches cracked under their clumsy paws.

Terror-stricken, Graybeard and Curlyhead stared at the approaching monsters. The crushing feet of the intruders could be heard from all sides now.

“Uncle Graybeard! Let’s get away from here! They’ll eat us up!”

Curlyhead did not even know whether he thought it to himself or cried those words out loud. Anyhow, they both took off and raced like two scared rabbits through the bushes, zigzagging and leaping over stumps and logs. Dry and prickly branches lashed at their faces and tore at their clothes. The monsters chased them, yelling and howling wildly.

Something unbelievable was happening as they ran. They were changing in shape before the very eyes of our travelers. Now they raced as bears, now as nomadic warriors wearing skin cloaks and bows and arrows over their shoulders. Where did

they come from into this kind forest, so rich in mushrooms? Wherever was their dark kingdom?

Graybeard fell, Curlyhead ran ahead for a while and then went tumbling down into a pit. Curlyhead did not have time to look around or think what it was — a hollow washed out by rains or a din of some wild beast. The only thought that flashed through his mind was that this was a hiding place and he must get Graybeard here as soon as possible. He scrambled out and returned to the old man. He was too heavy for the boy to lift, so he just rolled Graybeard into the pit.

They had hardly tumbled into their hiding place and pressed hard against the earth when they heard the crashing sound of the monsters' feet. The big thugs leaped over the pit and rushed on, their skin cloaks billowing behind them. Crash! Crash! The echoes of heavy blows rolled through the forest: the shaggy killers knocked down trees with their foreheads as they rushed along. The trees collapsed one after the other as if fallen by a huge club. Each of the savage pursuers left a wide path after himself, crashing and trampling down everything on his way.

"Where are they? We've lost their track!" bawled out the biggest one in the fearful pack. "Turn back everybody! Sniff the ground! We must find them!"

The shaggy monsters turned back and started pawing the ground, sniffing the damp leaves. Fortunately, they were searching a thicket further away and couldn't see the poor runaways.

"Uncle, the river is not far from here. Let's get there and hide in the water."

"Oh, Curlyhead, I can't. My foot...my foot slipped."

"Try to crawl. Lean on me. And hurry, Uncle!"

They began crawling, Curlyhead supporting the old man. They moved along a ditch, under prickly branches of bramble which tore at their bodies, then crossed a small bog. Heavy and plump Graybeard grunted along, stopping now and then as his clothes caught on something and repeating that he would not make it. Finally, they heard the rush of running water swirling round the snags and crawled faster.

"Crawl over here, Uncle, under these logs."

"Go on searching! These mushroom eaters must be somewhere here! The place smells of mushrooms!"

"And of melons!" added another bellowing voice.

The saving river was quite near, beyond the logs. They crawled on until they reached a steep bank undermined by the river. Clumsily, the boy and the old man tumbled splash! into the water, disappearing from sight.

The monsters crowded on the bank, their jaws hanging open.

"Where are they! Where did they disappear? Got drowned?"

"Sniff the water! Search for them!"

Curlyhead knew that the river was full of half-drowned tree stumps and gnarled roots. All you had to do was to curl up and let the current carry you until you catch on a snag. Then you get free, come up for some air, and go down again under water. Curlyhead could even stay rather long on the bottom, breathing through a reed. But did his uncle know how to do it?

The current carried Curlyhead easily like a snail. But Graybeard XII caught the first stump on the river's bottom. He came struggling to the surface and immediately heard the terrifying cry of the Caw overhead.

"Aha! That's where they are!" yelled the shaggy pursuers. "Go ahead! Catch them!"

There was a crash! crash! again as the monsters knocked down trees rushing along the bank.

Graybeard XII dragged on his wet pipe, spit out the water he sucked in from the stem, and said, "Here goes! One, two..." He folded his arms on his stomach, closed his eyes and dived. The current took him up and carried him along swaying him and turning him over and over like an empty barrel. He swam now sideways, now upside down, showing from the water the soles of his shoes, or his swaying mustache, or his swelled out shirt.

The Caw kept overhead, letting out piercing cries, while the pack of huge monsters rushed stamping along the bank knocking down trees on their way. A dozen or so of them swerved to a small pool to drink some water. As they noticed the water was clear, they snorted and rolled back, horrified. Then, grabbing soot, they threw it into the water and it became as thick and dark as tar. They lapped the dirty water wiping their faces with their paws and then resumed their pursuit.

Graybeard seemed to have guessed that it wasn't safe to show himself on the surface. He suddenly disappeared completely under water. Only a piece of gnarled wood could be seen on the river and small bubbles of air coming up. None of the pursuers could see in the dark or guess that Graybeard was hiding under the wood, breathing through his pipe.

The bird came swishing over the water a couple of times. Then it cried something to the shaggy monsters and they swerved into a thicket.

The forest river gradually became broader and calmer. The shadows along its banks receded giving way to large glades flooded by the moonlight. The meadows breathed of dew and night mist, and not far away the familiar Lower Lake shimmered under the red moon.

Old Bigfoot was sitting in his boat in shallow water among the reeds, dozing over his fishing rod. The fish weren't biting. The old man felt chilly and sleep was overcoming him, signalling the disappearance of the moon and the end of the short summer night. And he hadn't caught any fish. Suddenly he heard a heavy splash and then a wave running toward the shore. He opened his eyes and saw a huge catfish swimming, or rather crawling on four paws out of the water. It had long barbels and a black and green tail. The catfish said "Ugh!", stood up, and made clumsily for the shore.

The old man shook all over with fright. Then he dropped his fishing rod, jumped out of the boat, and rushed splashing away into the thick reeds, repeating, "Begone, begone!"

"Uncle Graybeard! Uncle Graybeard! We've scared old Bigfoot out of his wits! He must have taken us for some water spirits." Curlyhead threw himself on the sand, gasping for air. Breathing through a reed underwater was not that easy. Graybeard XII dropped beside the boy. His wet mustache curled up on the white sand, and he breathed even harder than the boy, his pillow-like belly rising and falling.

Graybeard was lying on the sand asking himself the same questions. Who were those monsters that could burn the trees? Where did that cruel bird come from? The boy's lips were curling up into a smile as he looked at the thoughtful old man, and then Curlyhead chuckled.

"Uncle, you never let the pipe out of your mouth, even when you tumbled into that pit. Did you puff on it underwater too?"

"I certainly did."

"But how could you breathe then?"

"It's very simple. Through my pipe. See, how long a stem it has!"

The old man puffed on his pipe proudly. There was a gurgling sound, and his mouth was full of rusty water. He spat it out angrily: "Let's hurry home, the dawn is near. We must tell our people of these dangerous monsters."

They stood up and went along the river into the large meadows bathed in the moonlight. These were familiar places: hazel groves, large glades where the Thickbeards and the Thinbeards usually went mushrooming and picking berries. Graybeard cheered up, twirling his mustache and limping less than before — he said his foot didn't hurt so much after being in cold water. Soon they saw the scene so dear to their hearts: the boat tied up at the dark shore, the stairs with long wooden handrails, and the lamps with the glowing living lights inside. There, at the gate, a lonely tall figure was standing dressed in black with her arms folded. Graybeard's heart was pitter-pattering with joy: his sweet and kind Primpersonia was waiting for him!

They were at the stump house when the Caw let out its terrible cry as it zoomed low overhead. It wheeled and then came swooping down on the old man and the boy, as if wanting to see them once again with its cruel eyes to remember them forever. As it went up with a whizz, its strong wings spread out, a small speck rushed at it. It was Graybeard's cuckoo. It went straight like a stone, aiming at the Caw's heart. The cruel bird gave a fierce cry, swerved aside, and then went up into the sky.

So it flew away, the cursed bird! The happy Curlyhead could hardly believe his eyes. He would never have thought that the small cuckoo could drive away such a big and fierce bird. Graybeard was also happy. He didn't suspect that once the Caw had seen them to their home it would never leave them in peace.

8

*A stranger at the museum,
who suddenly turns into twelve strangers.
Graybeard is attacked and carried away.*

After the exhausting adventures in the forest, Graybeard flopped onto the sofa and fell at once into an uneasy sleep. In his dream he again saw those terrifying shaggy monsters and the black bird beating its wings over him.

Graybeard woke up. His polished shoes were standing on the rug, their toecaps turned up, as if inviting their owner for a walk. His shirt, trousers, suspenders, and scarf were all washed, dried and folded by the loving hands of Primpersonia. Nobody

would guess that a day earlier all those things had been soiled with mud, sand and river silt and even singed into the bargain.

Graybeard cleared his throat, lit his pipe and began singing a sad song in his beard:

*Whene'er the king is setting off for war,
The queen wipes off the tears...*

He opened his museum, lit the two lamps at the entrance and looked up at the sky and stars, then at the forest. Angry clouds scudded over a dark forest, trees droned alarmingly, and three birds crossed the sky hurriedly calling in thin plaintive voices, as if inviting someone to follow.

“Hem, those intruders seem to be at work again,” remarked Graybeard. However, he hoped that black fire would roar across the faraway forest beyond the rocks, but never reach their own homes. The Thickbeards were a peaceful tribe. They had never done harm to anyone, so why should anyone attack them?

With that Graybeard XII lit up the museum and suddenly saw the first visitor standing before him. He had popped up from nowhere. His outlandish black cloak told Graybeard that the stranger must have come from far away. His high collar and a beret pulled over his forehead almost hid his face, leaving only a narrow slit for his eyes.

“Fancy that! He wears a beret!” a sharp bird’s voice whispered in Graybeard’s ear. The old man spun around, but saw no bird. His cuckoo was not here either.

The old man filled his pipe and said, “This way, please! This is the first hall with the living lights which are to be found on the forest ground.” Using the long stem of his pipe as a pointer, Graybeard showed his treasures to the visitor: rotten pieces of wood, roots and bark, and of tree stumps. But what was that? Graybeard felt a kind of cold draught coming from the guest. The black and surprisingly tall visitor kept his distance, nodding from time to time and repeating, “Crash, crash! Splendid, splendid!” However, his words seemed to be cold too.

“Primpersonia, will you please bring me my warm slippers. My feet are getting cold.”

Graybeard XII went on with his explanations, which for some time diverted his mind from the alarming events in the forest. But here he heard a hard step behind; his guest came closer. There was a rush of still colder air. Suddenly the cuckoo swished like a shadow between the old man and the visitor.

“Now will you please follow me to the second hall,” invited Graybeard. “Here we have underground lights: larvae, grubs, and some extremely interesting families of worms.” Graybeard looked back and his teeth bit into his pipe with astonishment. There were two visitors standing behind him now! They were absolutely alike and wearing the same black cloaks. And both kept their hands behind their backs! Either the visitor had split into two, or Graybeard began to see double. The doubles kept in step and tried to walk softly, but the wooden sounds of their steps echoed throughout the underground passages.

“Now for the third hall where we keep shiny beetles.”

Graybeard looked back again and saw three visitors. Perhaps he was just seeing things! The third one was exactly like the other two. They stood one behind the other. All three were of the same height, wore the same black cloaks, and kept their hands behind their backs in the same manner. Their eyes glinted mysteriously as they exchanged glances as if talking to each other.

In the fourth hall Graybeard saw four visitors! Yes, the initial one had turned into four others!

Greybeard heard their four feet stepping together as he squatted at the aquarium to show them the fish with the luring light on its long nose. The four strangers bent over Graybeard and again their eyes glinted as they looked at each other. The cuckoo swished before them for the second time like a scythe. They jerked back as one man and stood stock-still like a king's bodyguards, dutiful and severe.

There were five of them in the fifth hall, six in the sixth, and seven in the seventh!

Graybeard could never see how they managed to increase their number. Whenever he turned around, he saw there was one more. Now they spread freezing cold around them.

In the last, the twelfth hall, there were twelve of them standing behind Graybeard. All wore black cloaks, and kept their hands behind their backs, and the berets pulled over their foreheads resembled medieval visors.

Our poor good Graybeard did not realize he was in great danger! Unperturbed, he lit his pipe, blew several smoke rings, and led the visitors up to the squid which could expel a cloud of light.

“If you kindly pay attention to —”

The words stuck in his throat, for suddenly bang! all twelve strangers stepped up to him and threw a black sack over his head. They held something sickening to his nose, which felt like damp cotton or moss, and Graybeard fell into a deep sleep at once. It was a strange sleep, though, for he could hear every word they said. He heard voices saying, “Crash! Crash! Put him on your shoulders and let's get out of here! Make it quiet, or the Thickbeards may hear!”

However much they tried to soften their steps, their wooden heels made quite a racket in the underground passages. They lifted Graybeard onto their shoulders and carried him head first in the tied sack. If I could call for Primpersonia...or struggle out and escape... But his thoughts were dull and indifferent, for everything was asleep in him — his body and his thoughts. He could only hear. After a while Graybeard felt something wriggling at his face, and then a warm wing touched him gently. It was his cuckoo! So, you're also here, my dear bird! he thought. Well, you'll keep me company on this journey then. After a while he thought of something different: A pinch of tobacco and a good smoke would certainly cheer me up, for as I see this is going to be a difficult and unhappy journey. He even smacked his lips, feeling a taste of smoke in his mouth, while they carried him wrapped up like a larva.

The twelve attackers went bump, bump, bump up the stairs leading toward the exit from the museum. At the moment they were evidently passing Graybeard's room with its soft sofa and ancient books. There was a crash as soon as they were outside:

one of the kidnappers knocked down a lamp and a windmill from the stump. Casting back stealthy looks, they went up to the gate and then, thumping, downstairs to the lake. Later the crunching sounds told Graybeard that the kidnappers were walking on sand, rounding the lake.

As they swerved aside, Graybeard heard the familiar noise overhead. They were certainly in the forest now. Then came the crushing sounds as the kidnappers started breaking their way through the forest, knocking down oaks and birch trees. Each time they shifted their load to the other shoulder, the cuckoo fluttered its wings in alarm, and then closed them over Graybeard's wise eyes, as if trying to protect them.

Probably an hour had passed before Graybeard heard the familiar booming voice, "Hem, hem! Hold this parcel for a moment, Curlyhead. That's a new windmill I wanted to present to Professor Bestbrain. Hey, look! Who on earth are these people? They're carrying something. What and where from, I wonder? Stop! Stop, I tell you! What do you think you're doing? Robbing in full moonlight! I'm sure they were stealing melons at Sweetfruit's place! Well, open your sack at once, do you hear! Hey, Curlyhead, call our people in the glade over there!"

There was a crack as Whirfast broke a branch for a weapon, and then Graybeard heard heavy steps as he went at the kidnappers. Meanwhile, Curlyhead dashed away to call the Thickbeards.

The attackers stopped in their tracks for a moment, then took to their heels and rushed away into the forest, leaving behind a wide path of broken trees. They were terribly afraid to meet a large number of Thickbeards! They stampeded along like a frightened herd of bisons, crushing through the undergrowth, bumping the sack against trees, leaping over fallen trunks.

"Stop thief!" came the thundering voice of Whirfast from afar.

The kidnappers' breathing was coming now in short gasps, the sack was bumping up and down on their shoulders, slipping down now and then. Meanwhile, the sleepy Graybeard was counting his bumps. One, two...five. These are all on my forehead and each the size of a pear, I think. Now, there's a bruise on my nose, and one more bump behind my left ear... Ow! That's one more, blast you all!

The sack dropped bumping against a stump and bounced up once again. Graybeard grunted with pain and worry for the bird. Then he felt the cuckoo moving its wing and thought: So you're alive, my darling! Fine, let's go on then.

The kidnappers had been running for a long time now. They crossed a river, a bog and a bridge, then their feet crushed on stones, and they pulled the sack up onto some rock or a steep hill. The most terrible moment came when Graybeard felt a great swing and thought that was the end of him. The sack was hurled up into the sky and hung there suspended for a few seconds; then, as it plummeted toward the earth, it was caught by some other strong paws. There was an explosion of roaring laughter, and the sack was carried on along a rock and through such a terrible smell that even the sleepy Graybeard couldn't help sneezing. This was evidently the camp of those shaggy monsters.

Graybeard heard a clamor of voices and the crushing sounds of heavy steps on

the rocky ground. Further off a noisy company were making merry. Their crunching on bones was interrupted from time to time by guffaws of laughter and the roaring singing:

*We are strong — crash, crash!
Even rocks we smash!*

Graybeard remembered the charred trees and the dead young squirrels in a hollow. Enjoying themselves, the cursed tribe, he thought bitterly.

Suddenly there was silence. The stone gate opened with a rumbling sound and there was a fresh smell of smoke. The twelve kidnappers stood stiff at attention, then grabbed Graybeard and carried him into the rock, their thumping on the rocky floor echoing in the underground passage. At every other step Graybeard heard a “Halt! Who goes there!” to which the kidnappers answered with a “Crash! Crash!” and went on, deeper and deeper into the rock.

Finally, they stopped and threw the sack to the ground evidently at someone’s feet. May you be thrown like that all your life! thought Graybeard groaning. One of the twelve shot out a report:

“O the great crusher of rocks and the burner of forests, the strongest and the bravest king under the earth and on the earth, our immortal Bugaboo the First! We have carried out your order: the miserable midget is lying at your feet.”

“Crash! Crash!” the words came as if iron crashed against rock. There was a sound of slow movement. Probably the one who spoke last stood up and fixed his subjects with a withering look.

“Where is the smaller midget who also dared to cross the river into my domain?” thundered a crushing voice. Of course, it was he, Bugaboo the First, speaking in his terrible wrath.

There was a long and dreadful silence until rock began to crumble under Bugaboo’s hard stare. Then Graybeard heard a crushing sound and, in reply to an angry gesture of their ruler, the twelve kidnappers quickly mumbled that they, his humble servants, did their best to fulfill the order of the great crusher; seventeen times had they run around the lake in their attempt to seize the smaller midget, but it was impossible for he was sitting in a boat, and the boat was on the water. And water...

Here Graybeard heard a most unbelievable story about water. It turned out that the crushers feared the living water as the devil fears the fire. Long ago, their ancestor, Ogress who lived in a cave and used to steal people, had warned them: “O my dear rock children! Never and nowhere come close to water, for water is dangerous to you, it will swallow and drown you. Never and nowhere touch the living fire, for it will burn you. Walk only on dry land, among rocks and in forests; carry black fire on your arrows and the courage of cave dwellers in your hearts, and no one will ever conquer you under the earth or on the earth.”

Although Graybeard was sleeping, he pricked up his ears trying to remember everything about the living water and the white fire which the monsters feared so much. As to the crushers, he still had to find out what kind of evil creatures they were

and how to get rid of them. One important thing he had found out already: the bullies had never caught the smaller midget, that is Curlyhead.

Bugaboo the First had been breathing heavily and angrily for a long time, raising a real hurricane in front of him. Finally he ordered, "Throw him into a dark pit, untie the sack and watch him closely, as befits the crushers. I shall interrogate him tomorrow."

"Crash! Crash!" replied the twelve kidnapers in unison.

They grabbed the sack, dragged it for some time and then hurled it into a pit. "What about untying it?" muttered the old man sleepily. "You devils, why don't you carry out the order of your chief devil?"

9

Graybeard in the pit. Conversation between two guards — a bog dweller and a cave dweller. Some interesting things about Bugaboo and his tribe.

"To hell with him! Let him lie in the sack. That way he's sure not to escape," said one of Graybeard's guards, the one that had thrown him down into the pit. The guards rolled two huge stones to the pit and sat down on them. One guard yawned, opening his jaws so wide that there was a cracking sound in his bones.

"Listen, Muddy," said the other guard yawning as wide as the first. "What barrel did you take that sleeping stuff from? Oak or birch?"

"How the hell should I know? It was dark in the cave, so I just took it from the first barrel I bumped into."

"You bungling blockhead! You should have taken it from the oak one, because that stuff makes you both sleepy and deaf. And if you use the birch barrel stuff, you will sleep like a log, but you'll hear everything." Here the guard began to whisper in a frightened voice, "Crash, crash... If you used the birch barrel, the mustached midget had heard everything we were talking about and knows all our secrets. And that means only one thing, Muddy — we're done for. As soon as Bugaboo finds out, we're finished."

"Don't be a fool, Rocky! Just hold your tongue, and everything will be all right."

There was a pause. First one, and then the other guard began scratching their heads moodily, apparently reluctant to lose them.

"We'd better untie the sack, or he'll complain."

"What in hell are we looking for in these dangerous forests? I'll tell you what. I used to be an honest bog monster. My father's name was Muddy, and my name is Muddy. We were happy catching frogs — always nice, fresh and tasty — jumping from one bush to another, and blowing mists from our noses. That's what I call real life! Then I was stupid enough to hire myself out, put on your skin cloak, and now I have to rush around the forest like a dog, knock trees with my head, and track down some midgets. What is he looking for here, your great crusher? What does he want at these lousy lakes? Eh, Rocky?"

“Don’t you know?”

“Believe it or not, but I don’t!”

“You’re as dull as your bog, Muddy. Haven’t you ever heard of our dark kingdom and the great wars we waged underground?”

“Well, it rings a bell.”

“Rings a bell! All right, Muddy. I’ll tell you a great secret. But see that you don’t blab it out. So. We, the rock crushers, were born terribly deep underground, in the rocky caves, where none of you, who live in the upper world, have ever been. As soon as we could walk, we united into a strong host. You just touch me, Muddy, and you’ll see how strong we are. Our fur is of wire, our bodies are of rock, and our teeth are of flint — crash, crash! And we’re always hungry, sometimes we even crush rock with our teeth! We ate all kinds of grubs, worms, and moss underground, we had eaten up everything there was to eat. And then Bugaboo led us into the grottoes of Blind Bat. That’s where we’d made gluttons of ourselves! We had strangled and roasted every last bat there! But once you start, you cannot stop, and our fighting spirit drove us on and on. We pushed even deeper, into the infernal abysses, the abode of black owls and two-headed vampires. We’d had the time of our lives down there, devouring every living thing and leaving everything in ruins. And then a great silence fell on our underground kingdom, and we all howled with fear and hunger, for everything around us had been destroyed and trampled down.

“The very darkness seemed to howl with us too. That’s when we heard the terrible voice of Bugaboo. ‘Crash, crash!’ he said. ‘Stop howling, rock crushers! I’ll lead you up, into a new, upper world. My brother Flinttooth, called Death Jaws by the inhabitants of that world, had found out that there is a valley beyond the Jagged Rocks, and there are small forest people there, and green trees, and a lot of birds. That’s where we’ll have a lot of land and food for meals. We won’t be able to destroy it all even in a hundred years!’

“‘What about water and white fire?’ we breathed out and our fur bristled with fear. For who would want to leave our caves and eternal darkness and meet his end in water or in dazzling fire? You’ve heard that water pulls us down into its depths and fire makes us blind at once.”

“Yes, but what did Bugaboo say?” asked the simplehearted Muddy.

“Oh, Bugaboo! ‘Don’t be afraid!’ he cried out. ‘The living water won’t stop us. If we come across the river, we shall reach the enemy with our spears. And if they use white fire, we shall fight it with black fire!’

“Bugaboo clapped his hands, and the wisest of our magi were brought to him. And I must tell you, Muddy, that our magi are very powerful, they can do anything. They can turn a rock crusher into a tree stump, a log, a stone beetle, you name it. So, Bugaboo sent the magi into deeper caves where the underground thunders rumble and the pitch is always boiling. The magi brought him black fire, the one that’s burning in our caves and makes darkness still darker and cold still colder. You’ve seen it, Muddy. It’s like black lightning. It can destroy anything, rocks and trees, only it can’t give light. This kind of fire serves only us, the rock crushers.

“So, we put this fire on the ends of our spears, and then Bugaboo said, ‘To war,

rock crushers! I shall lead you to a new land which is up in the valley. We shall burn the forest and the stump houses that are there. We shall conquer that world and make it dark and rocky. We shall put up high mountains on the border of our land when we shall cross the valley, so that neither the moon nor the stars would dazzle us. We shall establish there an eternal kingdom of darkness and caves. Follow me, crushers! Our army began marching out of the caves to the beating of drums, but then... Oh, I'm trembling all over when I'm trying to remember what happened then!"

"Go ahead, Rocky, don't be afraid. I'm here, at your side."

"Well, listen. We had shouted 'Crash!' and were about to march out of the cave, when suddenly — blink-blink! A dazzling fire was flying right overhead! I still can't grasp how it had found its way underground, into our dark and silent kingdom."

"But what in the world are you talking about?"

"Oh, it meant our death was near, for it was a firefly, one of those living lights! It had sneaked into our caves from the upper world where the sun shines and the forest grows. And it was hovering over our warriors, as if it wanted to find out who we were and what underground passages we were going to use to attack the forest people."

"What if it had come there out of mere curiosity?" asked Muddy. "Just saw a cave and wanted to have a look into it?"

"Curiosity, my foot! Why didn't the cursed thing fly away when it saw us? It flew straight at Bugaboo instead, and suddenly flashed its light over his head! Just fancy that! A flash of light over the head of the great crusher himself in complete darkness! Bugaboo had never seen such a bright light. He went blind at once and fell trembling with fear. The frightened warriors yelled 'Crash, crash!' and scattered into caves, holes and whatever shelter they could find. 'Halt!' thundered Bugaboo trying to turn back his army. 'Knock it down! Throw stones at it!'

"He was the first to grab a piece of rock and throw it at the firefly. Then we all began crushing rock and hurling stones at that cheeky and ominous light. But it was circling overhead, flashing on and off and dazzling our eyes. Then it flew away to avoid the shower of arrows and stones, not to the exit, though, but deeper into the caves. The whole army, thousands of rock crushers, chased it. The mountain thundered with their heavy thumping and the crashing sounds of stones. Finally someone hit the firefly and it came fluttering down. The bravest of the warriors threw themselves at the light and trampled it down."

"Oh, yes, you're very good at it," sniffed Muddy. "You've trampled down our bog, and water plants, and frogs..."

"Shut up, Muddy! Don't you get on my nerves and don't interrupt me, for you don't know the worst yet. Now, listen. The firefly did not come alone. Soon another one came flying in, probably its friend. This one was even more impudent. It was dancing low overhead, flashing its light into our eyes, and then it flew away and lured us as deep as the grottoes of Blind Bat. It was awfully cold there, and there was not a living thing, only the scattered bones. 'O rock crushers!' cried out Bugaboo. 'Can't you see that our enemies, those evil and treacherous fireflies, want to trap us here

in these deep caves and to make us lose our way in the underground passages? But there will be no such thing!

“We yelled ‘Crash!’, threw ourselves all together at the firefly and killed it. For two weeks we had been wandering in the dark passages, angry and hungry, until we came out here, at the Jagged Rocks. Then Bugaboo spoke, ‘I shall burn not only the Jagged Rocks, but also this whole forest and the valley together with its mushrooms, birds, and small forest people. Instead of all this, a black rock will stretch to the very ocean, and on that rock we shall hold our great parades. Crash! Follow me, rock crushers!’

“We rushed out of the caves and swarmed over the valley. That’s what we’re looking for here, and that’s what we want at these lousy lakes, Muddy.”

“That’s all very well, but there’s one thing I still don’t understand. Why do we keep this plump Thickbeard here, whom our thugs have brought in a sack?”

“Why, don’t you know yet, you thickwit? This Thickbeard keeps thousands of living lights in his deep cellars. He must be the one who had sent those flying scouts into our underground kingdom to find out who we were and whom we were going to fight. Now Bugaboo’ll work the mustached midget over until he blabs out the whole story, and then he’ll roast him on our black fire.”

Both guards yawned again, scratched their heads, and stretched out on the ground. They would have talked on, revealing more terrifying secrets, were it not for a loud sneeze and a cloud of dust that shot up from the pit.

The guards jumped. “Hey, look! The mustached one must be awake now. The sleeping stuff probably doesn’t work anymore.”

“I think he’s moving in that sack. Hear that scratching?”

Rocky, a more experienced warrior, looked around and whispered in Muddy’s ear, “You go down there and untie it. We might have trouble if he tells the great crusher. You know how Bugaboo is: either you carry out his orders exactly, or you lose your head.”

Muddy glanced into the dark pit, and it seemed bottomless to him. “We better do it together,” he said. “You go first, Rocky. I’ll follow.”

“No, better you go first, and I’ll go after you.”

“Let’s slip down together. Here goes.”

Wham! Crash! They both dropped on poor Graybeard. That meant one more bump on his forehead. “May the biggest tree fall on your head,” he muttered.

They untied the sack and then Rocky, the braver of the two, warned him in a threatening voice, “Don’t you get out of that sack, hear what I said? Don’t move until we’re out of the pit. If you stir, we’ll prick you with our spears!”

The guards scrambled out, pushing and pulling each other down.

“Now you may get out!” They did it just in time, for soon thundering voices passed the order from one sentry post to another. “Crash! Crash! Bring in the mustached prisoner!”

Several figures, swords in hand, immediately surrounded Graybeard and led him along a dark underground passage. Now he could look around. Muddy and Rocky stayed behind at the pit, and he was escorted by the same shaggy monsters that had

chased him and Curlyhead in the forest. They were savage and fearless warriors with stern bearded faces and bearskin cloaks on.

Craybeard walked puffing on his empty pipe. He noticed a faint shadow of his kindhearted cuckoo flying noiselessly high under the ceiling.

The dark passages were long. As they entered the first grotto, Graybeard's hair stood on end at what he saw. The grotto resembled a field after a battle: lying close to one another and snoring away were a lot of bearded warriors. The bird's voice whispered into Graybeard's ear, "These are hirelings from bogs, the weakest ones." Some weaklings! thought Graybeard. Each of them can fell a bear with his fist.

The small cuckoo's shadow followed high overhead unnoticed by the escort. Meanwhile, they entered the second grotto, bigger than the first. It was also full of sleeping warriors, and the rocky walls shook with their powerful snoring. The bird's voice said, "These are rock fistfighters. Bugaboo trusts them more than the rest of his army."

As they entered the third grotto, the escort surrounded Graybeard even closer than before. This was a huge underground hall, whose ceiling disappeared in the dark. Instead of deafening noise, absolute silence reigned here. Now, for the first time, Graybeard saw the black fire of which his guards had spoken. The old man even startled as he looked at it. He saw a red-hot streak on the stone hearth, which looked like the embers of good firewood. But the flames! They resembled two black wings of an ominous raven growing from the heart of the fire. And this fire breathed not of warmth, but of freezing cold.

An ancient hunchbacked man was sitting under the black flames. He was all wrapped up in his enormous black beard. It seemed that the beard alone was sitting there, with small cold glittering eyes staring at the fire. The ugly old man was whispering mysteriously, grinding the ash in a stone mortar. The bird's voice said softly, "This is their chief magus."

As they passed the third hall, a thundering voice, which seemed to be coming from the rocky vaults, announced:

"Bow your heads! You are approaching His Majesty, the great crusher of rocks and the ruler of underground thunders!"

10

*Graybeard in front of Bugaboo the First.
The white horse. Old Bigfoot cries. The escape.*

Graybeard entered the gloomiest of all the caves he had seen, which reminded him of a palace with the walls blackened with smoke. He didn't notice that, as soon as he went in, a small wizard standing behind a stone door clapped his hands softly. The palace hewn out in black rock was suddenly illuminated with strange light. The palace remained in darkness to the underground warriors. But Graybeard saw a dim gray light flowing from the rocky walls. It stung the old man's eyes like an acrid smoke.

Graybeard blinked, rubbed his eyes, and saw a mighty knight sitting in a magnif-

icent armchair at the wall and wearing splendid king's garments embroidered with silk and precious stones. His one hand held a spear, while the other rested on the arm with a lion's head. Standing behind was a white horse with a luxuriant mane, and higher, on a ledge in the wall, was (of all creatures!) the Caw, its cruel eyes fixed on the old man. Graybeard darted a look at those bloodshot eyes and turned his head away.

The warriors nudged Graybeard, muttering, "Down, down on your knees!" But the old man only tightened his teeth on the pipe.

The knight stopped the warriors with a slight gesture and said, "Don't. We allow him to stand in our presence. Let the prisoner come closer. We can show hospitality even to our enemies who intended to do us evil. Bring him nearer and let him stand on our right."

The warriors gave Graybeard a push and put him right at the white horse whose mane reached down to the old man's head. He grimaced as sudden shivers of cold ran down his spine. His eyes traveled around and — oh! He never expected to see huge paws with sharp claws showing from under the knight's long embroidered garments. The knight's eyes were kind and warm, he even smiled at Graybeard, but there was something cruel hiding behind that smile. The old man remembered his guard's talk about the underground magi who could turn their warriors into anything — even into a stump, a log, or a beetle.

What about the horse? thought Graybeard. Is it real or false? I'd rather check on it. He took the pipe out of his mouth, put the hand with it behind his back, and dug into the horse's side twice with the sharp stem. A heavy paw shot out from under the white mane and swiped Graybeard on the head. "I'll teach you to dig me in the side, you wretched midget! No tricks while you're standing in front of His Majesty!" Nobody said those words actually, but Graybeard heard them clearly. Yes, he'd have to watch out. Everything was false around here!

The cave knight winked at his horse and began to speak addressing his warriors.

"Tell him we know everything about his secret and evil plans. He wanted to find out *why*, and for that purpose he and another midget (who will be seized and brought in here today) dared to cross the river into my land. But my brave scouts have been watching both of them from the very lake, and later followed them through the forest. They also saw the midgets practicing sorcery and performing a war dance of hawks called One-Two-Three! Which means they had a secret intention to penetrate into our camp and find out who we were. Did I understand them right?"

The false horse bobbed its head in agreement. "Perfectly right, Your Crushing Majesty!"

"Very well then. We shall show them who we are." The knight clapped his hands. "A bow and arrows for me, crash, crash!"

It was getting dusk suddenly in the cave, and stormy clouds appeared. Two warriors handed Bugaboo a bow and arrows. Graybeard had known from the beginning that the knight was actually Bugaboo. The old man with the enormous beard brought in a stone bowl with something thick and black, like pitch, boiling in it. He waved his

hand, and a mighty tree with a hollow, red apples, and butterflies fluttering over green leaves appeared on the wall opposite Bugaboo. It was so natural that it seemed to have been growing there all the time.

Bugaboo dipped his arrow into the boiling liquid. A malicious triumph flashed in his eyes as he carried over Graybeard's head a black hissing fire dancing on the end of his arrow. He drew his bow. The arrow went off with a whizz and sank into the tree. There was a clap of thunder, and a roaring fire with acrid smoke devoured the inside of the whole tree — trunk, branches and even leaves. After a moment the tree was dead, like a black skeleton made of powder and encased in bark with numerous cracks.

One of the warriors stepped up to the tree and swung his sword. The tree collapsed in a heap of ash. The same thing had happened to the trees out in the forest, but only now could Graybeard see what kind of fire had destroyed them.

Bugaboo smiled proudly, and even more cruelty could be seen in his smile now. He looked down at Graybeard. "One bunch of such arrows will be enough to burn all your stump houses, windmills, melons, boats, and living lights. And we shall burn them if you harbor treacherous intentions in your hearts. But we, cave warriors, do not bear revenge on the ends of our spears. We can grant you life, on one condition though. You, unworthy prisoner who had wanted to find out *why* and sent your spying fireflies into our camp, will go back and bring all your Thickbeards and Thinbeards across the so-called Wild Boar River, to the rock where we are. I and my brother," he pointed to the false horse, "wish to talk with your forest people and propose that we should live as peaceful neighbors and mark out our hunting grounds. You will retain your stumps and your lake, and we shall occupy the valley, the forest, and the land that stretches beyond them up to the Wonder Mountains. Are my words wise?"

The horse nodded. "Crash! Crash! They certainly are, Your Crushing Majesty!"

Bugaboo turned to Graybeard again. "Tell your people that I shall wait for them tomorrow at midnight, when the moon is over the forest. Tell your people the cave warriors are innumerable, there are thousands upon thousands of us and one million. We can appear through holes and cracks at any place of the earth where there are mountains and rocks. And I warn your people: if they don't come to the valley, if they so much as stir against us, we shall immediately —"

Bugaboo grabbed his bow and in a moment the arrow thumped into the rocky wall of the cave. Again there was a flash of black fire and the sound of thunder. The roaring flames spread all over the wall. The red-hot rock cracked and came tumbling down. Graybeard saw a great gate and a lot of spearmen marching in with vigorous strides.

The cave became gloomier at once, either because of the fire and smoke, or because of the great number of spearmen. The colors around turned faint and dull: Bugaboo was ominously gray now, and his horse brown and shaggy, like an old bear. A heavy silence settled over the cave.

"I have to think," said Graybeard, taking out his tobacco pouch. But as soon as he fished in his pocket for the rotten piece of wood with which he used to light his



pipe, Bugaboo flinched, his horse gave a loud snort, and a voice resounded in the cave, "Don't! Keep it in there!"

Humph, what's the matter? thought Graybeard, but immediately remembered. Aha, they're afraid of my living light, the devils!

Three spearmen stepped up to Graybeard to lead him away, but the sharp screeching of the bird stopped them. Bugaboo jumped and sniffed the air. "I smell an alien! There was one more alien here! It's the smell of the enemy!"

Without raising his head, Graybeard got a glimpse of the cuckoo's shadow in the clouds of bitter smoke high under the ceiling.

The horse was bobbing its head to and fro, snorting and blowing hot air from its nostrils. Bugaboo was stamping his feet and bellowing. "Who else has been here? Who? Sniff for him! Search every nook and cranny!"

The escort rattled their spears and hurried Graybeard out of the cave. He cast one last look at it and couldn't recognize it. The cave was black and narrow, and there was a lean and irritated raven-warrior sitting in the armchair. He was wrapped up in a black cloak and his feet with sharp claws showed from under the cloak. Standing behind him in the clouds of smoke was a wild horse tarpan, black as night. "The whole place is under evil spell!" muttered Graybeard in astonishment. "There's not a real thing here. Whatever you look at may change its shape!"

This time Graybeard was thrown not in the same pit, but in a dark side hole. He felt better here, because he could at least see something of what was going on in the underground kingdom. There was a cave opposite his hole, all black with smoke like a smithy. He could see two cave monsters building a fire and a small white-haired man sitting at the wall and crying bitterly. Graybeard stretched out his neck and strained his eyes. He grew rigid at what he saw, for sitting at the wall and crying was old Bigfoot. How did he get here, underground? Did they catch him and drag him here by force? And what were they going to do to him?

Old Bigfoot was busy with his fishing tackle, trying to undo the entangled mass of hooks, lines and floats. Meanwhile, the cave dwellers fanned the fire, roared with laughter, and boasted they would roast the old man's heels. Graybeard watched the scene standing on tiptoe and could hardly believe his ears. Could it be that they would torture the helpless old man?

Old Bigfoot was crying and wiping away his bitter tears with his sleeve, and his fussing made even a bigger mess of his fishing things. The work seemed to be most important to him, as if all those fishing lines were the threads of his life. The cave dwellers howled with laughter singeing their long poles to make them sharper. They practiced with the poles showing how they would hit the old man.

The cuckoo was fluttering worriedly over Graybeard's head, while his confused mind was working feverishly to find a way out. How could he save old Bigfoot and himself? Graybeard was ready to cry in despair. The cave was deep underground, he did not even know how deep!

Presently Graybeard heard footsteps and loud voices. The same two guards, Muddy and Rocky, rolled up two huge stones to block the exit from the hole and then stretched out on the ground.

“Well, Muddy, did you hear how Bugaboo scared the mustached one?”

“I did. I was scared myself when he hit the wall just above my head.”

“And did you hear how our great crusher made a sucker out of that midget? ‘Just bring your people to the valley,’ he said, ‘and we’ll divide the land between us.’”

“It beats me why he said it.”

“Why! You haven’t got it? You’re batty! He plans to get the forest midgets out of their lakes and stump houses into the valley and crush the lot of them here in the open place. Then he will burn their stumps and put up mountains in their place, and we’ll enjoy complete darkness, as we did in our caves, and gorge on their young birds.”

Aha! thought Graybeard. So that’s your plan! You’ve come to crush us all and to scorch our land! That cursed great crusher! That cave devil! And him babbling something of our own treacherous plans! And of my sending spying fireflies into these killers’ camp! That’s a pack of lies and treachery the world has never heard of.

Graybeard stood up and pushed one of the stones a little aside. Well, it’s time for some action, he thought. Where’s my living light? He took out his tobacco pouch, and from it a piece of rotten wood he always had with him. The wood glowed in the darkness like a live coal. He also lit his pipe for luck. The cuckoo fluttered its wings in apprehension; it knew what would happen now.

Graybeard squeezed between the two huge stones. Muddy and Rocky were snoring peacefully. Graybeard cautiously put his living light under their noses. Did they jump! Their eyes nearly popped out of their heads, and their faces were distorted with terror.

Graybeard never suspected that the glow of a light — a live white light — would terrify them so much. They were backing away slowly, unable to utter a word.

Meanwhile, Graybeard was going at them step by step, holding the glowing light at their eyes, forcing the two monsters to retreat further into the darkness. With every step Graybeard was sidling up to old Bigfoot. Two other monsters stood with their backs turned to Graybeard. They had sharpened their poles, and now they were enjoying themselves in a mock quarrel over who would be the first to throw his pole at old Bigfoot. Graybeard was, however, the first to reach the old man.

“Come on, Grandpa! Let’s get out of here!”

“What?” asked the deaf man.

“Hurry up! Follow me! We must get out of these caves!”

“What did you say?” asked the old man again.

He returned to his fishing tackle, shaking his head in annoyance, as if he wanted to say, “Why don’t you ever leave me in peace? I’ve enough work as it is with all this mess!” Dull tears glistened in the old man’s eyes. He was probably drugged, for he didn’t even recognize Graybeard, who grabbed him by the arm and shouted in his ear, “Get out of here, or they’ll kill you!”

Graybeard gave him a sharp pull, and they rushed along an underground passage, but it lead them down even deeper. As Graybeard pulled the old man on, Bigfoot groaned and repeated shaking his beard, “I can hardly breathe! I can’t run anymore! Let me go!”

“Stop!” said Graybeard to himself. “Just where are we running?” The floor of the passage became even steeper leading them deep underground. “This is a fine mess we’ve gotten into! With so many caves and passages we can spend our whole lives looking for a way out.” Only now did he notice that his cuckoo was circling and fluttering excitedly overhead, as if inviting him to follow in the opposite direction. Aha, he thought, the bird must know the way. They turned back.

Suddenly the runaways heard a heavy stamping of feet and a loud panting. Graybeard remembered the two monsters with the poles. What a fool I was not to frighten them with my light! he thought. There’s no fool like an old fool. I clean forgot about it in that rush. If they called for other cave dwellers, we’re done for. And the poor cuckoo with us, too!

“Well, Grandpa Bigfoot, let’s say goodbye to each other. That’s when the monsters will get us!”

“Eh?” asked old Bigfoot in a hoarse voice. He was evidently not aware of where he was and what was going on around him.

“I think they’ve cooked our goose, Grandpa. Here, stand behind this corner.”

11

*Playing hide and seek in the caves. Where is old
Bigfoot? The Caw attacks the runaways.
A heavy loss.*

Graybeard and old Bigfoot had hardly hidden behind a rocky jut, when they heard the sound of rolling stones, and then two yelling monsters burst into their hiding place. The noise of the other pursuers could be heard.

“Where are they?” bawled the two monsters sniffing the air. They looked here and there, and finally ran into Graybeard. He took a finishing puff on his pipe, muttered, “Hem, it’s a fine tobacco,” and then thrust the glowing light into their faces. They flinched, terror-stricken, yelled their “Crash! Crash!” and rushed away into side caves, small pieces of rock flying from under their clumsy paws and sending off sparks as they struck together.

Graybeard pushed old Bigfoot ahead and they ran along a steep narrow passage, dodging heaps of gley and stones, following the cuckoo. Shouts and yells echoed and reechoed in the long underground passages and caves, and the whole mountain riddled with holes was roaring and shaking with great commotion, like a huge anthill. Graybeard and old Bigfoot seemed to be playing hide and seek with death itself. As soon as they ran into the monsters, Graybeard scared them away with his light and rushed in the opposite direction, only to meet another group of pursuers. The two men hardly managed to break away from them when the next moment they both ran on the pointed swords of more monsters. Gradually the cave warriors came to their senses, and now they were roaring threateningly, throwing pieces of rock and spears at their prisoners. Playing hide and seek was becoming more and more dangerous. Even the living light might not save them. The cuckoo probably understood it

better than the people. It rushed in the dark, now leading them upward, now downward. The groaning and panting Bigfoot got lost suddenly. The monsters could have hit him with a stone, or struck him with a spear. Or he might have fallen through into a pit. Graybeard stopped and yelled desperately, "Grandpa, where are you?" It was a lost trouble; the deaf man could hardly hear anything. But even if he could, it was impossible to make out one's words in this maze. Graybeard's voice was lost in the darkness. He looked around, cried again, then thought irritably: Where on earth can he be? It's all over with the gaffer if I don't find him! The cuckoo fluttered in alarm, as if calling to Graybeard, "Hurry up! They're closing in on all sides!" He rushed after the cuckoo.

Graybeard swerved and twisted, rushed ahead and turned back, crawled over huge heaps of rock and ran along ledges over terrifying abysses. He would have never got out of this underground kingdom, were it not for his kindhearted and faithful guide, the cuckoo. The monsters surrounded him several times, blocked the passages with pieces of rock, threw spears at him. But each time the bird found a passage, however small and inconspicuous, through which he escaped the danger.

Finally, the noise and the roaring voices were far below, and Graybeard was trotting along until he saw a faint glimmer of light in the distance. It seemed to be getting twilight in the cave, and the old man could discern the jagged outlines of the walls. The heavy vaults seemed to become lower, but then suddenly he saw a dark blue hole ahead. This was the way out of the cursed caves! There you are, my darling cuckoo! thought Graybeard. Now we're free! The old man's clothes were more like rags now, he was scratched and bruised all over, and he limped into the bargain because of the injured knee. He twirled up his mustache happily, and would have certainly walked with royal steps, as Curlyhead had taught him, had he not been so tired.

As he got out of the cave, he saw the sky, moon and stars — the living world, so dear to his heart! His eye traveled over the wide valley, lying below. There was a dark forest, the Wild Boar River, and beyond it — the lakes shimmering in the moonlight. There was his home!

Graybeard nodded to the cuckoo and said, "Well, my dear, let's take a short cut through the forest."

The old man had hardly made a step when he heard a harsh "caw!" overhead. The ominous bird seemed to have been waiting for them here. Graybeard didn't even have time to duck, when the Caw swooped down on him and zoomed low, its talons barely missing him. Graybeard dashed aside, while the Caw whizzed up into the sky and with a raucous cry spread out its wings, ready to strike again.

Meanwhile, the small cuckoo was circling and fluttering frantically over Graybeard, as if trying to enchant the cruel bird and drive away its ominous shadow. However, the Caw was already swooping down again, and the cuckoo rushed to meet it.

The birds whirled in a fight over the rock. The Caw spread its talons and with terrible cries threw itself on the small cuckoo, driving it toward the steep rock. But each time the cuckoo managed to level out at the last moment, while the huge bird struck against the hard rock, leaving drops of blood on it and losing its feathers. And each time the Caw would fly up and throw itself upon the tiny cuckoo even more

furiously, beating its powerful wings, slashing away with its talons, and squawking threateningly.

Graybeard saw that one of the cuckoo's wings was broken and its movements became desperate. Finally, the Caw's talons reached the poor bird. With a farewell thin-voiced cry, the cuckoo plummeted toward the rock. The huge bird followed rashly, came down with a crash and lay still.

Graybeard knew that now he had to get away from here as soon as possible. The paling sky seemed to be expanding, the moon was sinking beyond the mountain, and a fresh morning breeze was coming from the valley. Graybeard thought worriedly: What if I don't make it? The sun will soon be up and then... There's no telling what may happen then.

The cuckoo did not lead him anymore, and the good bird would never come to his home now and never wake him up with its call in the evening. The old man ran heavily downhill, groaning with pain in his injured knee, leaping over deep gullies with closed eyes, falling and grazing his knees against the rock, but never stopping in his effort to reach the forest as soon as possible.

As the rock was behind him now, he said to himself, "Come on, it's not far now. And then you'll hide among the bushes and trees." The old man was very tired, and his head was hanging down as he ran. He looked up across the valley and saw a bright red sun climbing up above the blue strip of the forest.

Graybeard ran through the forest, shading his eyes with his hand. Something was flitting past under his feet and crackling, while he raced along helter-skelter. Then there was a strange humming in his ears, and he didn't know whether it came from his tired body or from the forest. He stopped and listened. It seemed to be the sound of rushing water. Could it be the river? Oh, yes, there were the black charred pines, and running beyond them was the Wild Boar River!

Graybeard had strength enough to trudge to the river bank, and there he dropped on the moss and fell into a deep sleep. The sun was up in the sky, and mist was rising among the trees.

Graybeard was on his guard even while sleeping. He heard a groaning sound and feet splashing as someone was wading in the water and then coming out onto the bank. He lifted his heavy eyelashes and saw a bedraggled old Bigfoot crawling out of the river.

"That you, Grandpa? How come you're here?"

"Oh, sonny, help me out, please..." answered the old man in a hoarse voice, holding out his hands in a pleading gesture. Apparently he did not recognize Graybeard and could see nothing in the blazing sun. He leaned on Graybeard's shoulder and limped up the steep slope. Exhausted, they both dropped on the moss.

"How did you get here, Grandpa?"

"Oh, sonny," wheezed out old Bigfoot. "Something terrible happened to me! I was sitting on the lake shore getting my net straight, when suddenly someone said, 'Crash!' Then several monsters rushed out of the bushes, threw a sack over my head and carried me off to some caves. They kept chasing me there until I fell through into a gully and found myself in a river. It's good luck that I'm old and light like a wisp

of hemp, so the water picked me up and carried me through the stone jaws right here, and then washed me out.”

Old Bigfoot...the caves... flashed through Graybeard’s sleepy mind. The Thickbeards had said long ago that the Wild Boar River began under the mountains. It may have been this river that had brought old Bigfoot out of the caves.

The thought of the frightful caves woke up Graybeard. He forced his head up, blinking and rubbing his eyes blinded by the sun. Then he saw the shaggy monsters appearing one after another at the top of the rock over which his cuckoo fought the cruel bird. They shook their spears and roared the familiar “Crash! Crash!” In a moment they would sniff the ground and would be on his track. He must get up and run away from here. But Graybeard’s head was again glued to the soft moss. The tired Bigfoot was lying curled up and sleeping away. Confused thoughts went through Graybeard’s sleepy mind: If Whirfast or Curlyhead were around, they would save me... If Primpersonia would make me a cup of coffee... Forest Special... A couple of sips...would get me to my feet, bring me back to life...

While Graybeard was lying there, smacking and licking his lips, a small crowd of monsters was rolling downhill, shaking the forest with their wild yells.

12

*Primpersonia uses her oar. A meeting on the lake.
Racing the monsters.*

Primpersonia went into Graybeard’s room with two cups of coffee. “Here you are, Graybeard XII. I have a little surprise for you today. I added some crushed seeds of nasturtium to your coffee. Just taste it, and you’ll see it has a very delicate flavor.”

She glanced at the armchair. There was neither Graybeard there, nor his pipe, or blue rings of smoke. Her eyebrow went up in restrained surprise. She liked punctuality, and this was the time when Graybeard XII had his traditional two cups of Forest Special.

“Craybeard, where are you? Your coffee’s getting cold.” Primpersonia looked out into the corridor. All the doors of the museum halls stood open, the glowing lamps seemed to be cold and lonely, and the long dark underground passages breathed of tense emptiness. Primpersonia frowned. Misgivings gripped her. She went quickly along the corridors, looked into one hall, then another. They were all empty. She saw a crushed piece of a rotten birch stump lying on the floor. Why on the floor, and why crushed, she thought. And what was that? She bent down and saw footprints, very large ones. Her worry began to grow, though she knew how to control her feelings as she was brought up that way.

Primpersonia put on her black kerchief which, together with her long austere dress, made her even taller than she was, and went out of the stump house. She saw a broken lamp and a windmill crushed into the earth and she thought immediately of burnt trees and wild intruders sneaking around, lurking in the dark thickets and waiting for their chance of attacking the Thickbeards.

Primpersonia decided to go and ask Whirfast's advice. She took an oar and her heels went clicking down the stairs to the lake. It was rather dark, but Primpersonia could see from afar a clumsy figure standing at the handrail. She used the finest perfumes made in Prudishland, so she easily smelled dirty fur and smoke.

That must be one of those intruders, thought Primpersonia. Her manners did not allow her to go up and say, "Get out of here!" She said in a haughty and cold voice instead, "You're an unwelcome visitor. What is your business here?" Only then did she strike the morose figure with her oar.

The shaggy monster jumped up above the handrail and his wild "Owww! Owwwww! Crash!" rent the night air. He did a flip and streaked off as soon as he landed on his paws. Primpersonia wiped her hands with a kerchief, perfumed herself. "Ugh, what a dirty creature! Hasn't washed himself for ages, I think," she said and continued proudly to the lake. She held up her dress as she stepped into the boat and cast off, as proud as ever.

The moon hid early beyond the mountain, nights were quiet and dark, and the water was gleaming dimly in the bays. The bulrushes were floating past, nodding their spikes. There was an alarmed call of a bittern, then a quack of a frightened duck. Among these sounds Primpersonia could hear a snorting and the crushing of the sedge, as if someone was moving along the shore, watching the boat. Presently she saw a figure standing among the rushes and glaring at the water with hungry eyes. Then came a drawn-out melancholy howl:

"Uhoohooohooooo! Crash, crash!"

Imagine that! thought Primpersonia. One strike is not enough for this unwelcome guest. She checked the boat. "Listen," she said in a soft voice, raising her oar. "You'd better go away, while the going is good, so that I wouldn't have to perfume myself again." The gleaming oar apparently reminded the intruder of something very unpleasant, for he yelped, as if touched with red-hot iron, and took to his heels, crushing through the thick bulrushes. Primpersonia took up the oar, but even while rowing she did not bend her proud figure. She rowed with strong sweeping movements, looking ahead and thinking of Graybeard tenderly, as a mother would think of her child: How can he do without his coffee and his pillow? And he also left behind his scarf...

The dam showed gray in the distance, arching against the sky. As she came nearer, she heard two or three voices. After a while she was sure there were two of them. One was the cheerful chattering of a boy, the other, a slow, booming, good-natured talk of an elderly man. The boy and the man were walking down to the Lower Lake carrying a dugout. Soon they put their boat on the beach to have a rest, and the man said nodding at the lake, "Hem, hem... Curlyhead, can you say who it is rowing here?"

Now Primpersonia recognized the voice. It was Whirfast! A kind heart can sense when someone dear to it is in danger. That's exactly what happened now. Primpersonia was rowing to Whirfast's place, while Whirfast and Curlyhead were heading for Primpersonia's. They met halfway to each other's home.

"What's the news?" asked Whirfast. "I felt so uneasy I couldn't sleep. When I woke up I heard that my mills had changed their voices. A thunderstorm was coming, I

thought. And those thieves are always on my mind; where did they run to? So Curlyhead here and I took the boat and were going to your place. Is there anything new on your shore, Primpersonia?"

Whirfast did not like Primpersonia's story at all. Who could have broken the lamp and the mill? He was especially upset because the damaged mill was the one that could turn against the wind. And then, who was that gloomy creature that lounged in the dark on the stairs? Whom was he waiting for?

Having exchanged news, they decided on going to Professor Bestbrain's. The man and the boy were rowing now, as they were in a hurry. The night was rapidly giving way to the day: the birds awoke, and the stars went out one by one or, as the Thickbeards put it, the cocks had pecked up the golden millet in the sky. They rowed on and on without a moment's rest. Soon the forest receded, and the wide meadows with a thin mist hanging over them spread out on both shores. Suddenly Curlyhead waved his hand excitedly.

"Look! What's that over there?"

They saw old Bigfoot's upturned boat on the beach. His ore and fishing rods were broken and his wooden bucket was smashed in two. Whirfast jumped ashore. He saw large footprints that must have been made by some huge monsters. Curlyhead called to Whirfast, showing they should row not to Bestbrain's but follow the monsters' tracks toward the Wild Boar River.

Primpersonia took the oar from Curlyhead and rowed so fast that Whirfast had to sweat to keep pace with her. And they had good reason for being in a hurry: to think only of the impertinent violence whose traces they had seen in the museum and here on the shore! How could they tolerate such things on their native soil? Besides, morning was near, which would close their eyes and plunge them into a deep sleep.

They turned back, let Whirfast go ahead, and raced upstream toward the Wild Boar River. Everything on the way reminded Curlyhead of his recent adventures: his escape with Graybeard through the charred forest, their hiding underwater, and their scaring of old Bigfoot.

However fast they rowed, morning was coming even faster. The sky became light blue, the valley seemed to be larger, and in the east a giant red bird seemed to raise its wings driving away the last streaks of darkness. Finally, a large dazzling sun climbed up over the tops of the forest.

Primpersonia immediately pulled the black kerchief over her face, which made her look like a haughty Moorish woman. Curlyhead and Whirfast shaded their eyes with their hands. It was hard to row now. Their shoulders and arms were weighed down with sleep and tiredness. The sleepy Curlyhead never noticed when he started nodding, his hanging head reaching as low as his knees. He would have dropped into a sleep were it not for a frightening sense of danger that woke him up. He opened his eyes with great effort. Whirfast and Primpersonia rowed as if blindfolded, the boats zigzagging and touching the banks with their noses now and then.

Suddenly a loud noise alarmed them. Wild yells and the stumping of running feet came from the Jagged Rocks. Curlyhead knew what it meant: the shaggy intruders were on someone's trail.

“It’s them!” he cried. “The same ones that chased Uncle Graybeard and me!”

Now all three of them saw the huge monsters leaping over the bushes and racing across the valley toward the Wild Boar River, their shaggy cloaks flying out behind them. They were evidently chasing someone.

“Over there!” shouted Whirfast and grasped the oar. At this moment Primpersonia snatched out something from under her kerchief and berries flashed red on her palm.

“Quick! Chew some of these,” she said pushing the berries with her soft fingertips into the man’s and boy’s mouths. “They grow on magnolia vine and take away sleep and restore your strength.”

Curlyhead, still sleepy, chewed the berries and their sour, pungent juice seemed to spread throughout his body. His eyes were wide open and his head became clear, as well as the world around him.

“Let me do the rowing!” he said. Soon the boy saw someone lying on the shore and sleeping peacefully, his head hidden among the bushes. No, there were two of them sleeping, and it was toward them that the monsters were racing downhill shaking their poles and spears.

As the monsters noticed one and then the other boat, they yelled even louder and rushed ahead to cut off the boats from the sleeping figures. A terrible race began. Everything went dark before Curlyhead’s eyes with great effort. He stood up and rowed like mad, his hands and face burning as if they were set afire. The voice of Whirfast rose above the wild cries of the monsters and the stumping of their feet, “Go to it, sonny! Give it all you’ve got! Hem!”

The commotion must have woken up one of those who were lying by the river, for he raised his head sleepily, his unseeing eyes staring at the sky. It was quite easy to recognize him now by his drooping mustache and his long-stemmed pipe reaching down to his chest.

“Grandpa, it’s Uncle Graybeard! It’s our Graybeard, Grandpa!” cried out Curlyhead, laughing through his tears.

“Press on, sonny! Stump and log on their heads!” snarled Whirfast through clenched teeth. They rowed for all they were worth, the dugouts nearly jumping out of the water with every effort. But it was clear that the monsters would be the first to reach the two wretched sleepers.

It was then that something unexpected happened. Quick as lightning, Primpersonia leaped onto the bank without stopping the racing boat. It was a jump that would have done honor even to her admirer Breakneck, a daring sportsman that he had been. Primpersonia snatched the oar out of Curlyhead’s hands and, as she flew through the air with her long black dress streaming behind her, she cried to her companions, “Haul the boats along the bank, save those two poor things! I’ll keep the intruders busy for a while!”

As she landed on the steep bank, she made a few steps ahead and stood still in the meadow. She held up the oar and, tall and severe in her dark dress and her kerchief pulled over her eyes, waited for the monsters to come. It seemed to Curlyhead the crowd of raging thugs would rush at her in a moment and trample her down and then press on to the river like a herd of stampeding buffalos. The roaring and bawling

wall was closing in on Primpersonia. Leaping ahead of the others was a terrifying monster whose shaggy cloak was flying behind him like the wings of an ominous bird. It might well be the same intruder whom she had struck with her oar for, as he was about to knock her down, he saw a gleaming thing in her hands and with an "Owww!" swerved sending up sprays of earth with his paws and, leaping sideways, dashed uphill. The rest of the intruders repeated the same savage leap in front of Primpersonia and followed their leader like an enraged herd. It was probably their deep-rooted custom to copy their leader even if he had jumped into a fire or an abyss. One monster accidentally separated from the speeding crowd and raced straight at Primpersonia.

"Faugh!" said Primpersonia. "You also smell of smoke. Go wash and comb yourself, you shameless creature!" And with this she swiped him on his head with the oar. His "Owwww!" was the loudest of them all, and he leaped above Primpersonia and streaked off to his fellow-monsters as fast as his paws could carry him. Two more monsters came too close to Primpersonia to get away without smashing blows. After which she wiped her hands with a perfumed handkerchief, wrinkling her nose in disgust and saying, "Ugh, dirty creatures!"

Meanwhile, Whirfast and Curlyhead did not lose a single moment. They pulled Graybeard into a boat and put him there on an armful of hay, then carried over the fainted Bigfoot. As soon as Primpersonia joined them, they cast off.

The swift current carried them down to the lake, tossing the boats mercilessly on narrow shoals. Soon the cave dwellers came to their senses. Part of them rushed through the forest to the Thickbeards' settlement, knocking trees down on their way. The others raced furiously along the bank, following the boats, throwing spears and shooting arrows. Several times Primpersonia raised her pine oar whose gleam scared away the savage pursuers for a while.

More and more often the Thickbeards looked worriedly at the distant forest where gray and black columns of smoke were rising, swirling over their homes. "There's a fire! It's in our settlement!" whispered Curlyhead, horrified. His lips were parched with thirst and worries.

13

Traces of violence on the lake shore.

The second meeting at Bestbrain's.

The professor says wise and instructive words.

Graybeard: "We shall meet them on the steep shore!"

As the forest river carried the travelers into the lake, the smell of smoke became stronger. There was a clamor of excited voices coming from the far shore. Whirfast frowned and said they should row to Graybeard's, there was perhaps something wrong there.

Indeed, thick clouds of smoke were swirling over Graybeard's stump house. The smoke was floating over the lake spreading a gray film of ash over its clear water.

Graybeard was lying on the bottom of the boat, sleeping peacefully, as if it were the most comfortable of beds. Presently he sensed with all his being, even with the tips of his mustache, that his home was near and that live wood and bark were twisting and hissing in fire there.

Graybeard woke up and asked in a worried voice, "Where's my pipe?" He lisped as he said it because his pipe was sticking between his teeth. The old man rose to his feet and with his eyes half closed stepped overboard straight into the water, as if he were stepping over the threshold of his house. Luckily, the boat was close enough to the shore already. Graybeard waded through the water as if he were dazed. Primpersonia followed, and soon they were stamping upstairs to the house faster and faster.

My living lights... flashed through Graybeard's mind. My museum...the largest, the most valuable collection in the world! To his surprise, the house was not damaged. There were only some patches of charred wood on its surface. Graybeard mechanically touched the wall with the stem of his pipe. The stump collapsed with a dry rustling. A cloud of ash dust hung for a long time over it like a night ghost looking the Thickbeards in their faces. They stood there petrified, staring back at the twisting snake-like wisps of smoke, as if expecting that the cloud could do another evil deed. Graybeard, Whirfast, Curlyhead, and Primpersonia were gloomy and silent, their faces gray with ash.

As the cloud settled down, they saw the scorched entrance leading underground. An arrow sent by an intruder and carrying the black fire had hit the old sycamore stump burning out its inside. The fire had reached as far down as the deep roots, but it could not destroy the underground bedroom and the halls of the museum.

Where did they come from to our misfortune? thought Curlyhead about the shaggy monsters. Our life here on the lakes was so nice and peaceful. Uncle Sweetfruit planted melons in his garden, Uncle Graybeard grew living lights, and my grandpa was going to make a windmill that would turn even without the wind. And now these intruders have come, cruel and savage. What do they want here? I don't think they intrude where they expect to meet an equal force. Their hordes come only when they're sure to get the upper hand. But are we weaker than them?

Graybeard, Whirfast, and Primpersonia stared at the burnt stump and at the snake-like wisps of smoke that had descended onto the ground and hidden in a heap of ash, great worry written on their faces. Primpersonia was the first to come to her senses and say resolutely, "We must go to your place, Whirfast. I'm afraid these dirty monsters didn't leave it untouched."

It was an unusual scene. The sun blazed scorchingly upon the lakes, but several Thickbeards and Thinbeards, instead of sleeping in their cool stump houses rowed for their lives toward the Upper Lake.

Soon the dazzling of the water was over, and they came in sight of the dam and then of the sandy beach of Whirfast's place. No words could describe what they saw there. The mills were broken or crushed into the sand. Perhaps for the fun of it, some monster had knocked down the most melodious of the mills and decorated the sticks on which they had been fastened with Whirfast's old shoes, straw hats, sieves, and pots. All the sand structures were destroyed except for the water-filled channels and the

high sand fortress also surrounded by water. The intruders lived in mortal terror of clean water, and Graybeard XII made a mental note of it again.

Whirfast looked gray and limp as he walked about his ruined kingdom where he used to enjoy himself so much. From time to time he cleared his throat threateningly, muttering, "Hem... Stump and log upon their heads. They won't get away with it!"

"Faugh! Faugh!" Primpersonia kept repeating as she followed Whirfast. "What a foul smell they had left here, dirty savages! Let me sprinkle you with my perfume, dear Whirfast."

"Please don't," answered Whirfast sullenly. "Better save it for those savage intruders."

At Sweetfruit's place it was a different scene. The merry and unusually active Sweetfruit was treating — of all creatures! — one of the shaggy monsters. It's hard to say where and how he caught the unhappy intruder, who was sitting tied to a tree in the melon garden. There was a pile of melons in front of him, and Sweetfruit was pushing juicy flesh between his huge jaws.

"Have your fill," Sweetfruit was saying, "though you're an unwelcome guest. And please, don't grunt and don't turn away your snub nose. Better listen to me. You can't imagine how much room there is in your stomach. This sweet piece will teach you to burn and trample my garden!"

The frightened cave dweller was turning his head, snorting and uttering some inarticulate sounds, his mouth stuffed with melon and sweet juice dripping from his tongue and trickling down his shaggy belly. His eyes were nearly popping out of his head.

Whirfast was not going to watch these gastronomic sufferings. He went up to Sweetfruit's prisoner, cut the rope and gave him a good kick in the back. The intruder, still holding a huge piece of melon in his teeth, took to his heels and dashed away like the wind.

After a short talk everybody agreed to Graybeard's suggestion to go to Bestbrain's and to discuss the situation there.

As they approached Bestbrain's yard, they saw a note under a birch tree saying "Welcome into the house!" How clever of him, thought Graybeard of Bestbrain as he went downstairs into the famous professor's underground halls. We're all tired and worn out by the sun as it is, so now we have a good chance of relaxing a bit. Primpersonia went first down the steep stairs, followed by Whirfast, Sweetfruit, Curlyhead, and Graybeard. As they had guessed before, almost all the Thickbeards and Thinbeards, young and old, had come, to say nothing of the professor's students. Misfortune brings people together.

A serious talk must have been going on here for quite some time. Graybeard passed along an aisle to the opposite wall and sighed with relief as he sat on a soft sofa unbuttoning his collar. Whew, here I can make myself at home, thought he. Indeed, everything in this luxurious hall (the professor called it Lunar Hall) reminded him of his museum. Living lights were glowing along the walls — his birthday present to the professor. The great dome of the hall disappeared high in the darkness, and under it, in the middle of the hall, a small lake shimmered dark and light blue. There

was an island on the lake and a bridge linked it with the shore. Professor Bestbrain in his white cloak used to cross the squeaky wooden bridge to the island barefoot, sit there under a walnut tree, and deliver his famous teachings addressed to the minds and hearts of Thickbeard boys. In a word, this was where he taught his lunar students.

This time everything was as it used to be during Bestbrain's lessons. The professor, enigmatically silent, was sitting on his island (he usually liked to sit by a nice little fire), living lights were glowing along the walls, and the hall was silent, cool and dusky. The only difference was that the audience included the whole population of the Land of the Long Lakes.

They had to discuss a difficult question: how to defend themselves from the invasion of the cave dwellers. Sweetfruit was the first of the newcomers to speak. He was wearing his usual loincloth and had a long red pepper sticking behind his ear. Sweetfruit went up to the suspension bridge holding a roundish melon under his arm and raised his hand addressing himself to the island, that is to Professor Bestbrain, who was sitting wrapped up in his white cloak and looking thoughtfully at his bare feet while listening to the speakers.

"Dear friends!" began Sweetfruit. "This is what I propose in this unfavorable situation. We should not irritate the enemy that attacks us, but treat him to the best meal we can offer. If we fight him, we can only enrage him. But if we stuff him with the sweetest melon just as I did my unwelcome guest today..." He made a clumsy gesture and the melon he held under his arm dropped with a plop turning into a heap of squashy mass on the earth.

"Your advice is as good as that smashed melon of yours," muttered Whirfast angrily.

"Wait a minute, shonnies," lisped old Bigfoot interrupting the speaker. "I don't think he knows what we're talking about here. He was very excited and probably meant something else. But this is all beside the point, you can take it from me. Now, I'll speak the truth, all the truth and nothing but the truth. I'm guilty of a heavy sin, I am, because I caught fish both large and small. But he that lives in the water watched me all the time and then once he threw a wet sack over my head and carried me off into the caves..." The audience listened patiently, but it was clear even to a child that old Bigfoot's words were out of place.

Professor Bestbrain gave a sign to Graybeard and Curlyhead to speak — they had been in the hands of the intruders and had a close look at them. Graybeard and Curlyhead both rose and stepped up to the bridge. Bestbrain studied them through his three pairs of glasses, while they were gazing across the lake at the professor and his undying calmly flickering fire under the walnut.

Graybeard and Curlyhead described their first encounter with the black fire: how it had hit a tree with a thundering sound burning out its inside, while the tree creaked with pain. As soon as the professor heard the words "the black fire," he took off one pair of glasses and cleaned them. The old man and the boy told about their escape and their hiding underwater. As they were speaking about how the monsters had followed them along the bank but had never come close to the river, Bestbrain took

off the second pair of glasses and said, "Aha!" Finally Graybeard recounted his ill adventures in the caves and how his living light had scared away the thugs. Here the professor slapped himself on the knee, took off his third pair of glasses, and pronounced loudly, "Ah-ha! I thought as much!"

With this, Bestbrain rose to his feet and speaking in a quiet but solemn voice, addressed the forest people — all the Thickbeards and Thinbeards watching him across the lake in complete silence.

"If you look properly at our forest and our green meadows, you will see that dandelion produces one hundred parachutes in each blowball and then sends them away with the wind in large clouds. White poplar produces one thousand thousands of parachutes in each wisp and sends them away with the wind in a still larger cloud. But when spring comes, only one dandelion grows from all those clouds of dispersed seeds, or two to three poplars. Now, why do we have so many seeds in autumn, much more than we need, and why do so few, so reasonably few of them, grow so that each plant is open to the wind? Why does it happen so in the meadow and why is this the case in the forest? Keep your eyes open!"

Bestbrain blew on a dandelion ball, and a fluffy cloud went up into the air. Some of the drifting parachutes turned toward the burning fire, as if sucked in by its hot flames. The rest sailed on and then descended onto the water where they were immediately swallowed by small fish. Very few parachutes, probably those having the heaviest seeds, landed on the island where, if moist and warm enough, they would appear in spring as bright yellow flowers.

"What does the ancient dandelion show us?" Bestbrain asked his silent listeners. "It shows that every living thing that is superfluous in the forest or in the green meadow dies in deep water," he pointed at the lake, "or on dry land," he pointed at a well-trodden path at his feet, "or in pure fire."

"Wise words!" exclaimed Graybeard. "It was very wise of you to say that, professor!" As you know, Graybeard looked at Bestbrain as his rival in science and never missed a chance of teasing or even making fun of him. Today, however, was a different case, and he appreciated Bestbrain's advice. "I understand you perfectly well, professor! I have it! We shall meet them on the steep shore! And we shall get our enemies into a ring of fire! Come to the lake everybody, after the evening bells. Every last man of you, forest people!"

14

The Thickbeards and Thinbeards make preparations on the steep shore. Graybeard and Gurlyhead scout around for the monsters. A cruel execution.

The evening bells sounded long and alarming. The sun slid into the crimson clouds and darkness fell fast over the forest. The Thickbeards and Thinbeards woke up. Here and there a creaking door could be heard as they came out with spades and crowbars and headed for the lake. The sound of the evening bells filled Graybeard's house,

but his cuckoo did not come as before to clean its bill, admire his white luxurious mustache, and call twelve times to wake him up. He got up by himself and, groping, found his pipe. Primpersonia was already standing by with a cup of coffee in her hand, its warm fragrant smell filling the whole room.

As soon as Graybeard finished his coffee, Primpersonia handed him his scarf and said in a cold and resolute voice, "Say what you might, Graybeard, but I won't let you go alone. And don't get offended please. I'll tell you more. Do you know whom you remind me of? You remind me of a small and innocent child. You never know where your feet will carry you. As soon as you find yourself in the forest and see a mysterious light in the darkness, you turn and fly toward it, as if you were a lighthearted butterfly, though you know you can get your wings scorched. How many times have you promised me to be careful? And how many times did you drown, fall into steep places, were on the verge of death? So! Say what you will, I'm taking a spade and going with you."

Graybeard muttered something and was about to say that a spade was not for her delicate hands, but Primpersonia's lips tightened, she pulled on big canvas mittens, grabbed a spade and leaned on it resolutely, a challenge in her eyes. She looked a real digger at this moment!

Graybeard only cleared his throat and scratched the back of his neck. He knew that once his sister took something into her head, it was impossible to get it out of there.

They went out together. Graybeard blew out a few rings of smoke and looked up at the sky. Heavy clouds promised a dark and stuffy night, probably a thunderstorm. He asked Primpersonia to help him shovel together some dry bracken to cover the entrance to their underground home — a black hole which remained at the place where once their stump stood. They had to be careful in case the unwelcome guests would come again. As they finished the work, Graybeard and his sister went along the shore of the lake, Primpersonia leading the way.

Opressive darkness settled over everything. The forest seemed to have come up to the shore, gloomy and silent. The sky was also silent, and the shimmering water could be seen now and then.

They passed sandy hills and then saw a large crowd of forest people. Some were with spades, others with shovels, still others had come with wheelbarrows. People were milling around and confused dull voices hung over the crowd. The place looked like a giant anthill in the dark.

The crowd parted to let Graybeard pass. His sharp eyes took in the whole scene at once; it was the very place they needed! There was a large meadow between the forest and the lake, an even stretch of grass coming to an abrupt fall over the water. The steep part of the shore was rather narrow with crumbled earth gently sloping toward the water on either side. Graybeard's idea was to remove the slopes and plant the edge of the fall with bushes to hide it from the eyes of those running from the forest.

The people plunged into work. Whirfast was removing the heaps of crumbled earth, throwing it into a wheelbarrow. As soon as it was filled, Curlyhead gripped

the handles and rolled the barrow away, whistling merrily. Primpersonia... Oh, it was worth seeing her at work! Never losing her dignified look, she put her elegant shoe on the spade, pressed on it, and threw the earth down the steep slope accurately, as if it were gold. Her movements were so smooth and precise that she seemed to know she was an example to follow. No one would have guessed this elegant woman could use her spade to swipe any of those shaggy intruders. Graybeard was busy pulling bushes to the edge of the shore with old Bigfoot helping him as best he could. Sweetfruit was fussing around teaching others how to do it and talking without end. He was sure they should put his barrel melons here instead of bushes, and then the unwelcome guests would come out of the forest and fall upon them like crows upon carrion.

The work was in full swing when a rumbling sound came from the forest. The Thickbeards and Thinbeards looked at an overcast sky, thinking it was thunder. Then they listened again and realized the muffled sounds were more like those of a drum accompanied by some rattling. The increasingly loud noise was coming from the Jagged Rocks. The people stopped working and strained their ears.

“Can you hear that? Looks like someone’s beating a drum.”

“Sounds like a funeral.”

“It’s them, the cave dwellers.”

Talking excitedly, the people never noticed when Graybeard had slipped away. Holding a hand to his ear, he listened hard to the noise coming from the dark, while his feet, in spite of himself, were feeling for a path and carrying him toward the dull din. Primpersonia was the first to notice his absence.

“Where do you think you’re going, Graybeard? Have you forgotten our talk?” she asked overtaking him.

Graybeard stopped suddenly, surprised that his feet had carried him so far from the people. Primpersonia put the spade over her shoulder with a challenging gesture. Then Curlyhead popped up out of nowhere, holding the handle of his shovel threateningly, as if it were a pikestaff.

Graybeard smiled and spread his hands in a helpless gesture. He clapped the good and brave Curlyhead on the shoulders and turned to Primpersonia.

“I’ll go with Curlyhead. His swift feet bring luck. And you — please, stay home and watch my museum. Those cave dwellers are awfully afraid of your oar. Please, Primpersonia, save our living lights! You know...” He turned away, as if choosing his words. “You know, life means nothing to me without them,” he finished in a low voice.

The old man and the boy rustled along the path, crossed a meadow flooded with darkness as with black water, and were soon swallowed up in the forest.

The forest seemed to be gloomier than ever, and the sky was overcast. Only the sharp eyes of the Thickbeards could in this pitch-darkness see the notches on the trees by which they had marked their trail. Curlyhead followed Graybeard stepping silently, looking around cautiously. The air was still, damp and stuffy under a dense canopy of interlaced tree crowns. And still, the boy could hear crackling and rustling sounds moving along with them.

“Can you hear that? Someone seems to be following us!”

“Could it be the monsters?” Graybeard stopped and pointed with his finger. “Ssshh!” he whispered. Indeed, it looked as if a cautious night animal were following them.

They went on, and the rustling sounds never ceased. Once Graybeard sniffed a fine waft of spring violet. The familiar smell reminded him of Primpersonia’s favorite perfume — but no, she must be home by now, watching his priceless lights.

The familiar paths led them among the charred trees, across the log over the Wild Boar River, and then across the swampy valley. The cautious crackling sounds moved along with them. Once they even heard muffled coughs behind the trees. Someone was shadowing them! The cave dwellers could have sent out their scout. But soon the stealing sounds were drowned in loud drumbeats coming from the Jagged Rocks.

The old man and the boy were slower and more cautious now, stealing through the thick bushes. As they reached a wide glade, they dropped down, overwhelmed by what they saw.

Hordes of monsters in their skin cloaks were coming out of the caves. The fearful Bugaboo the First was striding in front, wearing a black helmet and chain mail. A black horse was led after him... No, it was not a horse! It was a horse’s head being carried over Bugaboo by two spearmen. Then came a dwarf-like old magus swaying a long black besom, as if it were a tail. Following the chief rock crusher came the spearmen and the fistfighters carrying big stones and maces in their hands.

The hordes formed a crescent in the glade. Bugaboo, accompanied by two spearmen with a horse’s head, inspected his army and then stood in front of his warriors. There was a roll of drums made from the buff stretched over strong hoops. The chief rock crusher made a short speech. He said that two guards had broken a law of the caves: they fell asleep while on duty and let two prisoners escape. The guards would be put to death by the black fire. Crash, crash!

There was another roll of drums, and the wretched culprits were pushed out into the middle of the glade. Graybeard recognized them at once; they had guarded him in the caves and their names were Muddy and Rocky. They did not even try to struggle, for their heels had been roasted long enough to make them obedient and resigned. The monsters drove two stakes into the ground and tied Muddy and Rocky to them. The miserable creatures stood with their heads hanging down hopelessly. Bugaboo drew his bow.

“Look, what’s he doing?” whispered Curlyhead. “May I whistle to stop him?”

However, an arrow was the first to whistle, followed by another. There was a flash of black fire and its flames went through both of the bodies. Two charred figures were standing there instead before Graybeard and Curlyhead could come to their senses.

“My fire destroys the insides leaving only a charred shape,” said Bugaboo in a cold and malignant voice, piercing his warriors with a cruel look. “I shall burn this forest to the last tree and the earth on which it grows. Tomorrow there will be nothing here but rocks and caves, or I am not the great crusher. But first we shall go to the Long Lakes and my fire will destroy the stump houses of the Thickbeards.”

The hordes formed a column and, stamping heavily, passed before the frozen Graybeard and Curlyhead across the glade and away toward the river. Dark clouds drifted over their heads. Crash! Bang! There was a creaking of wood and the sound of roaring fire. The cave dwellers destroyed the first trees on their way.

The last rows of intruders had hardly disappeared in the forest, when Graybeard stirred uneasily. Was there any chance of holding them up? Someone should go and warn Whirfast.

“I’ll go!” said a woman’s voice behind their backs.

Graybeard and Curlyhead were lying as if pinned to the ground. Primpersonia! Unbelievable! Where did she come from? They would have been less surprised if they had seen her descending from the sky.

Primpersonia came out of the dark, her nose wrinkled in disgust. “Faugh! What a smell you caught from them!” She took out her handkerchief and waved it in front of her nose. Only now did the boy realize who had been stealing after them and whose fine perfume he had smelled.

Graybeard was as happy as he was surprised. “Aren’t you a terror, Primpersonia. Please, fly back as quick as the wind and tell Whirfast to prepare the fires. We shall decoy them to the steep shore.”

Primpersonia disappeared into the darkness silently. The old man and the boy could still hear the creaking of trees and the roar of the black fire — the cave dwellers crushed their way along the river, leaving behind charred trees, burnt moss and rock cracked from the heat.

Graybeard and Curlyhead followed them, stealing along among the black rocks. One thought worried the old man: would Primpersonia get to the settlement in time to warn their people?

15

*The mysterious preparations of the Thickbeards and Thinbeards.
The roaring and the black lightning approach the lake.
Where is Curlyhead?*

Thickbeards emerged from the darkness one by one and, talking softly, went up to Whirfast standing by a barrel. “Dip it in here, hem,” he kept repeating in his booming voice as the people, old and young, passed by, dipping into the pitch hemp or rags wound up on the ends of sticks. Whirfast gave terse instructions, “Hide over there, in the ditches. On both sides of the meadow.”

Primpersonia was handing out living lights, and the Thickbeards carried them carefully on their palms, and the lights glowed here and there in the dark like hot coals. Thinbeards were also coming up, dipping their torches into the pitch and hiding living lights in their hands.

Meanwhile, something terrible was going on in the forest. It was full of creaking and roaring sounds accompanied by the flashes of black lightning. The wild force was breaking through the forest destroying everything on its way. The hordes of cave dwellers were closing in, and Primpersonia was rushing about, explaining to the people where to hide and when to light their torches. She wrinkled her nose and

kept repeating, "Faugh, what a smell is coming from that forest!" She was the last to come up to the barrel and dip into the pitch the blade of her oar with hemp tied to it.

Whirfast rolled the barrel up to a small hill on the opposite side of the meadow and put Professor Bestbrain with two students to guard it.

"Keep your heads," repeated Primpersonia. "We shall give them a hearty welcome." However, it was not so easy for the people to keep their heads lying in ambush, when they saw the fiercely yelling hordes destroying the last trees on their way and flooding the wide meadow. But there was something even more terrible to watch for the Thickbeards and Thinbeards hiding on both sides of the glade.

The bedraggled Graybeard and Curlyhead were rushing ahead of the pursuing monsters led by Bugaboo with his attendants, archers and spearmen. Carried out by the chase, Bugaboo bawled, "Get them alive! Alive!"

The cave warriors kept hurling stones and thick wood branches at the old man and the boy, apparently trying to knock them off their feet. Winded like wild horses, Graybeard and Curlyhead had been racing about the forest for a whole hour trying to hold up the hordes of monsters to give more time for Primpersonia and for the rest of their people to get ready for the battle. Now the army of cave dwellers was chasing them across the meadow heading straight for the steep shore of the lake.

Graybeard was bleeding, wounded in the shoulder. Curlyhead was out of breath, running as if he were blindfolded. A huge shaggy monster followed on his heels holding a log overhead and yelling, "Crash! Crash!" A moan of horror ran along the hidden Thickbeards and Thinbeards. They would rush to his help, if they did not have their orders.

However, everything was going according to Graybeard's plan. He had led Bugaboo away from the rest of his army, and the chief crusher was following him to the steep shore of the lake. He was eager to seize his victim and was rushing ahead with his henchmen, the horse's head bobbing in front of him and the black-haired dwarf magus rolling and jumping at his feet like an old tree stump overgrown with moss.

As they dashed past Primpersonia, she felt a whiff of dirty fur and a foul smell of the caves. It was then that an owl screech came from the darkness. In a moment Primpersonia was on her feet and crying, "Light your torches! Cut them off from the rest of the horde!"

Hundreds of blazing fires burst into flame on both sides of the meadow. The Thickbeards and Thinbeards rushed against one another brandishing their torches and sending bright sparkles flying in all directions. One group was led by Primpersonia, the other by Whirfast.

The yells and shouts of that night would not be soon forgotten.

Bugaboo and the other monster leaders had dashed toward the shore. And then they saw living, hot, white fires behind them — the terror of the cave dwellers. Two long lines of fires moved against each other until they came together, cutting off Bugaboo and his henchmen from the rest of his army. A great cheer of triumph rose from the Thickbeards and Thinbeards as they closed a fiery half ring.

Great immortal Bugaboo, the crusher of the mountains, was marking time, uncertain about what to do. Then he started backing away, his eyes bulging unbelievably.

Perhaps he could not grasp where all those fires had come from. His henchmen were also backing away, toward the steep fall, the bravest of them throwing spears and shooting arrows at the line of fires closing in on them. They were herded closer and closer to the edge of the fall unseen beyond the newly planted bushes.

Suddenly their feet went up in the air and Bugaboo and his company, screaming and bellowing wildly, tumbled down the steep fall into the living water of the lake. There were dull splashes and more screams, but they soon died down as the clear water would not hold the cave killers, and they plummeted to the bottom like so many stones. If there were someone who could understand the language of the lapping waves, he would hear the following: You are intruders here. An evil force let you out of the dark underground kingdom of rock, so go back into the dark abyss where you belong.

Meanwhile, a fierce battle went on in the meadow. The cut-off hordes did not give up. They tried to break through the line of fires, they still hoped to save their chief crusher. Thickbeards and Thinbeards were showered with spears and arrows. "Scare them away! Use your torches!" shouted Primpersonia brandishing her oar with the blazing hemp on one end.

Professor Bestbrain set fire to the barrel of pitch. The two students gave it a light push and the barrel rolled downhill at an increasing speed into the thick of the shaggy monsters. A sheet of flame and sprays of sparks were flying behind the burning vessel. With the screams of "Crash! Crash!" the singed and panic-stricken warriors scattered. Whirfast, Primpersonia and their people were keeping them away from the forest. Sweetfruit was rushing along the line with warlike cries, poking the shaggy monsters with his torch made of melon stalks. Graybeard had come to his senses now and was swinging a long torch, the burning pitch dripping from it, sending the terrified monsters running helter-skelter in all directions. Suddenly he stopped, struck with a terrible thought. "Where's Curlyhead!" he cried out. He had lost the boy in this commotion. "Where's Curlyhead? Have you seen Curlyhead? Where is he?" the words ran along the lines of Thickbeards and Thinbeards. People were looking around for the boy, passing on the worried question. But Curlyhead was nowhere to be seen.

Chased by a huge monster with a log, Curlyhead had swerved aside as he had reached the edge of the fall. He had heard the monster splash into the lake. He had been lying in a ditch unable to catch his breath, his heart thumping against his chest. The boy had seen what nobody had noticed perhaps, because he had not plunged into the battle from the beginning.

A large crowd of cave dwellers and swampland hirelings had separated from the rest of the monsters and, like thieves, they rushed through the darkness to the Thickbeards' settlement. They had shot arrows with black fire and the first stump houses had burst into flames. The rotten stump of old Bigfoot had been burning, as well as the birch trees and benches in front of the Lunar School, and some of the boats on the lake.

"How can you? Get away from our houses! Get away from the school!" Curlyhead had shouted and rushed after the intruders. He had been terrified at the thought

that these monsters could have burst into the underground school and its Lunar Hall, where everything had been so dear to his heart: the underground lake, the walnut tree on the island, the bridge, the living-light lamps, and the voice of wise Bestbrain. "I won't let them do it!" Curlyhead had said to himself. If he had taken a living light which could have scared away the cave dwellers. But no! He had only picked up an oak stick, overtaken the crowd of monsters and started desperately banging on their heads, backs and bear-like paws. At first the cave dwellers had dodged avoiding the blows, but then their eyes popped out of their heads with astonishment. The boy was alone! And without a living light! Well, he was asking for it!

Yelling and snorting, the monsters had thrown themselves on Curlyhead. He had struggled desperately, kicking them and banging them with his stick. But what could he have done singlehanded against the savage crowd? The cuckoo could have saved him if it had been alive. It would have flown to Graybeard and Whirfast, and its frightened shadow would have told them to hurry and get the boy out of trouble.

The terrifying hordes had been swept off the meadow. The blazing torches were dying down, groups of Thickbeards and Thinbeards were coming together, calling each other in weary but happy voices. Graybeard came up wiping the sweat off his forehead. Suddenly he turned to Whirfast.

"Look, what's all that fussing over there? By the Lunar School?"

"Yes, I see. I think they're fighting. Maybe Curlyhead is there?"

A choked desperate young voice came from the school.

"Grandpa-a-a!"

"Coming, Curlyhead! Hold out, boy!"

Whirfast, Graybeard and about fifty Thickbeards rushed to the school. As they ran along the lake shore under heavy clouds, their worried faces were glistening in the dancing light of their torches. When the monsters saw them leaping out of the darkness, their eyes blazing with wrath and revenge, they streaked off into the night forest, leaving smoldering ruins and heavy stumping behind.

Whirfast came running heavily, his heart sensing trouble. He stopped at the place where the fighting had taken place. Too late. The dead boy was lying still on the gray churned sand. Whirfast, who had never cried in his life, dropped on his knees, buried his face in the chest of the cold boy, and his whole body shook with hollow sobs.

The funeral train was moving slowly toward the steep shore. The night was wearing away, the smoke was drifting with the wind away from the battle scene toward the valley. Curlyhead was being carried on tied up oars. Shadows were wandering over the dark meadow, picking up the torches lost in the fight, carrying away the wounded. Primpersonia called together some girls and told them to pick up all the torches, light them and pass them on to the head of the train. The torchlight procession approached the lake.

Boats had been run to the shore. Whirfast and Graybeard took the first one, then Curlyhead's body was passed carefully on to them. Slowly, as if by itself, the dugout cast off. Dozens of boats followed, forming two long lines of torches which, from the shore, looked like small living lights sailing on the dark surface of the lake.

Curlyhead was buried on a high hill near Whirfast's mills that remained untouched by the monsters.

The dawn was at hand, but it was dark yet, and the Thickbeards and Thinbeards were filing past the grave in the light of the torches, their heads bowed in sorrow. Following the old custom, old and young each threw a handful of sand into the grave. Little by little, a small mound grew over the buried boy. Whirfast put a birch-bark



windmill on top of the mound. When all the people had passed, leaving the mound alone on the deserted shore, the windmill began to turn humming a sad song which sounded like a plaintive cry of a crane.

The morning light began to break through the clouds and mist in the east. The Thickbeards and Thinbeards hurried home. From their boats they could see two dots showing gray against the white of the sand. One was the grave mound, the other a bent sitting figure. It was Whirfast listening to the sad song of the windmill, his face buried in his palms. The desperate "Crandpa-a-a!" still echoed painfully in his ears.

*All things change, but the coffee Forest Special
and the living lights remain unchanged.*

The cave dwellers had come and gone like rotten twigs under spring water. The intruders left behind only barren rock where there once were glades overgrown with mushrooms. The Thickbeards and Thinbeards gathered again at Professor Bestbrain's to discuss a serious question: what should they do to cover the barren rock with moss and trees? The professor, as usual, spoke in the underground Lunar Hall. To demonstrate his thought, he took a dry pine cone and removed from it half a dozen flat seeds with reddish wings. Bestbrain blew on his palm and the winged seeds went spinning down and bored into the dry ground. "That's the way to do it — using a living drill!" the professor concluded his speech.

The Thickbeards and Thinbeards went out into the forest and planted the barren places with mountain pine. The seedlings grew badly on the rock, especially where it was steep. Lonely cave intruders, still wandering in the swampy thickets, crept out and uprooted the young trees fiercely. This kind of war went on for two years, until a terrible thunderstorm. Nobody knew whether it was the strong wind or the work of Professor Bestbrain and his students, but after a strike of lightning the mountains shook and the fallen rocks closed the mouths of all the caves. Nobody had seen the savage killers since.

The life in the forest and at the lakes went on as usual, day and night. At sunset the sound of the solemn evening bells drifted over the country:

Bong!

Bong!

Bong!

Thus the forest keeper announced that the day was over and that it was time for the Thickbeards and Thinbeards to wake up and attend to their nightly chores, both the more and the less important.

Graybeard stretched out blissfully, enjoying the soft pillows. He allowed himself to doze a bit this morning, just a little bit. He never noticed when something like a small ball darted into his room filled, as usual, with thick learned books scattered around.

"Cuckoo! Cuckoo!" Graybeard suddenly heard from the tall chest of drawers. He opened one eye sleepily. Wasn't it a wonder! Sitting on the chest of drawers was a tiny cuckoo. It had called only twice and was silent; its voice was too weak yet.

"My darling," Graybeard laughed and reached out for his pipe. "Your good old mother must have told you about me. Am I right? Well then, allow me to introduce myself. I'm Graybeard XII. And you? Are you her son or daughter?"

Graybeard held out his hands invitingly, and the small cuckoo perched on his palm. It must have just left the nest of some other bird; its feathers were short and bristling and there were two yellow circles on either side of its bill. The tiny bird

gave Graybeard a sly look, and he thought it was about to ask: Will you show me your chubby legs and shiny heels? My mother used to admire them so much!

Graybeard was never too proud. With a good-natured “Hem!” he pulled his quilt and showed the small cuckoo his shiny heels. “Grow up,” he said merrily. “Gargle your throat with the silvery dew of the meadows and come back as soon as you’re in good voice. Then you’ll call twelve times for me just as your mother did.”

At this the cuckoo took off and darted away through the window. Graybeard lowered his feet from the bed. He knew that his warm slippers, his scarf, shirt, suspenders — all his things, ready to put on, had been placed at the bed by his thoughtful Primpersonia.

Graybeard lit his pipe and said, “Hem! That’s what I call good stuff!” With these words and the rings of smoke lingering in his mustache, he went out of his house. He stopped at the gate and looked around. A full moon was up above the forest, as in the good old times. Myriads of stars were strewn across the sky like clusters of pink snowball flowers. Only a girl’s voice singing a melancholy song disturbed the night silence.

What about Graybeard’s stump house? Oh, now he had a new house, better than before. All the forest people helped to build it. It was made of strong, well planed wood shining like gold in the moonlight, as only planed pine and its resin could shine. And on the top of the stump... The moved Graybeard twirled up his mustache as he glanced at it, because he saw three windmills there instead of the two as before. They were all brought by Whirfast. “The humming of this one will remind you of myself,” he had said. “You’ll remember Curlyhead as you listen to that one. And the third one will turn against the wind to spite our enemies.”

Graybeard puffed on his pipe and touched each windmill with the stem. They began turning merrily at once. One purred like a cat dozing comfortably by a warm stove, the second rattled with the voice of well dried maple, and the third whirred away against the wind. The song of this trio reminded everybody that warm summer nights had come to the Land of the Long Lakes.

Graybeard sniffed the air. The breath of the forest was fresh and cool, filled with strong fragrance of pine needles. “Hem,” he said. “The pine smells really nice.”

Not everybody remembered the heavy clouds of smoke that had come from the forest two years ago. It would be better to forget that painful story. But even now, while turning over dry oak leaves to find the hiding honey agarics, the Thickbeards often came across a charred log. Frightened, they would silently leave the place, but in other glades they would sooner or later find another piece of black scorched wood.

“Bah!” said Graybeard dismissing the sad memories. Why should he think of such evil things, when he was so happy standing under these magnificent stars! It would be better to recall his recent wandering beyond the Wild Boar River. Tired, he had sat down in the shade of a tree to relax a little. He had taken out his tobacco pouch, cleared his throat as usual before smoking, and looked around. Why, the place was familiar to him! That’s where they had been hiding with Curlyhead, watching the hordes of monsters marching out of the caves...

Graybeard finished smoking, opened the gate, and went up to the door leading to the museum. He breathed on the brass plate and polished it until the old-fashioned letters began to shine more than before. Even the moon stopped riding across the sky to admire a rather long sign:

WORLD FAMOUS MUSEUM OF THE LIVING LIGHTS
FOUNDED BY GRAYBEARD XII OF THE THICKBEARD TRIBE,
DOCTOR OF FOREST SCIENCE (BRACKET FUNGI AND LARVAE).
ADMISSION FREE.
OPEN AT NIGHT ONLY.
WELCOME!

Added below was:

ENTER WITH ROYAL STEPS ONLY: ONE-TWO-THREE!

Graybeard stood waiting for a while, then opened his underground museum. It was then that he heard someone climbing the stairs. He looked back and saw Whirfast coming up from the lake, followed by a little but important looking Thinbeard. The boy was perhaps seven or eight years old. Aha! That was Whirfast's younger grandson. And he was the very image of Curlyhead! The same blond hair, the same reserved look from under his eyebrows, and the same curiosity to learn about the world around him.

"Primpersonia!" Graybeard called into the drawing room. "Will you please open all our halls! We're having our dearest guests today! And don't forget to make three cups of Forest Special for us!"

Before entering his stump house, Graybeard looked once more at the dark forest and his heart stood still with anticipation: yes, the time had come! The living lights — blue and white, light blue, and greenish — were shining, glowing and playing in the damp darkness of the forest. It was impossible to take a step without seeing a wonder. Every piece of rotten wood, every root and twig was burning and glimmering in the night.

This night they should all go to the forest. Of course, first they would see the exhibits in the museum. And then the guests and hosts — Primpersonia, Whirfast, his grandson, and Graybeard — would hurry to the forest bathed in the fantastic glow. They would fill their baskets with the living lights to be put in the museum and handed out to every Thickbeard and Thinbeard. Let there be a small glowing night wonder in every stump house, a living light that blooms in the forest only as a sign of good weather and brings happiness to everyone who has held it in his hands.

1977—1978



The Singing Gossamer

I dedicate this tale to the grasshoppers, June bugs, soft rains, and silted-up streams — the greatest wonders of the world which we discover in our childhood.

— THE AUTHOR

THE SILVERY LITTLE MAN

Ding-dong-tock!

I'm lying enveloped in pitchy darkness and listening to *him* playing. *He* has been living in our house for a long time — maybe behind the chimney, maybe under the bench where the bogy dozes curled up. The little man is not afraid of the bogy. He often sleeps on the bogy's soft paws. He comes to visit me early in the morning when there's no one at home and the shutters are closed. He usually sits on the metal rail of my bed, ringing against it with the silver hobnails of his boots. Just like this:

Ding-dong-tock!

But now he is in the corner under the dish shelves. There's a barrel standing there full of water and the corner is dark, but I can see him all right. He's as slender as gossamer, this funny little man. And he's glowing with blue light. Besides, he's so quick, I can hardly see him. He's hopping and skipping about the floor, flitting around like a firefly. His small wings are light and transparent like grasshopper's, and they rustle and crack softly: crack-crack-crack.

The little man is in good humor this morning. He must have had a good night and munched up all the bread crumbs I had left for him on the bench. So now he's enjoying himself hopping on one foot. Each time he jumps up he clinks his hobnails. Hop — ding! Hop — ding! And each time he comes down he stands still for a moment listening to the silvery ringing sound and pleased with his skill.

The little man darts from a dish shelf onto a stool, then down to the floor, and then comes hopping up to me. Hey, look, he's teasing! Hop-hop, he's in front of me. Hop-hop, he's away. And he's clicking his tongue all along, as if saying, "Click-click, I'm playing a trick!"

Well, I think, just you wait. I'll get you.

Slowly, I put out one foot from under the blanket. As I put out the other, shivers run up my spine. I lie still, waiting until I get used to the tickles. I turn over on my stomach and start slowly slipping down. I'm slipping, and the blanket's slipping. Then I'm suddenly suspended in the air, over a dark abyss. There's a stinging pain in my funny bone, and with an "Ouch!" I fall down onto something cold. Oh, it's the floor.

No, I wasn't scared, I just thought I fell into a pretty deep pit, that's why my knees are knocking together. I'll stand a bit so I can see where to go. I can hear the darkness breathing, and the cold grips me by the shoulders. Maybe I should turn back? The bed is right here, I can slip under the blanket in a jiffy. But what about that little devil? He's watching from the corner and laughing. Why on earth are you laughing?

You think I got frightened? Wait till I get you by your tassel, then you'll see if I did. Oh, you don't know what a tassel is? What about a wagger? You don't know that either? Certainly not! It's a tail. Cheeky devils like you usually have one.

I hold out my hands, as if playing blindman's buff, stand on tiptoe and take a step toward the corner. I spread my hands, trying to move aside the dark curtains. Where can he be, that playful imp?

Splash! The mischievous little man jumps down at my feet, but I can only catch a glimpse of the silvery shadow. I continue groping in the darkness. Nothing doing! Where's he hiding? I touch the earthen floor. It feels wet and sticky like dough. Suddenly I see a round patch of moonlight. It is swaying and shimmering, and I can hear ringing sounds against it:

Ding-dong-tock!

Ssshhh! Here he is. Wham! I hit the moon patch with my hand. There's a splash. It's water in a galvanized basin. Now I remember.

Once our roof leaked after the rain. At first there was a yellow patch on the ceiling, showing various colors in the light. It looked like the sun painted by someone, only it was distorted and dirty. Later the sun became even more distorted and water appeared on its surface. The sun began to weep. Its tears were a rusty color because they mixed with the clay on the ceiling. They dropped plop! on the earthen floor which soon became covered with a lot of holes and small pits like the moon surface whose pictures I had seen.

This was something new and curious, and I was fussing around looking into the holes and watching bubbles bursting over them. Mom was very upset, though, and kept repeating, "Oh, dear me! It's a real deluge. What shall I do?" That's when a basin and a tub appeared in the house to be put under the weeping sun.

Mom didn't have to be afraid as nothing terrible happened. It was even better now, because we had our own music. The old wooden tub played one tune, while the galvanized basin bought in the local shop played another. "Ding-dong!" said the basin, as if someone hit glass icicles with tiny hammers. The tub's sound was short and dull, "Tock!" Both of the tunes made pleasant music of falling drops, as if those hammers hit real cut glass, "Ding-dong-tock!"

I don't remember why I'm standing here by the dish shelves. I'm just standing and listening to the drops of water growing, coming off the ceiling, plummeting through the darkness, and finally exploding in a musical sound. It's too long to wait for the next plop in the basin, so I hurry the drops up, "Come on, fall!" I can imagine a pearl-like drop growing and swelling and then suddenly —

Bang! I shudder, unable to understand what has happened. In a moment I know it was only a drop, and it hit me right on the nose sending fine spray into my eyes. I had hardly blinked several times to get the water out when something flits before my eyes. There is a rustle of wings, and a blue speck darts to the upper shelf. It's him, the silvery little man! He's escaped again.

With his escape the corner grows darker and the bench and the barrel turn into shaggy monsters. The sleeping boggy sneezes suddenly. Then he stirs. I hear a voice yelling, "Beat it!" and I take to my heels.

The cold chases me, and the darkness, as if they're eager to bite me on my heels. I hit the bed and scramble under the blanket. "You didn't bite me, so there!" I say teasingly with a chuckle.

I can hear a noise in my head while I'm hiding under the blanket, as if small blacksmiths were beating their hammers. You can listen to those merry blacksmiths hammering away as long as you want. You can even see those blood-red little blacksmiths. But I'm too busy now. I raise the blanket over my head like a tent and peep out from under it, watching something fantastic. It's a sun movie.

Mom thinks I sleep in the morning, so she closes the shutters. Well, let her. It's even better that way, and I'll tell you why. Because there was a knot in one shutter. Then, I think, it got dry and loose and fell out. Now there's a small hole there through which the long sunrays can come in. That's my movie. Look.

A narrow beam of light slants from the window to the baker's oven. Everything is dark and silent around the beam. Then suddenly the darkness comes to life, as if disturbed by someone. Fluffets sail out of it and take on a golden or pink color as they come into the light. They drift around, go up and down, some disappear back into the darkness.

There was a time when I didn't know that so many little things lived in our house. Don't smile, please. Better watch them for some time and you'll see for yourself that they are living things. See, there are so many of them, but they don't push, don't annoy each other. It's because they're not ordinary bits of down, they're cherry fluffets. Yes, cherry fluffets, I mean it.

When the orchards are in blossom and the poplars are covered with down as if with cotton and the small suns of dandelions are glowing yellow around our house — then these cherry fluffets live in the orchard, in full freedom. They're white balls actually, and they nestle in the flowers' cups. The wind sways them gently, the sun keeps them warm, and the bees feed them with honey. But when the cherry blossoms fall down and the poplar down flies away, Mom opens the window and the sad white balls move over from the cherries to our house.

I can see them everywhere in the morning: on the windowsill, on the bench, and on the floor. Weak and cold, they can hardly move over the blanket of white poplar down, white blossoms, and yellow pollen, when trying to hide somewhere for the winter. They have to wait until the next spring in their small and dark hiding places. It's because the fluffets are too small, and the rain can beat them down to the earth, the wind can carry them away. Even the weight of a gnat is too much for them.

So the cherry fluffets spend day after day lying low and longing for the sun, and for the violets, and for the cherry blossoms. Only when the house is silent, and there's a warm beam of the sunlight in it, do they come out and enjoy themselves.

Look, they're so polite and graceful, like young ladies. Small and dignified, they sail slowly out of the darkness, filling the beam, as if it were a sunny glade. As she approaches her friend, each young lady curtsies and asks politely, "Did you have a good night, my dear sister?"

Flooded by the sunlight, the young downy ladies are twinkling like stars. Their



dresses flash pink now and then, and they glide in all directions, making fanciful lace.

They are dancing.

Oh, can you hear that? “Ding-dong-tock!” The water drops are playing. They stretch the strings while falling down. The downy ladies touch them, and the house is filled with the blue music of a water spring.

The tiny ladies are sparkling and circling in the light. It’s like a dance of little princesses!

Suddenly — what’s that? The downy ladies scatter away into their dark hiding places, as if caught in a sudden gust of wind. Aha, they got frightened! I can see a black feather sailing out of the dark. It’s stealing silently along the sunbeam. It’s not a feather at all. It’s a pirates’ ship. A high bow decorated with a dragon figurehead, two rows of oars. The captain, a cruel sea robber, Breakjaw by name, is on the upper deck roaring to his cutthroats, “Get the downy ladies! Drag them here!” The pirates’ oars churn the water, hitting tiny ladies’ heads, the robbers pull some of their victims aboard by their hair.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I scream from under my blanket. “Get away from here, or you’ll catch it! I’m getting up right now!”

I do get up, but only on my knees, and pull the blanket over my shoulders, and go on yelling at the pirates. They pay no attention to my threats, though, and continue sailing toward the window, scattering the poor downy ladies away.

Wham! I see a blue spark rushing down, hitting the feather, I mean the pirates’ ship, and sending it flying into the darkness.

Well done! That’s my silvery little man! I even jump up on my bed.

Now I can hear new sounds down in the darkness: rustling, cracking, creaking. Then come the thudding and clanging. I can guess what’s going on. They’re fighting! He knocked the pirates onto the floor, and now these cutthroats surrounded him and are trying to get my brave little man with their sabers.

Hold out! I’m coming!

I want to jump out of bed and run to his assistance, but then I think better of it; I might step on some of them. Aha, there’s a stool by my bed. I grope over to the stool and then scramble to the windowsill. I open the hinged pane and push the shutter, letting in the dazzling light. My eyes hurt, as if there’s sand in them. I cover them with my hands and wait for a while.

When I look at the floor there’s no one there. No pirates, no little man. The downy ladies have also disappeared.

The house is silent again. The old oven stands still with its yawning toothless mouth. The bench by the wall doesn’t dare to stir, as if playing statues. The glasses, cups and bottles on the shelves stand stiff at attention, like soldiers. Aren’t they all cunning! They keep mum pretending they haven’t seen anything. I don’t ask them about the fight because it’s no use. They have their own secrets and they won’t say a word. But then, they don’t need to. I know that the pirates, downy young ladies, and my winged little man scattered as soon as I opened the shutter. They don’t like to be watched by people. They’re little, but proud.

Now that my invisible companions have disappeared there's nothing unusual about the house. The tub and the basin brim with water. Some of it overflowed and ran toward the oven, leaving dark brown patches on the floor. There's nothing interesting in that, so I put a finger into the knothole and pull the shutter closed.

I'm in the kingdom of darkness again. I'm lying on the bed and thinking. Where did he come from, this brave little man? He must have been born of a water drop. Caterpillars, butterflies, grasshoppers, and horned beetles all come from the grubs or chrysalises filled with cotton. And my silvery man must have appeared from a falling drop. It came crash! against the floor, and he leaped out at once, shook off the water from his wings, and darted under the bench. He dried off there, spread his wings and, as he heard water dripping from the ceiling, he went hopping and hovering among the falling drops, trying to catch them and clinging the hobnails on his tiny boots. He's so little, but nothing can scare him: neither darkness, nor the spiders, nor the bogey. He never hesitated to rush at the pirates. I, for one, was thinking it over peeping from under my blanket, but he just flashed his saber and leaped onto their ship.

What's his name, I wonder?

"Hey, little man, what's your name?" I call out into the corner where there's a barrel and a swaying black shadow. Silence. Not a sound. The house is quiet and as dark as pitch.

"Tock!" I hear suddenly.

Aha, I think happily. Now I know. Your name is Tock.

Tock, Tocky. What about his family? Where's his Mrs. Tock and his son, Tocky boy? Where are his grandparents? Tell me about them, Tocky!

But Tock is silent. He doesn't make a single sound. I'm so eager to take him in my hands, to have a better look at him, to warm him with my breathing, to stroke his tiny wings. Maybe to put him in a box... Oh, no! He'll die. He'll dry up. Suppose the dark night throws me into its caves, blocks them with stones and leaves me there forever? What would I do there all alone...with bats...in the cold and darkness? Oh, I would cry bitterly, I would beat my head against the walls, I would grope around in those caves as if I were blindfolded. It would be terrible.

What about that butterfly? The one that I put in a box? It had yellow and white wings, and there was golden pollen on its legs and feelers. It was so restless, making fun of me all the time. I was on my last legs before I caught it. It struggled, it didn't want to be shut up in a box, it was pleading: let me go! But I didn't. I pushed it into the box and put the box behind the oven and then clean forgot about it. In autumn, when Mom started drying cherries, I remembered about my butterfly. I rushed to the box and — What was it? Dry bits of the shell...dust...or powder. It must have choked in there and rotted.

It's bad to kill a living creature. Eh, Tocky?

You can enjoy yourself in our house. Run and hop wherever you wish. I won't touch you. Ever. Here are some crumbs for you on the bench, and there's milk in the saucer. Help yourself. Right, Tocky?

THE BOGY

I'm big enough and I know that the boggy is used to threaten children. When I'm tossing on the bed Mom scolds me and says, "Sleep, or I'll call the boggy." With this she puts out the light and goes to the kitchen leaving me terribly frightened. I behave like a disturbed snail. I draw my legs up to my chest, and I draw in my head, and then I curl up until my nose meets my knees.

I'm lying there as quiet as a mouse, all numb and shrunk, only my ears are growing. They're growing and growing until they're as large as burdock leaves and can catch the smallest sound coming from the dark. There! That's him! He's puffing there, under the bench, in the darkest place of the house. His puffs are so strong that I can hear the wind blowing. I cover my head with the pillow and start mumbling something out loud trying to drown the puffing sounds. Nothing doing! I can hear some scratching, and the blowing air comes even under the pillow. I don't know where it comes from — the boggy or my whistling nose.

Yes, it's the boggy! I can hear the padded paws on the floor.

I close my eyes. I close them tight, real tight, until they begin to sting. Even so, I can see the boggy, brown and shaggy. He gets up slowly, sneezes, shakes himself, and then — hop! — he's on the bench. Oh, no, it's not a bench anymore, it's an old wolf. It's padding stealthily, making for my bed. And the boggy's riding on the wolf's back.

Don't scream. Don't be terrified. Don't call to your mother.

You know what you should do if that ever happens to you? You should say, "Tock, follow me!" and then leap out of your bed. Of course, you can be scared, but there's Tock at your side. And you're a commander now, there's a cavalry squadron flying behind you and flashing their sabres. Attack your enemy and don't be afraid! Clench your fists and teeth — you're a man after all. Push the darkness with your shoulder, puff out your chest and say:

*Ding, dong, ding, tock,
We're of the bold stock!*

Don't look back. Just go ahead and don't forget that Tock is here. Say, "Tock, follow me! They took to their heels, they're running away!" Now you and Tock have reached the dark corner. Don't be afraid, stretch out your hands and touch the bench. It's smooth, and it's hard, and it can't move. It's as still as still can be, and it never walked, you were just dreaming. Now reach under the bench with your hand. There's the wall, the floor, and nothing else. The boggy? What are you talking about? Can you believe there is such a thing as the boggy? That old shaggy lazybones, that sleepy-head that spends the whole day sleeping his head off in the bushes and then crawls into someone's house for the night?

Don't believe it. There's no boggy. The adults just made him up for threatening children.

At first I was afraid even to poke my nose out of the house. So I searched every

nook and cranny in the house: under the bench, under the table, behind the barrel. I didn't even miss the oven. My explorations brought me a lot of things: an old battery (it bites when you touch it with your tongue), a piece of polished dark blue glass, a tooth (Mom said it was a rabbit's), a rusty thimble that once rolled under the chest and had long been forgotten. I had a whole box of such treasures. I could tell you a very interesting story about any of these findings — the piece of dark blue glass, or the tooth with a dark chip. But I'd rather tell you about something else. I'll tell you about the doors.

I think that any thing in the world has its own door: a loft, a caved-in cellar, a pear tree split by lightning, a rock over a river. And what about an old cuckoo clock, a broken lantern, and your grandma's hope chest? You can open them too. You have only to find a door, or a crack, or a window, or a hollow, or a chink. As soon as you find it and take a serious look inside, you'll see something that nobody has ever seen.

Our house also had its own door. It made the wind blow, let people in and out. When it opened, I had a glimpse of something blue — water or sky, I didn't know. Sometimes I got worried: where did people disappear as they crossed the threshold? What happened with them *there*? And why did they smell of frost, or the cellar, or milk, or melons when they came back from *there*?

I had spent a long time studying our door. It used to swell after rain, took on a gloomy dark green color, and got covered with something slimy. Then I could squeeze a black liquid out of the door as I drew a line on it with the edge of my nail. The door's voice would become lower and, when opened, it would creak angrily, as if howling: "Uhooo!" That reminded me of the spook Grandma used to scare me, or of Mom's warning: "Don't you dare cross the threshold! You may fall down!" I might indeed, for the threshold was rather high and there were two steps on the other side of it. But I was curious: what was there behind the door, in the hallway, where I sometimes got glimpses of faint light and shifting shadows and from where the unknown stared at me with its bulging eyes?

Once I did cross the threshold and found myself in the yard. There's no need to explain that I was dazzled. A patch of sunlight, a patch of sky, a patch of grass — everything around was big, and unusual, and astonishing. The vast yard was rocking, running from under my feet, and carrying me god knows where. The immense world made my head swim. Wow, what was I to do? There was nothing to hold onto!

Here's what you should do in such a case. Say, "Keep your head, Tock, you're not alone. The main thing is not to gape around. Let's squat right here — that's a good boy — and get busy; there's sand to dig. See, the ground is rather firm now, it doesn't rock like a ship's deck under your feet."

So I did. I turned my back to the sun and sat down on the ledge running along the walls of the house. The ledge was long and warm and crisscrossed with cracks. They were dark and deep, and I could put my finger in there, and they were full of moving creatures: centipedes, soldier beetles and ants. Some of the creatures staring at me from the cracks I'd never seen before. Probably all these cracks were like real ditches and ravines for them. There was a steep, and that patch of moss was their grove. There was a beautiful golden beetle in the green grove.

I noticed a cake of clay that came off the wall and a lizard slipping into that hiding place. A little toad with a white belly and a bumpy back came hopping up, gazed at me sadly, and hid under the ledge. A wasp was humming about for a long time, bumping against the windowsill, angry because it couldn't find something. Then it found a small hole, shook its long tube-like mouth, and crawled in... Where to? Our house?

I gave it a thought. That lizard, and the little toad, and the ants — where did they all hide? In the walls, floor and windows, perhaps. They were our neighbors actually, because they lived in our house. They had nests there, and nice little pillows, and small children, and mustached ant-nurses.

I put my ear to the ledge. It was rustling like June bugs jammed into a small box. The ledge was seething with its own mysterious life. Perhaps those ants had their own ant schools, and palaces, and army, and they held great parades with music and singing. Presently a black ant came out of its kingdom into the sun. It moved its long feelers, gave me a look (meaning "Hello, boy!"), and disappeared back into the hole.

"What a big place this world is!" I said in great surprise. "And so many living creatures around!"

THE FLYING TREES

We're cooking dinner, Mom and I.

Our stove is in the middle of the garden, among the pumpkins. You wouldn't see the stove behind the thick wall of the intertwined climbing pumpkin stems and leaves, were it not for the tall chimney which looks exactly like a ship's funnel — black, with a yellow band in the middle.

A heavy cauldron is boiling on the stove, and the porridge is puffing angrily from under the cover. I throw dry pumpkin stems into the fire "getting up steam" to make the smoke and flames belch out of the chimney and the sparks fly.

Mom is sitting by on a stool, peeling potatoes. The peelings are running like a long ribbon onto her skirt. She's deep in her thoughts and doesn't see the great efforts of her son, or else she would scold me, "Make that fire smaller a bit, or you'll burn the house!"

Ours is a beautiful place. There's a lot of luxuriant garden stuff growing around, and the stove seems to be surrounded by a hedgerow from which small plump pumpkins, bean and pea pods reach down to my shoulders. The earth around the stove is well trodden and even polished by my pants. It's so clean and cozy here, and a song flows from my heart:

I'm a sailor, jolly handsome fellow...

Our stove is a big one, built of brick and whitewashed, with a yellow band at the bottom. It's almost glowing with heat, but I throw more dry pumpkin stems on the fire, and it's roaring and my steamer is ready to cast off. It turns slowly and begins to plough through the green waves.

*My friend, we're leaving this land,
The shore's now faded away.*

I'm standing on the deck, my hand raised to my sailor's hat, my chest puffed out, my face lashed by the sea wind. Right rudder! Full steam ahead! (Along the pumpkin sea, that is.)

I turn around and see my mother. She's sitting bent over a bowl, peeling potatoes, her lips slightly trembling, a twinkle of amusement in her eyes.

I just forgot she's here. My raised hand slips down by itself. There's no sailor's hat, and has never been, and my steamer is again an insatiable stove devouring pumpkin stems. I squat and reluctantly return to my duties as stoker.

The air is still, there's not a breath of wind. A hot fragrance of thyme comes from the steppe which begins right behind our house. We have no fence. There's only a ditch running along the road to lead rainwater away from the vegetable garden. Nothing blocks your view, and from the yard you can see a pasture, ploughed land, and then the steppe, and then there's nothing else to see but the vast sky.

That's when you look along the road disappearing beyond the hill. Now, if you look in the direction of the meadows down below, you'll see that our house stands over a ravine whose steep slope runs down to the river. Halfway down there's a black wall of an orchard which has almost gone wild and is overgrown with bushes of elder, blackthorn and gooseberry...

My fire! I beat the ash down with the poker, my face burning from the heat. I stuff the stove with dry stems again, and the chimney belches out a column of dark blue smoke. It swirls up into the sky, growing into a huge tree with spread-out branches. The tree sails over the garden, the orchard and away toward the river. Meanwhile, a new tree grows out of the chimney, then another, and soon there are several blue trees flying across the ravine. If only I could plant a whole forest of blue poplars there on the hillside (there are no such trees yet in the world!). I would have a real sea by that forest...and my ship would sail on it.

A sea... I sigh at the thought, because it's real hot by the stove and I'm longing for the river. You could say it's deep enough for the frogs only, but still you could have a dip in it. I glance sideways at Mom: will she let me go?

Mom's wearing a white kerchief on her head. She made a peak to protect her eyes from the dazzling sun. Her face is in the shade, and it makes her look even more strict and thoughtful. I don't think she'll take pity on me this time. She'll say, "I won't let you go alone there."

I wish I had Rex, my dog, here. Then we'd go together.

But there's no Rex anymore. Gawker killed him.

Whenever that man trudges past our house, I hide behind the cellar or the stove.

Because this Gawker, how shall I put it...there's something hellish about him. His high boots are so heavy they seem to be made of stone. He always kicks up clouds of dust as he walks along the street dragging his feet. He usually walks with his head hanging down, and he's gawking at the ground, as if looking for a lost coin there. And I always see him with his double-barreled gun slung over his shoulder. He works as a watchman, and he's a hunter.

He never hears you when you say "Good evening!" You raise your voice, "Good evening, uncle!" Silence. Then you run up to him and yell, "Good evening, for goodness sake!" That's when he turns his head and growls like a wolf, "Shoo-up!" I never know whether it means "shoo" or "shut up." One such "Shoo-up!" is enough to teach you not to be so polite.

Gawker's way of life differs from that of the rest of the villagers. He sleeps during the day when people work, and he prowls around when they sleep, stomping with his heavy boots. Says he can see better at night. And he goes hunting at dusk too.

Gawker's the greediest hunter in the world, so help me he is. Whenever he misses while hunting in company, he swears and argues until he's blue in the face that it was he who killed the game and even claims that the buckshot has his own markings. Or sometimes Gawker would shoot bang at a hare, and the hare would take to its heels. Gawker would chase it until he's out of breath. Then, seeing he wouldn't make it, he throws his mitten in rage after the hare, then pulls off his boot and hurls it too, and finally throws himself on the ground and growls in a hoarse and threatening voice, "Come back... I'll get you anyhow..."

Such is the man that killed my Rex. He said the dog had attacked him at night. But that's a lot of lies. Rex would have never done such a thing.

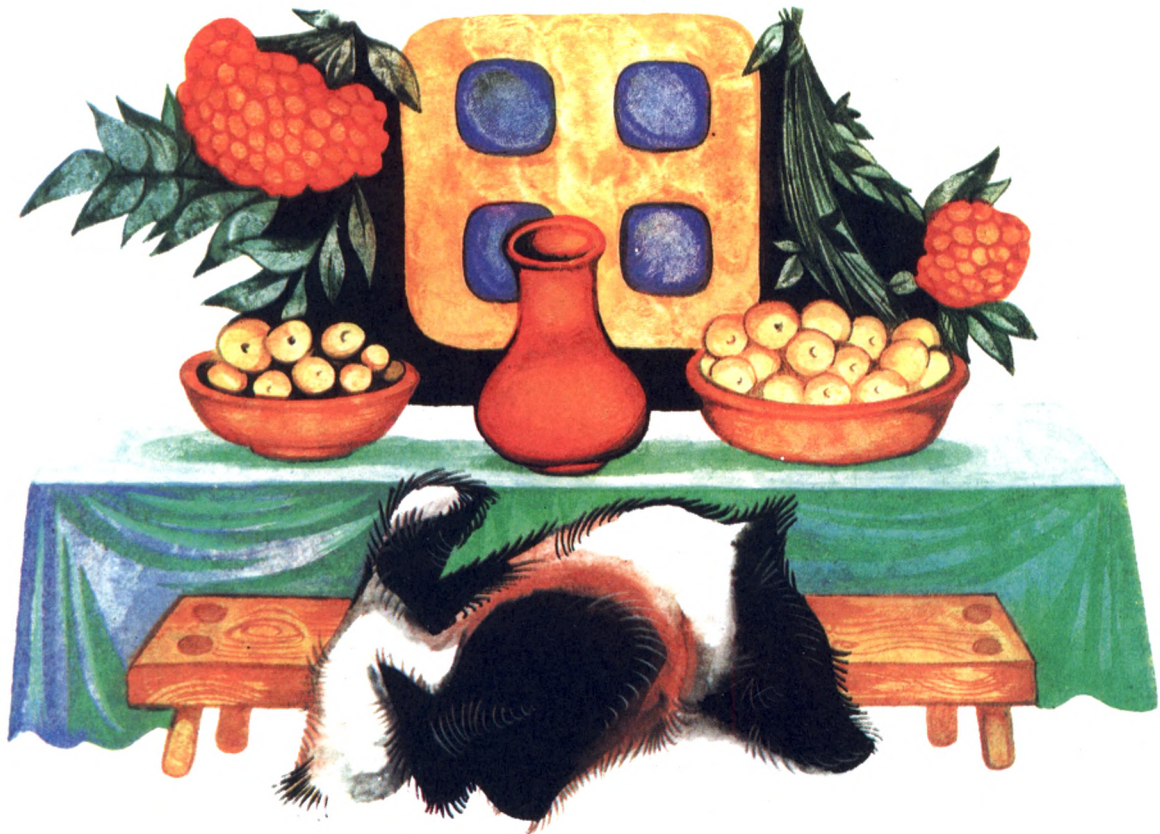
Rex was a kind dog. Chickens often came visiting him in the kennel, a lame gosling stayed with him all the time, and sometimes a white rabbit came hopping around. When they all came together, Rex would lie stretching out his paws and spreading his lop ears on the ground, and he would shut his eyes, happy to have such a blissful time. His friends would cling to him all over. The rabbit would nestle between his front paw and his belly, the gosling would snuggle against his warm neck, and the chickens would choose whatever place they like: on his back, forehead, and even on the tip of his tail. Rex would lie motionless, like a dead dog. He wouldn't even twitch his ear, letting them all get some warmth. He would only open one eye sometimes and blink sleepily, as if asking, "Is everybody comfortable?"

Rex was a trained dog. He liked to perform to amuse people. Once I was sitting outside with my arms around my shaggy friend. Soon Mom came out, looking rather worried, as if she was trying to remember or find something. It often happens to her. She would knock around the house holding a knife in her hand and asking, "Where did I put that knife?" This time she was also upset, so Rex and I followed her back into the house. I gave him a soft nudge and said in a sad voice, "You know, Rex, I'm leaving for a faraway place. Goodbye." Rex jumped to his feet at once, pulled my cap off the peg, came back with the cap between his teeth, and bang perched it on my head. Then I said, "Rex, will you clean my clothes before I go?" Rex wagged his tail, brushing the imaginary dust off my pants, licked my hand and cheek,

and looked cheerfully into my face, as if saying, “You’re all right now — clean as a new penny.” Finally, I asked, “Rex, do you happen to know where my submachine gun is?” Rex — his fur was as red as blood — rushed into the hallway and returned bringing my weapon, an elder stick.

Mom was still upset, but a smile lit up her worried features. “You both belong in the circus,” she said.

Such was the dog that Gawker killed.



I’m thinking of Rex, of our wrestling matches and playing border guards and spies. Once, it was among the bushes in the orchard — Stop! The borsch on the stove has been boiling for quite a time, the lazy curls of smoke are rising from the chimney, and the blue flying trees have been replaced by the dancing bluish tongues of fire.

Mom says, “Don’t stoke that fire anymore. The borsch’ll stew on the heat.”

At last, dinner’s cooked. And so am I. My head is like a pot, cracking, as if flakes of tin were coming off inside there.

“Mom, may I go to the river?”

“No. You won’t go there alone.”

“I’m not alone. I’m taking Rex along.”

“Rex?” Mom gives me a look which means: Nonsense. Stop inventing things, boy. I’m not inventing. I know Rex’s dead, but does it matter?

Look. The pumpkin leaves are swaying, there’s a rustle, someone is struggling through the thick greenery.

Rex?!

Of course, that’s him. The winded dog pops from under the leaves, decorated with burrs and mud, his shining muzzle cunning and cheerful. Must have played a prank. Maybe he drove a grass snake under the river dam, or dragged Gawker’s boot somewhere (Gawker usually put them out to dry in the sun, spreading a stinking smell throughout the village).

Rex is gazing at me — his tongue lolling out, his brown eyes mischievous and tempting: Come on into the steppe...let’s go hunting.

You, shaggy devil. How can you go out into the steppe with your thick coat. It’s blazing hot there, and you’re lapping the air as it is.

“Rex?” I give him a wink. “I’d rather go to the river.”

I stand up. The dog gets up too (or maybe it’s my shadow). We steal past Mother. Her worried eyes follow us, as if saying, “Rex? What are you talking about, boy? Rex’s dead. Gawker killed him.” He may kill him a hundred times. All the same, the dog’s alive to me, and that’s that. I’m not alone, we’re going together, can’t you see?

As we are behind the house, I shout, “Let’s have a race!” and streak off along the garden. The hot path has dried out white. My bare feet are pattering against the hard ground, my shirt is billowing out behind. I don’t look back because I know the dog will take his time. He’ll wait a bit at the house, getting ready for his leap, his ears pricked, his tail curled up, his eyes glowing with mischief. You can go ahead, boy, is written on his muzzle. I’ll give you odds.

I’m running like hell, even my heels burn. The path winds across the garden, then swerves into the orchard. I plunge into the green dusk of the bushes and in a moment I hear rustling sounds behind. I catch a glimpse of the blood-red ball racing like a whirlwind through the thicket.

Rex! He’s overtaking me!

We’re flying downhill. I spread out my hands, and I can see the shadow dashing along by my side. That’s my Rex, my ever true friend.

“Rex, step on it, or I’ll step on your tail!”

We’re racing across the meadow, laughing and happy to feel the rush of the wind which tickles me in the armpits. The ground is soft and cool underfoot, the air is fresh. The river is near.

ADAM

There are no boys in Shatrishchi, the end of the village where we live. You can say Mom and I live alone here, because our neighbors don't count. There's Gawker's house at the bottom of the ravine (but Gawker's sleeping all day long) and, further, the lonely and dilapidated cottage of Grandma Sirokha, whose two little boys were killed accidentally by a mine after the war.

Shatrishchi is far from the village, and Mom doesn't let me go there. I have to ramble in the orchard alone, and when I go swimming in the river there's no one to keep me company either. But then, why alone? When I bend over and gaze into the river for a long, very long time, two faces emerge from the shimmering darkness of the running water. They are the faces of my friends, Nina and Adam.

Adam is a thick name, Nina is thin and transparent. You can try to say them yourself. Ni-i-i-na. It's like the singing of a gossamer in the wind, isn't it? Now try the other one. Ad-dam. To me it sounds like a tired evening voice of a bell as huge as a Cossack grave mound: D-dam!

The ford is the best place on our river. It's a small sluggish river with pits here and there, tree roots under water, and overhanging willows giving cool shade. And a stone ford.

You can see it from afar. There's something like an elephant's back standing out among the thick lush grass, water plants, sedge and water lilies as you approach the place. That's a boulder. And that's where the ford begins.

Mom does the wash at the ford. White bedspreads and pillowcases look like parachutes dropped from the sky when she hangs them out to dry on the bushes and willows. I help Mom usually, that is I splash about in the water until there's goose flesh on my skin. When I don't swim, I crawl, exploring the caves, islands, rocks, waterfalls, gorges and rapids.

Speaking of the gorges and rapids. I don't mean any huge rocks, but two small stones, smooth and flat. One is submerged, the other sticks out. There's a narrow passage between them. That's my gorge.

I can hardly put my foot into this gorge, but there's no other such place on the whole river. It flows rather wide here over this stone bed, babbling and rolling its small waves, a rippling gleam of silver. After playing in the sun for a while, the water falls into the gorge, boiling angrily under the stones.

I can listen to this murmur of the flowing water for a whole day. I just sit down on the stone (it's so hot it burns even through my pants), put my feet into the gorge, and don't stir for a while. The rushing stream of water tries to push me out of the narrow passage. The water is dark and cold down there, so that my bones begin to ache and my feet grow numb.

Then I put my feet out into the sun and lie down on my stomach to have a look into the gorge. The stone is clean and polished on the surface, but underwater it's slimy and overgrown with brown moss whose long, woolly strands sway in the current like the beards of some fearful monsters. I can see shrimps and waterfleas there and hear someone's angry breathing coming from the bottom. I'm scared...

The water flowing merrily over the flat gray bed of stone is transparent and warm, as in the washing tub. Young fish come here in shoals, browsing in the shallows along the bank.

I was sitting over my gorge putting water-dock leaves — my swift caravels — on the current and trying to steer them between the two rocks, when suddenly a shadow fell across the water, as if a bird stopped overhead. I shrank, waiting for what would happen next.

“What are you doing here, sir?”

It was a human voice, which would have calmed me down, but it was too loud and unexpected. I felt a sharp pang in my side. Then I bent again over the water, humming a tune under my breath, so *he* wouldn't think I got scared or too curious to see a stranger. Let *him* know I had another problem — to steer the caravels through the rough passage.

“Captains should exchange greetings, sir, when they meet in the open sea. Good morning, sir.”

Humph, no one in the village could speak the language of the characters from *Treasure Island*. I turned around. A long-legged wispy man was standing on the bank. The clothes he was wearing were not those of a villager: light gray trousers, a white nylon T-shirt, and a sky-blue hat. The sun was shining through his clothes, and the man seemed bodiless.

“Good morning,” I said finally, changing my position to a more comfortable one, that is clasping my knees with my hands. “I know you. You're the uncle that came to stay with Grandma Sirokha.”

“Perfectly right,” said the long-legged man and sat down on the stone. He took off his shoes exposing to the sun his bony bluish-white feet. “Mm, how warm,” he murmured shutting his eyes. “That's where my poor bones will get a bit of the sunlight.”

The man took off his hat and put it down beside him, then smoothed out his hair. Only now I noticed that he had a strange face, I mean it was not at all like Gawker's, Grandma Sirokha's, or my own. We all got brown during the summer, like a pot does in the fire. But his face... It wasn't white even, it was so pale it seemed transparent. A pointed nose, a pointed chin. Bluish bristles here and there. It seemed he had never been in the sun.

“Sir,” said the stranger. “Don't call me uncle, please, for I don't deserve this honourable title. Call me just Adam. That's the name my friends used in the institute.”

“Adam?” I repeated clearing my throat in disbelief. “You aren't...kidding by any chance?”

“Not in the least. My surname is Adamenko. But Adam is more convenient. He was the first man on the earth. It's not that bad to be the first, after all. And may I know your name, please?”

“I'm Sashko.”

“That won’t do. Rather commonplace, I suppose. You’ll be Sand from now on. Captain Sand. How does that sound to you?”

“Oh, get away with you. You’re just making fun of me.”

“Thunder upon my head, if I am! Aren’t you in charge of this fleet?”

Wow, I thought. He even guessed it’s a fleet. Because it’s like this with those adults: when they see a leaf they call it a leaf. They don’t even suspect this leaf can be any-



thing. A boat when it’s on the water, a bird when it’s in the air, or an order when it’s on your chest. This Adam must have a good head on his shoulders.

Meanwhile, Adam rolled the legs of his trousers up to his knees (his calves were also bluish-white) and said, “Let’s wade a bit. Over there.” He nodded in the direction of a clean underwater stone.

He raised his long leg like a heron, lowered it into the water, and cried out, “Ugh!” (but why, the water’s so warm). Then his other leg went into the river, and he shut his eyes again — oh, how good! I waded after him to the shallow water. It was transparent here and the current was swift and babbling, streaming round my legs, tickling between my toes, and cooling my hot body.

We stood on the stone for a while. Adam doubled up and aimed his long nose at the water.

“Sand, what’s that over there?”

Sticking out of the water was an inky rotten branch with a lot of black beads clinging to it all over. There were whole clusters of them on the branch.

“What’s that?” repeated Adam.

“Snails,” I explained. “They sucked to the branch and went to sleep. If you throw the branch where it’s deep, they’ll come off because it’s cold there. Then they’ll crawl back into the shallow water to get warm again.”

“And what are these?” Adam doubled up again peering at the bottom.

“Water tigers. Look, they don’t swim, they leap. Must be using some kind of a tiny motor.”

“What about that?” Adam pointed to a burdock leaf hanging over the water.

“That’s a frog’s home. Look. The frogs made a pouch of the leaf. Just folded it in two and glued the halves together properly. There’s spawn in there. As the tadpoles hatch, each will make a hole in the leaf and go splash into the water. It can leap!”

“Fancy that! They never taught us such things in the institute.”

“What did they teach you then?”

“How to make an artificial sun. The one that would shine brighter than the real one.”

“Oh!” I sniffed significantly. “One more sun! Bigger than the one we have!”

“Do you really need it? You’re tanned like a Papuan as it is.”

“But...two suns, just think of it! One would shine in the daytime, the other at night. You can play as much as you want then. Will they soon make that other sun?”

“I’ll tell you what, Sand.” Adam frowned and screwed up his light-gray cold eyes. “When the scientists were making another sun, they hoped it would shine for the people. But it doesn’t. It can only flash like a match, and then it goes out at once. Only this match is a huge one. It can burn the whole of our Earth. The rocks, rivers, the sky — everything...”

I tried to imagine this dangerous match. What an enormous head it must have to burn down the earth, the sky, and the seas! But Adam interrupted my thoughts.

“Oh well,” he dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand. “It’s not your headache, anyway. This river is a real paradise, and we’re talking of hell. Besides, the doctors don’t allow me to think or talk about that. I have a better idea. Let’s make...” His eyes traveled businesslike over the bushes of sedge and the silted-up bank downstream. “Let’s make a dam. And a water mill.”

We returned to the sticking stone. Adam told me to take off my clothes. He pulled off his T-shirt and his well-creased trousers. Wow! He was so white, and so clumsy! He was so skinny you could count his ribs sticking out under his bluish skin. This river had never seen such a long-armed and absolutely white man.

I took off my clothes and put them on the stone beside Adam’s. Then I tried to imagine myself in his trousers. I’d probably get lost in them, and you could even make

two knots over my head. He certainly had that advantage over me — he was much taller than I. But there was a thing in which I would compare well with him. It was my tan. I had a chocolate back, as my mother put it (even if dirt added a bit to the color), against his sickly pale skin. So there... That was no trouble, though, he'd get a good tan here in the village.

So we went downstream along the bank for a while. But as soon as we tried to go into the water we had to turn back at once. The bank was muddy, and as you stepped onto it your foot immediately sank into the black squashy mass, sending up bubbles. As you sank deeper, there were more bubbles coming, tickling your knees. You wouldn't build even a poor dam here.

We found a drier place at last, and Adam said, "All right! Knead the mud thick and pass it here."

The silt was rather tough, with clay. I made mud pies, flattening them at the top and passing them on to Adam. The river was very narrow here, and Adam was towering over it on his long legs like a Goliath crane on a building site.

Adam was a clever builder. He was raising a dam on both sides simultaneously, leaving a channel in the middle. As the dam grew, the level of the water was rising. Soon a sedge bush was flooded, then a lake appeared before the dam. There was no sluggish flow now, but a muddy and swirling current rushing through the narrow channel.

"Mud, get more mud!" Adam hurried me up. He was just closing the channel, while the river was trying to wash out our structure with an angry hiss.

Adam was really carried away by the work. He probably didn't suspect that the sun had pained him with patches, and now he was covered with brown spots all over, like a leopard. His bony, poker-like arms never stopped moving. He went on snatching pieces of mud from me, slapping them on the dam, until the river had calmed down.

"Well!" Adam said finally. "Where do we get a headrace?"

"What's a headrace?" I asked.

"Well, it's a simple thing — a pipe or a trough that leads water to the mill."

Mm...a simple thing. Mentally I raced around my yard, looked into the hallway, shed and cellar, but didn't find anything suitable. What about the downspout lying in the backyard? A rusty pipe, I used it once as a long-range gun.

"What about a downspout?" I asked.

"The very thing. Get it here, quick!"

I went off like the wind and rushed uphill. I raced back even faster, the wind roaring in my ears, the pipe, as red as Rex, making a terrible racket as it bounced downhill.

It painted my side in the same color too.

As I came back, only the tops of the sedge bush were sticking out of the water and the lake before our dam became even larger. I could see the bottom now behind the dam — jelly-like silt with puddles, in which waterfleas, beetles and loaches were crawling.

Adam praised me, took the pipe and built it into the dam, covering it with a thick layer of clay. At first the water came oozing timidly from the pipe, but then the muddy

stream became more forceful and clearer, and soon it was spurting down making a pit in the bottom, which looked like a print of a horse's hoof. The water was gushing noisily through the pipe, sending up sprays as it rushed out. It seemed that a spring stream was now murmuring under the willows.

"Well?" asked Adam. "How do you like this music?"

He was standing there, as tall as a maypole, with a happy smile on his mud-splashed face. Evidently pleased with himself, he smoothed out his thin hair, so thin you could see the sun shining through it.

"Tomorrow, dear Sand," announced Adam, "we shall make a wheel (it's too late today) and put it before the headrace. Then you'll see how the water can work for the benefit of man. Remember Marshak?"

*Let the power of swift water,
Harnessed by the human brain,
Turn an engine and a motor,
Rush along electric trains.*

That'll be tomorrow. But now...now we can think of something else for the time being."

With that Adam made for the bushes with a mysterious look on his face. He walked cautiously, like a white explorer in the jungle. He picked up several sticks, tore a strip of bark off a young willow, and plucked a burdock leaf. These findings kept him busy for quite a time. He pushed the sticks into the dam around the pipe, fastened the leaf on the sticks, and tied it with the bark to one of them. Before he finished this contraption, there was a hollow sound of the water pattering merrily on the trembling edge of the leaf.

It was the quiet hour of dusk, when shadows creep from under the willows. Only the cheeky pat-pat-pat of the river disturbed the silence. I was staring at Adam as if I suddenly saw a magician. He put his head on one side, smiling a pale smile with his bloodless lips.

"What's the name of this river?" asked Adam.

"It has no name. It's just the river. The boys call it Frog River for fun."

"Too bad. Just think of it: what would people do if there were not a single spring or stream on the earth? They would die out like a fish dies when it's taken out of water. A river gives us life. But we're sometimes too lazy even to give it a name. Now listen to our river. What name would you suggest for it?"

I pricked my ears. The meadow was quiet. The cooing of a turtledove came from the orchard. And here, the tireless chattering of the river rose above the dam like the clattering of a stork.

"The Chattering River," I said. "Is that all right?"

"The Chattering River," repeated Adam. "It's a good name. We shall put it on the map tomorrow, so that the world would know of a quiet and warm river discovered by two captains, Sand and Adam."

Suddenly I was suspicious. What if this long-legged man really came from *Treasure*

Island populated by sailors and lemonade sellers? Because there were no such skinny people here in Shatrishchi in the first place. And in the second, no one could speak here like those famous sea captains in the adventure books. In a word, I cherished the hope that at some time we would travel with Adam to unknown lands.

Meanwhile, we went back to the ford and there, in the shallow water, we started washing off the dirt with the soapwort (that's a kind of grass which looks like lichen). The cool of the evening mixed with a strong smell of mint came from the bushes on the bank which took on a dusky tinge. The water became even warmer now. It was so soft and pleasant that you wouldn't want to come out of it even if you were in a deep place. I stood wondering what kind of a mill Adam was going to make the next day.

"Adam," I began from afar. "Will you be here for long?"

He was silent, looking away, at the tree crowns painted golden by the setting sun. Was he angry or what? But why should he be? Maybe he just didn't hear me? I raised my voice.

"I say, will you stay here for short, or did you come to live with your grandma?"

"No, I didn't." There was an icy note in his voice. "I came here...to die."

His voice was calm, so calm that I felt the shivers at once, as if they sneaked out of the water and ran up my spine. Pulling my leg? What about his voice then? People didn't speak in such a voice when they pulled someone's leg.

Adam turned to face me. He stooped, and his thin arms hung limp along his body. Only now did I notice that Adam was glowing. He stood in the slant rays of the sun which seemed to be shining not only through his gristly ears, but also through his transparent face and his feeble body.

I realized — Adam was not joking. A deadly fire was devouring him.

"You see, Sand," Adam screwed up his cold eyes. "There is such a sad thing called leukaemia... Did you ever see a candle dying down? The flame slowly licks off the wax until there's nothing left. The same with this disease. It burns your blood, drop after drop, until there's no more blood left to burn. The doctors are rather surprised that I'm still alive. But I don't think it'll be long now..." He waved his hand, as if saying, "Oh well, to hell with those sloppy talks!" and told me to put my clothes on.

We were hurrying home. Adam was striding uphill kicking high with each step. I was almost running to keep up with his pace. I don't know why, but I was not quite steady on my feet.

From among the willows wrapped up in warm dusk came the drowsy chattering of the river.

NINA

Adam did not come to the dam neither on the next day, nor on the day that followed.

...It was a sorrowful sight. The Chattering River washed out the dam overnight, leaving the pieces of mud scattered downstream along the bank. Only tiny hills of mud barely rising over the water surface remained of the dam. It resembled a fortress destroyed by a cruel enemy who had battered down the walls and thrown the remnants into the river.

I trudged along the bank. The end of the pipe showed from the silt under a tree root. As I jerked the pipe, a green toad leaped out of it. The burdock leaf was also silted up. Torn into shreds, it was no good anyway. The lake disappeared, the river was not chattering, but flowing peacefully in the same channel. However hard I tried, I would never manage to build such a dam or a singing headrace.

Downhearted, I went home.

A day passed, and another, and finally there came a sunny morning with the crowing of cocks resounding throughout the village. I had an itch to go to the river.

There's goose grass growing in the meadow by the river. It's silky and thick, like cotton. It looks like a green carpet spread among the willows. The goose grass is not good for hay, it rolls up into balls as you try to cut it with a scythe. But it turns into a nice fur coat when the dew falls and the grass seems to be covered with frost. As the sun rises, the meadow is all sparkles.

When you find yourself on the dewy meadow, you want to buck and kick like a colt and let out a wild ringing neigh that would bounce away along the bank of the river.

I ran to a willow and back, then turned to the river, leaving behind a dark path on the grass. The steaming dew burned my feet and they went numb with cold. I was racing like hell, kicking dew off the grass and sending spray of cherry-red radiant pearls flying through the air.

Finally I stopped at the ford and glanced at my pants. Oh my! They were dripping wet. Mom certainly wouldn't thank me for *that*. I stood there, giving the matter some consideration. However, my thoughts were rather confused. Something distracted my attention, as if a gadfly was buzzing in my ear. What was that? I couldn't figure it out, but I sensed there had been a change on the river. Oh! There you are. The river had changed its voice. I knew the whole of its register. In the morning it was a rapid silvery babble, in the afternoon heat a sluggish muffled splashing, in the evening a quiet steady humming which could be heard far away. But now the river was rather noisy, rushing and gushing among the willows. Something must have changed!

Crouching under the bushes, I went down to the river. Oh, it had risen, and the flat stone that used to stick out disappeared under the water. I rushed to the place where Adam and I had built a dam. I knew as much. There was a new dam! Even higher. And the lake before it was larger. And there was a mill whirring away. But where did all this come from? Who did it? And when? I didn't dare even to stir not

to spoil the marvellous dream. I was just standing rooted to the spot, blinking my eyes in amazement.

A real water mill... How should I describe it? Two rather thick forked upright sticks with a crosspiece laid horizontally on them. Fastened on the crosspiece was a wooden mill wheel. Its vanes were like hands held up to the headrace. The stream spurted on the vanes and the wheel was whirring, spraying water dust around, and there was a small sun shining at the bottom of the dam.

I could listen forever to the splashing of the water, the pat-patting of the vanes, and the humming of the uprights. But I had to have a closer look at all this, to touch it, to see how it worked. I touched the sticks, the strong tiny knots of the willow bast, the vanes — everything from top to bottom. I stopped the wheel and let it turn again, I caught on my tongue drops of water flying off the flitting vanes, I even made a small ditch with my finger on the dam, just to make sure that the wall was strong enough.

But wait a moment... That meant Adam had been on the river after our meeting. And had made the water mill. But how? On the sly? And when? At night? Who would have allowed him to get out of bed when he had a high fever?

I listened to the noise of the mill until evening, as if knowing it wouldn't whirr for long. And it didn't.

A hot afternoon. The sultry air. The sluggish murmur of the river.

I was lying on the flat stone like a dead fish. My arms were limp, my head was heavy, my eyes were staring unable to blink. The mill was lying beside. I had pulled it out of the mud, broken, and now it was drying in the sun. The river had washed out the dam again. And again it had happened at night. Evil things were always done at night, I thought. Rex was killed in darkness. And now this water mill... It looked as though some bad people had sneaked up to it in the dark, knocked it down, and crushed it into the mud with their heavy boots.

My mouth was dry, and I felt a bitter taste in it. Adam wouldn't come. What was I to do? What could I do alone? When Mom gives you a slap, it's better to be alone. You just hide in a corner, sniff for a while, and then it passes. But this was different. Nobody gave me a slap, and yet there was this bitter feeling. The mill was broken. Whom could I tell about it? To whom could I complain?

I should have someone at my side. Someone who would lie now beside me in the sun and to whom I would tell my story beginning with, "I come here in the morning and what do I see! The dam's gone..."

I was longing for a friend. I was looking forward to his visit.

I propped myself on the elbows and looked ahead, at the place where the river came running from behind the hill. I strained my eyes in disbelief. Yes, there was a boat sailing. It was passing slowly under the overhanging willows, moving cautiously among the water lilies, then silently coming out into the pool. There was not a splash, not a slap of the paddle. The sun had strewn the water with millions of sparkles, and the boat was sailing like the moon among the stars. Someone was steering the craft toward our bank.

The boat was coming close. Here it was, turning to the ford. Now I could see it was blue, and the paddle was blue, and who do you think was sitting in that boat? A girl! She was also blue, her eyes were large and worried, and there were white ribbons in her plaits.

Before I knew what was going on, the little boat entered my gorge and stopped under the rock on the swift current. The girl pulled the paddle out of the water and put it on the bottom of the boat. Then she looked up at me with her blue eyes.

“Did you call me?” she asked.

“Why, no I didn’t. I just wished you to come.”

“All right. Tie up the boat, please. The current might carry it away.”

She threw the end of the chain to me, and I fastened it around a tree root sticking from the earth like a crooked elbow.

“Look,” I said. “This passage is narrow, I can hardly put my foot between these rocks. How did you manage to sail through it?”

A shadow crossed her face. She bent down, took off her white little shoe, and hit it slightly against the side of the boat, pretending she was knocking out the sand. Perhaps she didn’t like being asked too many questions.

The girl put on her shoe and looked at the stone where I was lying. “What’s that beside you?” she asked.

“A water mill. It was broken last night.”

“Adam made it for you, didn’t he?”

“He did. How do you know?”

Again there was no answer. She bent her head and put a finger against her cheek, then asked in a sad voice, “Tell me, does Adam wear his hat now?”

“No,” I answered. “He doesn’t. He doesn’t even walk. He’s in bed, at Grandma Sirokha’s. She keeps him wrapped up in warm things and laments because he reminds her of her dead sons... Sirokha’s his mother’s mother, grandma, that is. Adam says he came here to keep away from the doctors. They were chasing him with those injections. He escaped them, but caught cold, see? He’s so weak he can’t even get out of his bed.”

“I know,” the girl said with a frown and looked unhappily at the downpour of water falling from the stone into the gorge. “He’s so helpless, like a child. He should keep away from the river, but he had splashed here for a whole day, and then he was choking during the night and was as hot as fire... Later, when he was still very ill, he went on the sly to the river to build a water mill.”

The little boat was rocking on the waves and the girl was rocking with it, or maybe she was just sadly nodding her head.

“Give him my regards,” she said strictly. “And tell him I’m angry with him. Let him take care of himself.”

“Who shall I say said that?”

“Nina. He knows me.”

“Oh, so you’re Nina!” I got up to my feet, surprised. “I saw a dream about you. I dreamed about a gossamer quivering in the wind and singing in a very thin voice, ‘Ni-i-i-na...’”

“I must go,” said Nina. “Untie the boat.”

I handed the end of the chain to her, she pushed off the rock with her paddle and raced out of the gorge. She stood in the boat flooded with the sunlight, and it seemed that a flickering candle was sailing away.

“Goodbye!” She waved her hand from afar.

“Goodbye!” I shouted after her. “Come again!”

The little boat sped downstream, flashed like a shadow under the willows, and disappeared round the sharp bend. It seemed the candle went out.

She came again toward evening.

Dusk settled between the riverbanks, over the calm sheen of the water. I heard a young frog croaking. Then I saw her boat. As before, it was coming upstream, from the land where the sun set and the river began.

I could see from afar that Nina was in a different boat this time. It was not blue, but white, with short dark lines over it. As the boat approached, I saw it was made of birch bast, while Nina was in a white pinafore dress and had black ribbons in her plaits. So, everything matched.

Nina looked downhearted, perhaps even more so than she did yesterday. She pulled in to the bank, said hello, and remained in the boat, her hands on her lap, her unhappy eyes on the flowing water.

“Nina,” I asked. “Thirty-nine point five — is it much?”

“Thirty-nine is much enough,” she said with a sigh. “Point five makes it even more.”

“That’s his temperature. They say he’s going to die...”

Nina was silent for a while, her head hanging down. There was a plop, maybe her tear dropped into the water.

“Did you see him?” she asked blinking at me with her wet eyelashes.

“I did. They moved him out and put him under the apple tree in the yard. He’s as white as a sheet, and he doesn’t seem to breathe. He keeps his eyes shut; they’re so blue, with white beads in the corners. He didn’t recognize me at first. I went up, shook him by the shoulder. ‘Adam, Adam,’ I said. He didn’t stir, as if he were dead. I shook him again. He sort of came to life and groped about, trying to reach me. ‘O-oh,’ he said. Then he whispered, ‘That you, Sand. Everything’ll be all right, Captain. We’ll build a real dam with you yet, a brick one...’ He told me soothing things and stroked me. His fingers were weak, and hot, and trembling... I wanted to tell him... well, there was much I wanted to tell him, but they sent me off. They said I shouldn’t disturb him... There was a strange woman there, such a plump one in a white smock...”

“I know her,” said Nina. “She’s the most important doctor in Kiev.”

Oh! I thought, surprised. In Kiev! Who called for her, I wonder. And brought her here. I suddenly remembered that Nina was in a hurry to leave yesterday. She had flashed like a shadow under the willows and disappeared. I gave her a furtive look. Maybe she did it? Maybe she brought the doctor to save Adam?

Night. The rushes are rustling, a quacking sound comes from the steep bank. Nina is sailing all by herself, and the wolves are chasing her... Oh, no, there can be no

wolves in the river. Well, tigers then, I mean crocodiles. The boat is rocking, struggling across the whirlpools. Nina is peering into the darkness and whispering fervently, 'Help! Save him!'

I didn't ask Nina whether everything was as I imagined. I didn't dare to. Because I knew she didn't like those women's gossips with a lot of questions you have to answer. Apparently, something bad had happened to her, but she didn't want to speak about it.

By silent agreement, neither of us spoke. I was sitting on the bank, Nina in her little boat. The sun had almost slid behind the hill, the sky was crimson in the west, and there were crimson reflections in the backwater. The girl was rocking gently in her white boat, and her eyes were filled with distress.

"Nina," I said softly. "I want to die. Not for long, though. Just to have a look at what's going on there underground. I mean after people come together, and cry, and lament, and fill your grave with earth. What comes next? What happens after that? You lie in your coffin in silence and darkness. Suddenly...a door opens, rusty and squeaky. You get up and go downstairs, as you do in a cellar, and there, in the murk, you meet a lot of people who had died long ago — "

"Don't!" Nina shuddered and her face darkened. "No one ever comes back from there. I knew many such people, they were my friends. Then they grew up. Some were killed, others died of disease. But none of them came back. Don't you dare die, do you hear!" She banged her tiny fist on the side of the boat and gave me a strict look. "And tell Adam: those who die never come back to life."

I was sitting dumbstruck. Then I tried to figure it out. How's that? What'll become of me? Here are my arms, legs, head, the hair on it and the ears. Will all this have to disappear? What about my running, yelling, swimming? Will this vanish too? Will there be nothing left of me on earth? Oh, no. This girl is laying it on a bit too thick. I told her so. I said I didn't believe people could die completely.

Nina was thoughtful for a while. Then she said in an important tone, "No, people don't die completely. When they are put into the earth, and become earth themselves, grass grows from them, or trees. Good people grow into something good — apple trees, lilacs or daisies. Those who are wicked and greedy will become burrs, nettles or lichen."

I thumped my heel on the earth and burrowed a hole; Nina's explanation suited me very well. Then I thought suddenly: What will grow instead of Gawker?

GAWKER AND MARBLE

He was an old and wise horse. His days were numbered. They didn't even hobble him anymore, and he was free to roam about the riverbank. He was grazing there, often sighing and dropping into a doze. He was said to have been white once, but that color had changed into dirty-gray long ago. When the river was enveloped in

fog, the old horse himself became part of the drifting milk-white clouds, and only his occasional snort showed where he was.

On a hot day he would find shade under willows and plunge into his thoughts. He stood motionless there — remembering something, his thick hairy lip hanging down. I was always eager to know what he remembered, what his thoughts were about, and what he saw in his dreams while dozing. Perhaps he dreamed about roads (he had covered miles and miles of them), and one road smelled to him of hot dust, while another of squelching autumn mud. Or maybe he dreamed about a field (he had ploughed quite a lot of them), the steppe hay fragrant like tea (he had carried over a mountain of hay to the barn), a stinging whip and a burning harness, or wagon drivers: merry, bad-tempered, decorated with medals or having artificial legs or arms, stinking of bad tobacco — in a word, all kinds of people who had ever happened to drive him.

I didn't know his dreams, but I often saw him in my own dreams. He would poke his warm muzzle out of the darkness and gaze thoughtfully, snorting into my ear. I would smile through my sleep because the ear tickled, stroke his soft, velvety lips, mumble something, reach out for his mane. Then, before I could realize what had happened, I found myself on his back. It went on as in that film when something is wrong with the sound and the picture and the figures on the screen can hardly move. The horse carried me up slowly. It took away my breath and I held his mane tight. We were flying over the ford, and over the steep hill, and it was so nice and easy to fly. But then I felt a rough tug, and I was falling down and down, and my heart was hammering away with fear. Then I was suspended over the steep slope, as if I were hanging from a thread which could break any moment. I would scream and jump up, and the silent scream would stick in my throat. But as soon as I fell back into deep sleep, the horse reappeared and we went flying again.

The horse's name was Marble.

He wasn't fit to work anymore. He was living the rest of his days in peace. And, like every old creature, he thought over his life. His burdensome thoughts never left him. When on pasture, he pulled grass casually, evidently trying to solve some unsolved problem and giving very little attention to his stomach. When he waded into the river in the morning to drink some water, it was also clear that he was thinking. Even when he dipped his lips into the water, he went on reasoning. But when he found himself in the shade from the willows, he was so deep in his horse's thoughts that he forgot to drive away the gadflies and they crawled into his nostrils and his watery eyes.

Nobody disturbed Marble. So he had whole days to think.

Sometimes, however, a boy or a man would pass by our house with a bridle in his hand. That meant he was allowed to use Marble privately for some easy work: to bring water, or to haul a log. Marble was neither happy nor sad to see a man coming up and carrying a bridle. He would wait obediently, and let himself be bridled as obediently. Only when he had to start, he gave a heavy sigh and his flanks heaved.

It wasn't often that Marble was disturbed — once or twice during the summer. This summer nobody had come for the horse yet, as if people forgot about him.

Once I saw Gawker. Big deal, you would say, to see Gawker. But I saw him in broad daylight, when the watchman was supposed to sleep. That's for one. Second, he had a bridle over his shoulder and the rein was slapping rhythmically on his bootleg. Third, he was not alone, but in company with a man who looked very much like Gawker. Here I remembered that our neighbor was putting up a hen house and that his brother had come to give him a hand.

So, they were going for the horse.

I could see that the brothers had met recently, and I knew it was a happy meeting. Both were merry and talkative, and a mere wave of a hand sent one or the other reeling down the road. Gawker was telling one of his hare hunting stories: "Bang went my gun. It screamed 'Owww!' And here I grabbed it by the ears!" By way of example, Gawker grabbed at a bush, but lost his balance and went over into the ditch. It was real fun watching his brother getting Gawker on his feet, and Gawker pulling his companion down.

Their boots were very much alike — big, warped and dirty. The brothers plodded toward the river, lurching now into a growth of nettles, now into a silted-up ditch. I also ran to the river, only through the orchard, crouching behind the bushes. Gawker and his brother couldn't see me, but I kept an eye on them all along. They trudged toward the ford. As they went stamping on the stones, Gawker's guest stumbled, waved his hand desperately, and — splash! In a moment the unlucky traveler — his pants, boots and all — was sitting in the shallow water, splashing and howling with laughter, "That's it!" This time Gawker was trying to get his brother on his feet, while his brother was pulling Gawker into the water. They got across anyway. They must have pushed on, because crushing sounds came from the bushes and a twig swayed here and there.

Marble was standing at the bottom of the hill, dozing. Woken up by the rustle, the horse jerked up his head and, with a hostile glint in his eyes, looked at the two bedraggled creatures that had popped out of the bushes and were staggering up to him. The horse shied at them, just in case, as if saying, "I'd rather you passed by, good people." But the brothers' strong and greedy hands grabbed him by the mane on both sides.

Soon they were pulling him to the ford. Gawker was the first to jump from the bank onto the stone. He tugged Marble by the rein, but the horse struggled. Evidently, he didn't like to be mishandled, especially now, when he had to step cautiously on the shaky and slippery stone. As Gawker gave him a strong pull, the horse dug his forelegs firmly into the ground, while his hind legs slipped under him, his back arched, and his watery eyes closed. It looked as if the horse wanted to say, "Let me go, I'll do it myself."

However, the pigheaded brothers wouldn't give up.

"Come on, you beast!" Gawker yelled jerking the rein. "Havro, give it to him!" Gawker gave the rein such a furious pull, as if he was going to tear the horse's head off. Meanwhile, Havro lashed him on the back with a willow switch. "Havro, give him a push there!" Havro rammed Marble's hind quarters with his shoulder. The horse jerked ahead, his hoof crashed against the stone, and here...and here I heard a cracking sound. I couldn't grasp what had happened at first. I only saw the horse

lying flat on the stone, his lip hanging down and twitching helplessly. Only later did I understand that Marble had stumbled and his foreleg had slipped between two stones. The hole was deep and narrow, and the horse's hoof was stuck dead there.

"The fool!" bawled the raging Gawker at the horse, slapping himself on the wet pants. "Havro, get him up, the old hack!" Havro swiped the poor animal on his ribs, and a dark welt appeared on the horse's side. Marble gave a heavy, painful sigh, jerked, and his knees slipped an inch on the stone. The stuck leg held him fast. "Use your boot, Havro!" Gawker pulled the rein, while Havro was banging the horse with his heavy boot. Marble jerked again, twisting his leg terribly. His muscles bulged with enormous effort, and it seemed the skin would burst and let his old bones fall apart.

Marble moaned. Gawker realized at last that the horse had got into trouble.

"That beast!" Gawker cursed. "Just look where he got his leg!" The brothers were standing there, their arms across each other's shoulders, gawking at the horse's twisted leg.

"Well?" Havro said. "No go?"

"Just a moment. We'll do it in a jiffy!" Gawker flopped onto the stone, slipped up to the horse's leg and began jerking it with short cries, his tongue lolling out with effort. "Ho!...Ho!...Ho!"

Marble was only staring with his dull sad eye into Gawker's hairy ear.

"Well, brother? Nothing doing?" asked Havro.

"He's stuck."

"That's it then. He won't get out of here."

The brothers sat down on the bank, embraced each other, and burst into wild singing: "Hey, Dunya, pretty girl..." But in a moment Havro interrupted his brother.

"Hey, what do we do with the damned beast?"

"We need a saw," answered Gawker. "We'll cut his leg off and that'll do the trick. We can't get him out anyway. He's stuck."

I overheard their talk, hiding behind a bush. Gawker's "cut his leg off" gave me shivers, my hair stood on end, and horrible scenes passed before my eyes: two thugs were carrying a saw...they were sneaking up to the horse...the saw was grating against the bone...they were sawing away, paying no attention to the dreadful sound.

I felt a burning pain below my chest, and even more frightful scenes flooded my mind. Sure, I thought. Gawker'll do it. That's him all over... I remembered the story the boys had told me of how Gawker had sunk their boat. They had made it at school, and its blunt bow made it look like a washing tub. That was collective property which was to be used for swimming and diving in our pond. The boat was an eyesore to Gawker. "What's the use of them having it?" he used to say. "They only scare the ducks away." So, one night he came with an ax and bang! bang! made a large hole in the bottom and pushed the boat off on the deep water. That's why I knew Gawker would not hesitate to cut and ruin.

Oh, poor Marble... He was lying there, old, his haunch bones sticking out, his head hanging down, the veins pulsing painfully on his neck.

I jumped up, fear pushed me ahead, and my heart was filled with a silent scream, "Mom...over here...help!" Then something stopped me. The brothers... They were

getting to their feet holding up each other... They were going away. A voice mentioned a brigade leader. They needed permission; maybe they would just finish off the toothless hack (that is Marble) and there would be at least a hide to use, because he was good for nothing anyway. The brothers lit up and went swaying in their dripping wet trousers to the collective farm office.

As soon as they disappeared behind the bushes, I rushed to the horse. He recognized me, touched my cheek with his dry lips, and snorted softly. His muzzle was warm, and every hair on it was warm, and the faded hair on his body felt as if it were covered with warm road dust. Only his watery eyes were glistening, and there were wet traces running down from them.

“Marble, dear, get up!” I said patting him on the withers. The horse shook his head, as if he was about to rise, but only let out a sigh and hung his head helplessly. Heavy and motionless, he looked like a bag full of firewood. He was shedding his hair, and his bones were bulging in the joints. I was crawling around him, not knowing what to do. I tried to move the stuck leg and was scared even more than before; it was stuck all right! He had probably wedged his hoof under the stone while jerking under the blows. It was no use trying to pull it out.

Still, I went and tried. I pulled and I tugged, but it all came to nothing. The bony leg didn't budge, as if it were made of cast iron. I couldn't tug it anymore either, as the horse's grazed knees were bleeding.

What should I do? What on earth should I do?

Minutes passed away, it was late afternoon. Terrible scenes flashed before my eyes again: the brothers shuffling along with a saw...they were closing in...

Before I knew what I was doing, I raced uphill and rushed home. I searched the yard, looked into every corner — Mom was not to be seen anywhere. The entrance door propped up with a stick, the swallows chirping away in the shed, the yawning hole of the cellar. Then it struck me suddenly. I was on a wild goose chase; Mom was at work.

Without catching my breath, I raced off into the steppe. The warm dust was puffing from under my feet, while my thoughts flew far ahead. I thought of meeting Mom, of telling her the whole story, of rushing together with her to the river. Then it struck me again. Where was I running? And where was Mom? I didn't even know where she worked.

I turned back and ran like hell. Something was jolting inside below my chest. At home I spread out my hands in a helpless gesture. Where could I go now? Whom could I talk to? Grandma Sirokha wouldn't help, she was too old. Adam wouldn't help either, he was too weak to get out of bed.

I saw Gawker again...and a saw. I heard the grating sound...

I took off again and raced to the village. I would ask anybody to help there. The sun was sinking low on the horizon, the road, lined on both sides with dust-powdered thistles, was empty, except for a lonely figure coming out of the ravine. It was a woman wearing a white kerchief on her head. Her gait seemed familiar to me, slow and tired. Oh boy, that was my mother!

I can hardly remember how we met, how I buried my head in her warm and rough

hands and began whimpering like a stupid boy (she couldn't guess what it was — too much running about or being scared?), babbling something incoherent about the horse and Gawker.

We stood alone there, on the deserted evening road. Mom clasped me to her breasts and I snuggled there as in a nest. Then her fingers, the very tips of them (they were so soft, I could hardly feel their touch) began stroking my neck, and the unwashed back of it, and those nice black (as she put it) ears. She was reassuring me, telling me to calm down and to sleep it off. Gawker wouldn't go back to the river today, she said, because they had brought Moldavian wine to the shop and this occupied the loving brothers' minds so much they would hardly be on their feet by morning. She also said it was better to leave Marble alone, he would manage somehow.

That night I was flying on Marble's back again, and falling, and I dreamed about a monster sneaking up to our house and trying to cut down its corner with an ax. The ax went bang, bang, and the house was cracking and coming down, and I heard water running under my bed... Mom woke me up, asked if I didn't overdo it splashing in the river, and told me not to toss and to go back to sleep.

In the morning everything was wrapped up in the fog. The willows and the sedge bushes over the river, the orchard, and the growth of blackthorn on the opposite bank seemed to be screened off by the cheesecloth.

I ran downhill and stopped, amazed, in the middle of the meadow. It was strange to see a cloud of fog coming, wrapping you up, its wisps going through you, and not to hear a single rustle or touch. But I felt my face and hair and shirt growing damp and soft, and there was a taste of rainwater on my lips. I stood there for a while, trying to catch the fog wisps in my hands, then ran on to the ford.

Marble must be still there, lying motionless, as if he were chained up to the place, poor thing. And he didn't have anything to eat. I should get him some grass at least. Suddenly a loud snort came from an elder bush hidden by the fog. I shrank away and ducked with fear. My heart sank. Then a muzzle popped out of the bush. It was a horse. "Marble, blast you! You gave me a fright there." I leaped up to the horse and hang on his neck. He was standing still and seemed to be smiling, his lips painted green with grass. "Marble, who got you free? Or maybe you did it yourself? Well, let me see your leg..." Oh, what a fool I was to hang by his mane, when he had to stand on three legs only. He kept his wounded leg raised, and there were grazed spots on it and caked blood, and flakes of horn had come off his hoof.

We talked a bit, while I combed his mane and cleansed his wounds, and he blew on me, wrapping me up in the hot fragrance of the chewed grass. Finally, I let him go: "Go graze a bit, Marble." The horse hobbled away into the willow bushes, his head jerking with every limp.

The fog lifted up a little and a pale sun hung in the sky. You could look at it as long as you wished, it wasn't dazzling at all. I was sitting at the ford on the stone that looked like an elephant's back, watching the sun; now it came out, now it hid behind gray wispy clouds. I don't know whether I had been sitting for long there, when suddenly I heard booming voices and the shuffling of feet coming downhill. I jumped up. They were coming, the Gawkers!

One of the brothers had a piece of tarpaulin over his arm, the other an ax and a long knife used for sticking pigs. The brothers were walking toward the ford, talking merrily and puffing on their cigarettes. They never suspected that Marble, caught between two stones, could disappear.

Suddenly they came face to face with the horse also making for the river. The brothers stopped in their tracks, so did the horse. The men stood staring at Marble, Marble was staring back at them. The horse snorted, bewildered, and then — and then I could not believe my eyes when I saw what happened. Marble, old and usually obedient Marble that was limping only a moment ago, suddenly kicked out, gave a challenging snort, and galloped away, though with a slight limp. This was something he had not done for a long time. His victorious neigh soon came from the opposite end of the meadow.

The brothers exchanged glances, and their eyes stretched wide as four wheels. “Well, that’s it then, eh?” said Havro.

“He got unstuck,” mumbled Gawker, perfectly at a loss.

The brothers plodded off. An ugly prickly bush of wolfberries appeared in the place where the men had stood.

THE LONG-LEGGED DOCTOR

It’s partially dark in the shed. The door is low, there’s no window, and when you go into the far corner, where the frowning manger stands with the numerous traces of teeth, you seem to go into the night. Peeping, rustling and cracking sounds come from the manger, the walls and the rotten boards. The shed is swarming with restless creatures living in it.

I don’t go in, but sit down by the door and wait.

Now I feel the scorching sun on my neck, now I don’t — clouds must be gathering in the sky. I’m beginning to nod.

Still, I’m waiting patiently.

Finally, there’s a swish, and a swallow flies into the shed. It comes swooping under the lintel, but doesn’t even graze it. An excellent diver! I often saw the swallows playing with Marble. They sneak up from afar, flying low, very low, and then — whoof! — they rush under the horse. First one flits under his belly, zooms up and gives a challenging chirp from above. Then another follows, and soon a whole string of them dart under the grazing horse, chirping loudly, as if teasing him, “You didn’t catch me, so there!” Marble is munching the grass, swishing his tail now and then, or twitching his ear, and pays no attention to the screaming swallows. He would give a reserved snort once in a while, when a swallow darts too close to his muzzle.

They make as bold dives for the doorway of the shed. A swallow seems to see from outside that there’s a pole supporting the ceiling in the middle. There it goes. It makes a circle under the ceiling, avoiding the pole, and then flies straight to its nest. It went

through the doorway like a silent shadow, without a chirp or a flutter of its wings. But the young ones wake up immediately, as if at a signal. "Cheep-cheep-cheep!" they cry all at once. I can't see the nestlings, only the flying gray down and their wide open bills. These yellow screaming mouths are begging and pleading: we are hungry! The cheekiest nestling scrambles higher than the others and tries to swallow the worm together with its mother's bill. Just try and get enough food for these greedy things! They drop down in the nest as soon as their mother darts out of the shed. They sleep. All is quiet again, as if the nest were empty.

The shed is silent. And the yard is silent. More clouds appear in the sky. I have nothing to do. So I lean against a door post and gaze up at the ceiling, examining the nest. Have you ever seen a swallow building a nest? It brings blobs of mud from the riverbank. It's not just mud. It's the mud mixed with grass roots and threads of various plants. It brings those daubs into the shed and then fastens them skillfully with its bill to a beam. The swallow looks its work over after a while and starts chirping, happy that it can build so well. And it builds well indeed. First there's something like a horseshoe or a moon crescent, then a purse, and then a small basket, after the swallow has laid the top rows of daubs. The nest becomes white when it dries out, and it's so strong it can hang there under the ceiling for years without falling apart.

I often feel an urge to put the ladder against that beam and have just a glimpse of... But haven't you heard what people say? They say that a swallow will leave your yard as soon as you touch its nest. It will go away and never come back, and it will tell the rest of the swallows to keep away from your house. But if you ruin a swallow's nest... Oh, it's better not to do it at all! A swallow has a red streak on its chest, I saw it myself. It's like a match. When a swallow grazes its chest against a thatched roof, the dry straw catches fire at once. And your house is burnt down. Storks set your house on fire with a hot coal when you destroy their nest, so I was told. That means birds never forgive people's cruelty. Our house, for example, has never been on fire. Nor Grandma Sirokha's for that matter. Gawker had two fires that I remember. You can still see the scorches on his cottage, and there are only charred uprights sticking up like candle ends and a charred jagged trough left of his shed.

The swallows got used to my sitting on the doorstep, and they fly in and out over my head. One comes swooping down on me, as if threatening to pull me by the hair, but then just swishes overhead and into the shed. It's good to sit here, among these swishing sounds and the darting shadows of the swallows, and to feel the pleasant sunlight softened by the clouds. I'm going into a doze, and I can hear faint sounds of someone calling me: "...o-o-o! Sashko-o-o-o!" comes with the light breeze.

I jump up in alarm and glance at the road. There's Grandma Sirokha standing there, a small, bent woman. She's in a dark full skirt, and her face has darkened, too. Strict and silent, she waits for me to come up.

"Come with me," she says in a strict voice. "Adam wants to see you."

I follow the tottering old woman, surprised and scared a little. She has never invited me to her place, to say nothing about Adam. What's up there?

We come to the ravine and pass Gawker's house. The path turns into the grandma's vegetable garden and we walk through a blue dusk, under the thick cover of leaves

and sunflowers as big as sieves. We cross the garden and find ourselves in the yard. The whitewashed cottage is small. There's a huge apple tree growing by a window, its branches spreading beyond the chimney and the apples hanging over the roof. The giant green umbrella of the old tree covers almost the whole yard. I can see a white plank bed under the whitewashed trunk of the tree and Adam, lying on the pillows. He grins, showing his white teeth shot with blue.

"Oh, Captain Sand!" He gestures a welcome with a wave of his hand. "Glad to see you. Will you sit down, please." He nods at the rickety stool and warns that I should be careful, because it must have been made before the Deluge. I sit down, pulling the stool closer to him. I'm pleased and embarrassed because he uses such beautiful language talking with me.

It's fresh and cozy to be in the shade of the apple tree, with the dense canopy of the drowsy leaves overhead. The sunlight comes down through them all dappled on Adam's bed.

Adam doesn't hide his feelings: he's glad to see his neighbor. It makes him sick to be lolling on these soft pillows and this feather bed, and to sweat after drinking some hot stuff instead of enjoying this fine weather and getting suntanned... Adam's voice is weak and his limp arm hanging down from the bed is thin and greenish. And yet he's different from what he was even yesterday. There's more life in his eyes, and they're more cheerful and teasing.

Grandma Sirokha, her arms folded, stands by for a while, then gives Adam a strict and sad look, sighs and goes into the house. Adam winks at me like a conspirator.

"You know why I asked you to come? I received intelligence about a battle at the ford. Some people wanted to cut off a horse's leg. Thought he could do without it, as they could do without their heads. You're said to have been there, and have seen everything, and have even distinguished yourself..."

"Distinguished yourself"... That's laying it on a bit too much. I glance at Adam: isn't he pulling my leg by any chance? No, he looks serious. Still, I ask, "Who told you?"

"Well, there are reliable people."

"Who are they?"

"Oh, that's my secret. I have a friend. It's a girl, to be more exact. She never deserts me. We've been bosom friends since childhood. She followed me here in a boat."

"Humph. What's her name?"

"You want to know too much. But all right... Nina."

Nina?! The name comes so unexpectedly that my jaw drops. And when my mouth is open, it's a sure sign that I'm deep in thought. Indeed, this is something to think over. I thought Nina was a local resident, that she lived beyond the hill, beyond the garden, where the sun sets. It appears she came from Kiev where she met Adam...

Nina... Then it strikes me. Maybe Adam has borrowed this name from me? Maybe he overheard me speaking with her? I'm always doing it: while sitting over the river, while wandering in the green tunnels made by the sunflowers.

Apparently, I would have come to a certain conclusion, but Adam interrupts me.



“Don’t you try to keep in the background,” he insists. “Tell me how you made a fool of that Gawker.”

Adam would take no refusal. I hesitate, shifting on the stool and making it squeak. What can I say actually? Fear set me running home, then into the steppe, as if I had eaten too much of the nightshade. That’s all I can say of my heroic deeds. Marble... Well, Marble is a different thing. That’s a real horse for you!

“Oh, no,” says Adam angrily, adjusting his pillows to prop himself up. “This will never do. We’ll keep mum when we’re on the river. There’ll be no time to talk then, only to work. I’ve invented one thing, oh! Meanwhile, my dear Sand, each of the two captains must tell a story. Is that all right? You’re younger, so your story comes first. I’d like you, dear Sand, to tell me something about the adventures of the famous traveler Marble Graymane.”

Adam probably noticed my faltering, because he takes me by the hand and says simply, even with a pleading note in his voice, “Sashko, I’m serious, please. You know everything about him...”

The sun has slid down a bit, and now its light coming through the green and yellow leaves makes Adam’s chest and face dappled. His pointed chin and as pointed thin nose are sticking out from the pillow, and the sun is shining through them, as if they were made out of wax. Adam often wets his scorched lips with his tongue, his breathing is uneven and wheezing. My throat tickles, and I feel the same under my eyes. I bend down, blinking, and think: Adam’s all by himself for days and there’s no one to say a word to him except Grandma Sirokha.

“All right, Adam,” I say with a sniff, because I have to start somehow. “Once we went... Only mind, it’s a true story.”

“Of course,” Adam agrees. “No lies.”

I shift on the stool to make myself more comfortable and look at Adam, who’s folded his arms on the white sheet and is ready to listen. So I begin:

“Once we went... I’d fallen ill before that, whooping cough or something. So Mom borrowed a buggy from a brigade leader. He has a motorbike now.”

“So Mom borrowed a buggy from him,” Adam brings me back to the point.

“Yes, she borrowed a buggy, harnessed Marble to it, and wrapped me up in my overcoat and a sheepskin, because it was frosty, and took me to the doctor in Zahatne. We came there in the evening. As we knocked on the door, it opened and a woman with a bucket and a mop stood in the doorway.’ ‘Evening,’ she said with a bow. ‘It’s a bit later than you think. The reception is over.’ And she slammed the door in our faces. Well, we had to stay overnight, I don’t remember with whom. We tried again in the morning. The same woman appeared. ‘Morning,’ she said. ‘There’s no reception, and there won’t be. The doctor’s at a meeting.’ Then Mom whispered something into her ear, and the woman fell flop right in the doorway... We got into the buggy and went back home...”

I make a pause to see if Adam is listening. He is all ears, his lips slightly parted and curled into an unhappy smile... I don’t say anything, wondering if he will ask to continue.

“What happened next?” Adam asks losing his patience. “There must be something about the horse.”

“Oh, I clean forgot about it!” I cry out with regret. “I just left that bit out, you know. Sometime it happens with me. Well, where are we? Oh! Have you ever been to Zahatne? You haven’t? Wel-l-l, it’s a pity. The river there is not at all like ours, where only frogs can swim. It’s wide, and it has a sand bottom, and it swarms with crayfish, and you can catch them with your bare hands. There’s a stone ford there, and the buggy jolts as you ride across it. It was late autumn, mind you. A cold wind was blowing, pushing us in the backs. Mom went to the ford, we’d be sooner home that way. We came to the ford only to see that the river was frozen. Yesterday the water was churning amongst the stones, but now it was iced over. Mom was upset. ‘What shall we do? We could go across the bridge, but that means over five kilometers more.’ While she was thinking unhappily, I slipped out of the sheepskin and stepped onto the ice. It was rather thin yet, and as smooth as glass. You take a short run, and then there’s no end to your sliding. Mom also came onto the ice and tried it. It cracked and sagged, but it didn’t break. Would it hold the horse? ‘If Marble falls through,’ Mom said, ‘he’ll cut his legs. If he doesn’t fall through, he won’t be able to walk on ice because he isn’t shod.’ Marble (that’s a horse for you!) probably understood Mom was worrying. So he went up to the river, sniffed the ice and snorted. Then he did a strange thing. He bent his legs and went down on his knees. He began sliding over the ice, using his legs as runners, as if showing us that we were too slow, and that we should push him ahead. Mom even clapped her hands, she was really amazed. ‘What a clever boy! Come on, Sashko, let’s push the buggy.’ So we were pushing the buggy while the horse was sliding on his knees over the smooth ice. It was sagging and cracking, but nothing bad happened. As soon as we reached the bank, Marble jumped to his feet, and he was on the firm ground next moment. And I didn’t have any whooping cough, I just caught cold, and that’s it. We came home. Mom held my head over steaming potatoes, and I was well again.”

“That’s a fine story,” praises Adam. “Especially that piece about Marble. I can’t understand, though, who had more horse sense — Marble with his sliding over the ice, or that woman with her repeating there was no reception? What do you think, Sand?”

“I think...” I begin, frowning and sniffing and wobbling my stool, because the question is too difficult. “I think... Look, you have so many apples here, and they’re all with red sides, ripe that is. Can I have that windfall over there?”

“Of course you can!”

I roll the apple closer, then toss it like a soccer ball. Then I take a bite — ugh! My mouth is full of water at once, the apple is so sour and green.

Adam didn’t bite an apple, but he also screws up his eyes. A shadow of a smile crosses his face. “You’re a cunning man, Sashko,” he says. He rolls onto his side and punches his pillow. I think he’s going to tell his story.

“Now comes my true story. And, since you mentioned a doctor, I’ll tell you, Sashko, about a famous long-legged doctor... Well,” his voice suddenly changes, “there she goes again. My doctor.” And he gives a hopeless sigh.

Grandma Sirokha is coming carrying a saucer, a glass of water and some powder.

“Why, is it time to take it again?” asks Adam in a miserable voice.

“Swallow it,” Grandma Sirokha orders.

“Grandma! I’ve had so much of this stuff —”

“Take it. Every two hours, that’s what the professor said.”

“All right.” Adam swallows the powder and his lips seem to become even paler.

Grandma Sirokha goes away, Adam lies on his right side and becomes thoughtful. His thin smooth hair is wet and yellow patches appear on his face. He lies still, then seems to doze off. After a while he shakes off the sleep and turns to me.

“Now for the story of the long-legged doctor,” he says in the same thoughtful voice as he had begun. “I’m a happy man, Sashko. I have two grandmas. One lives here in the steppe, the other had lived in Polissya. And I must tell you, dear Sashko, that Polissya is a kingdom of mushrooms and wood nymphs. The forests, lakes and small rivers there are simply wonderful... There are also storks there.

“My Grandma Hrunya had her own couple of storks, husband and wife. They used to come back from the distant warm countries in early spring and wheel over the village. Grandma Hrunya would come out and wave her kerchief to greet them. The storks would circle lower and lower. So Grandma asked the boys to put a cart-wheel on the roof. The storks built a nest there.

“One cold spring there was a snowstorm at night. Grandma came out in the morning and saw the snow lying kneedeep. The stork couple were buried in the snow, their wings spread out helplessly. They were too weak even to raise their heads. ‘Poor things,’ said Grandma Hrunya and took them into the house. She heated the oven to get them warm and brewed tea for them with herbs. Soon the storks were well again, and they loved Grandma even more after that.

“The storks made their nest high and comfortable. They took turns at keeping watch over it. I remember seeing them once. It was dark, and the sky was strewn with stars. The stork was standing stockstill in his nest, as if drawn with a charcoal crayon. He was standing on one leg, and the moon seemed to be hanging from his raised beak.

“Grandma Hrunya liked to have a chat with her storks before going to bed. She would stand in the middle of the yard and ask:

“‘Well, my friend, what is your forecast for tomorrow? Will it rain?’

“The stork would clatter its beak in answer.

“‘It stands to reason,’ Grandma would say. ‘The stars are clear, the grass is dry, it’ll be a hot day tomorrow. I’m going to prick out some cabbage seedlings in the garden, so I just wanted to know...’

“The stork would clatter again.

“‘Of course, I’ll do as you say,’ Grandma would conclude with a sigh and go back into the house.

“Every autumn Grandma saw them off as they left for the warm countries. She would come out of the gate, wave her kerchief and say, ‘See that you stick together with the rest of the flight. Fly above the clouds, but keep low when you see lightning and hear thunder.’

“One autumn Grandma didn’t come out to say goodbye to the storks. Their friends had come together, made a farewell wheel over the forests and lakes, and flew away to the warm countries flight after flight. Grandma’s couple stayed behind. They wheeled and wheeled over the village with alarmed cries, but Grandma wouldn’t come out. Then the husband landed in the yard and saw that the entrance door of the house stood open. He went in and flashed his brown eye at the bed. So that was it! The old woman was lying on her bed very ill. She was too weak to say even a word. The stork clattered understandingly and hurried out. He returned as quickly as he left and went up to Grandma holding a frog in his beak. Fresh. Right from the marsh.

“‘My dear long-legged doctor,’ said Grandma with a moan, moved by the bird’s kindness. ‘I see you’re going to cure me with that medicine of yours. Well then, I’ll have to get up and see you off, or you’ll never leave for your warm countries.’

“Moaning, she got out of bed and went out to see her storks off. She died soon after that.

“When spring came, people were surprised to see the stork couple wheeling high in the sky day after day and never landing. They landed finally on a lonely pine growing close to the cemetery, where Grandma was buried beside her sons.”

That is the end of Adam’s story. He’s tired perhaps, because he put his hand under his head and seems to be dozing. He’s lying pale and quiet. I get scared from time to time: Is he alive? The sheet cover is still and flat, as if there were no man under it. Only the pointed chin and the nose are sticking out. And Adam’s feet, white and motionless on a stool, are showing from under the sheet.

Adam opens one eye sleepily, his look finds me, and he makes an effort to smile, but his lips only twitch.

“Well, Sand,” he says in a guilty voice. “My true story is rather sad, isn’t it?”

“You mean about the long-legged doctor?”

“Yes.”

“Why, it’s interesting. I cannot understand one thing, though. What about his children? Didn’t the stork have any children?”

“He had. But they flew away. Every new couple of storks looks for a new place to settle.”

“Do they ever come here into the steppe?”

“It’s a rare occasion. Storks like water, forests and large marshy meadows...”

“Will you go there? I mean where your Grandma Hrunya had lived?”

“Who knows. Maybe I will. Then it’ll be a miracle.”

“I wish so much to have a couple of storks. Just little ones. I would get a wheel for them myself.”

“You’re a cunning man, Sashko,” says Adam. This time he forces out a smile.

Just when our conversation becomes lively, Grandma Sirokha appears out of the house, carrying the same saucer, a glass of water and a powder.

“Grandma,” Adam complains like a child. “I hoped to escape into the steppe from all those injections, powders and other medical things... I’m really sick and tired of them...”

“Take it,” says Grandma Sirokha. Her hands begin to tremble, the water spills. I notice that her eyes are filled with tears. Her wrinkled mouth works as she tries to swallow the unwanted tears. She says between the sobs, “Do you think I want to torture you and myself, son? I just hope it will help you get out of that bed and recover, because you’re dying away before my very eyes. What a stupid life this is: my sonnies would have been your age now, enjoying life as other children are, if they hadn’t been killed...”

“Grandma,” Adam’s voice quivers. “Please forgive me. I’m a fool. I’m an idiot. I won’t torture you anymore. Give me that powder.”

Grandma Sirokha shuffles into the house. I’m sitting for a long time bent down, a heavy weight on my shoulders and my heart. Because, when you come to think of it, I’m to blame. Of course, I am. He went into the water because of me, and I was even happy about it, the fool: What a dam I have now, what a mill. Now a man has to pay for making those toys for me.

“We won’t go to the river anymore,” I mutter frowning.

Adam is lying still again after taking his powder. And many yellow patches appear again on his face. He doesn’t answer at once, waiting for his heavy breathing to become more even.

“We *will* go to the river, Sashko. The river is not to blame. Nor are you for that matter. The question is more complicated. How shall I put it? Well, suppose you went out into the sea in your boat. You’re far from the shore, and suddenly there’s a leak in the boat. What will you do? Just fold your arms and wait until it is filled with water? Or will you continue rowing? Of course, you’ll bend at your oars as long as you can, won’t you? The same thing here, Sashko. My boat had a leak when I was at the institute. I’ve been rowing hard since then. My boat is sinking, but I keep rowing. Because I want to go on living like you, like any other normal man while I’m on the surface. Is that clear, Captain? We’ll go to the river and we’ll build a real dam, a brick one. And we will make a mill, so strong that it’ll go on chattering even after school starts. You’ll have to wait a bit, though, for me to get on my feet.”

Grandma Sirokha has come out to put something warm on Adam. She’s standing tense listening to him, sad reproof registered on her withered face: What are you talking about, Adam? How can you go that far, when I have to walk you from the yard to the house like a small child?

THE SINGING GOSSAMER

She’s different today.

Look, there she paddles. She steers her boat here and waves her hand from afar. Her hair is well done; she sits on the side of the boat and her long plait hangs down into the water. Her boat runs more merrily than before.

“Good morning!” she calls out.

“Hello, Nina! Watch out, there’s a snag there.”

She passes the underwater stone, where the water is transparent, rises on the wave, and then rushes down into the gorge. “My,” I gasp, because the boat jumps up, plunges into the spray, and then streaks between the two rocks. Nina bends down, jamming her paddle into the river, and in a moment the boat stands still under the rock.

“Well done,” I say looking into the narrow passage to have a better view. “I was afraid you’d crash on that rock... Throw me the chain, I’ll tie up the boat. You know,” I prattle along, “a horse had got stuck in this gorge.”

“I know,” says Nina. “It was right here. A sharp stone had cut into his leg, so I painted the wound with iodine. And I blunted the edge of the stone with my paddle.”

“You?” I gasp in surprise. “So it was you who got Marble free?”

Nina pretends not to hear my gasps and exclamations. She starts humming a popular dancing tune, accompanying herself with the rhythmic slap-slap on her tiny knees. I forgot she doesn’t like to talk about herself. I decide to use some cunning.

“You can’t see-e-e anything in da-a-arkness,” I sing out.

“I can. Because I have a lamp.”

“Can you show it?”

“Here.” She gives me a mushroom with a large cap.

“But that’s a mushroom!”

“So what. It can glow in darkness.”

I put the mushroom into my shirt and poke my nose into the darkness. That’s it. It glows indeed, with a cold blue light. The light paints everything blue inside, and I seem to be in a small night world with its own sky, earth and a full moon.

“Listen, Nina.” I jump to my feet. “Take your lamp and let’s go to the china clay pits.”

“What is there to see?”

“Oh, there’s a hole there. A real cave. Awfully deep. And scary. Come on!”

I help her out of the boat and she takes off her white shoes. Only my mop of hair makes me taller than she. The girl is thinner, though, and her skin is white, as Adam’s.

It is for the first time that Nina gets out of her boat. She drops her eyes as soon as she steps onto the stone. “Come on, don’t be afraid.” I lead her across the ford, then through the willow bushes on the opposite bank of the river.

The winding path leads uphill. The ground underfoot is dry and reddish. We often come across flintstones. Each time we find one Nina jumps with excitement: Oh, how beautiful! Ah, how nice! Well, a girl is a girl. “This is the place where you can find the best flintstones,” I explain to her. “Sharp, flat, like old knives. Just look at the colors! See — lemon, green, blood red. The very thing for striking sparks. I have a capful of them at home. I can swap one for your lamp. Or I’ll just give it to you for keeps.”

We continue along the bottom of the hill, chatting as we walk. The path becomes white, a clear sign that the pits are near. We come to a steep — a reddish upright wall with a lot of furrows made by the running rainwater. There are holes at the bottom of the wall. That’s where you can enter the pits.

We stop at the first hole we come across. You get in there as you get into a cellar. Someone even cut neat steps in the earth. Only it's dark inside. And I can feel cold coming from there.

"Shall we get in?" I ask in a hesitant voice.

I must have a funny look, because Nina smiles as the adults do when they see freckles on a boy's face. Well, come what may. I draw in my breath sharply and slide down onto the upper step. Nina follows. She raises her mushroom, and we continue along the tunnel, holding hands.

The tunnel, polished by the feet of the previous visitors, is steep and slippery. I put forward one foot cautiously, then the other. Something sticky, like cobweb, catches my head from time to time. I walk crouching, and I can feel Nina breathing down my neck.

"Aren't you afraid?" I ask.

"No... Is it far yet?"

"It is."

I don't know whether she's afraid, but I'm rather scared, that's definite. Because there's a whole mountain of earth overhead, with tractors and people and all kinds of things. I can't even see that narrow entrance now. Will I be able to get there in time? The earth shakes, there are cracking sounds, a sand stream rustles. We feel and hear it all in spite of ourselves. We hardly dare to breathe, and we speak only in whisper.

"Nina," I say, "hold up that light, because it's too dark."

"Maybe we better turn back?"

"We'll soon be there."

We go still deeper, the tunnel becomes gloomier, the cold bites by my calves. Suddenly: "Ouch!" I slip and slide into a damp hollow. Then something falls — bump! — on my back. I can see a light glowing at my ear. "Nina, is that you?" We're both scared, but in a moment we giggle.

Nina stands up and raises her lamp. "Ooooh!" she cries out in an admiring voice. "Wow! How beautiful!" We are in the pit now, in a white cave. Oh, but have you ever seen a white cave? I mean a cave in white clean clay? With the floor, walls and ceiling shot with blue and glistening like frost?

Nina is gazing in astonishment at this fantastic white light. She's smiling slightly and two rosy dimples appear on her cheeks. These dimples seem to be filled with glowing honey. Suddenly, there is a sweet taste in my mouth. I fold my tongue into a groove and try to lick the honey out of a dimple.

"Ouch!" cries Nina. "Why do you scare me? Your tongue is so cold."

She wipes her cheek with her hand, raises the lamp still higher, and goes up to the wall. There are traces of a spade on the white cold clay. Colorful little stones sparkle in the wall, and red veins glisten. Water wells up in these veins and drops — ding! — at our feet. The drops seem to freeze before they reach the floor, and there's an echoing sound after every ding.

I'm cold, so I snuggle against Nina and we whisper in each other's ear.

"Nina, your eyes are glowing."

"So are yours."

“Your nose is cold.”

“So is yours.”

“Your lips are trembling.”

“So are yours.”

“Let’s beat it from here.”

“Let’s.”

The cave resounds with the pattering of our feet. We run pushing each other, falling and screaming with fear or maybe laughter, I’m not sure which. We are outside at last. There’s a lot of the sun, and heat, and sweet smells here. That’s it.

We stand there, dazzled by the sun, until we are warm and have had enough of fresh air.

“Let’s play jacks,” Nina says suddenly.

“All right,” I agree, though I think: Maybe I shouldn’t. Jacks is a girl’s game. And then, I never went further than the ferry boat, only saw others play. It takes time.

“Fains I playing second!” Nina shouts and — pop — she has gathered several beautiful polished stones. “There, five exactly.”

She sits down on the ground, smoothes down her dress, blows into her hand with a mysterious look, and arranges the jackstones on the palm in her own way.

“Playing mother hen,” she says.

Before I can realize what is happening, the jacks are in the air. She flashes her palm and — pop — catches them on the back of her hand. The stones had clattered in the air and landed on her hand in a neat close group — not a single one fell on the ground. She tosses the stones once more, and this time they all land in her palm.

How quick she is! Once I tried to play mother hen, but caught only one or two stones. Which means you continue with the one or two stones your mother hen has picked. If you catch nothing, you’re out of the play, brother.

“Now for the ferry boat,” says Nina.

She puts all her stones on the ground and plays ferry boat, then merry-go-round. She tosses the stones quickly and high, one, two or three at a time, and then she picks up a stone from the ground, tosses it, claps her hands, sometimes turns round on her heels, in time to catch the stones which are coming down. Not a single one falls to the ground. I watch her flitting plaits, her restless eyes, and knees flashing in the sun, and her open mouth, turning round and round, as if it is going to catch the darting stones.

“Finished!” Nina gasps, licks a bead of sweat from the tip of her nose, and sinks exhausted to the ground. Her cheeks are flushed and there are happy sparkles in her eyes. Of course, happy as a lark. But what shall I do? How shall I save my reputation? I wish we were at the pond now, playing ducks and drakes. Then I would throw a stone so it would jump some three hundred times. No kidding. Well, six or seven, if not three hundred. But these jacks...

“Listen, Nina,” I say. “Let’s better go to Khivrya.”

“Are you afraid to play?”

“Certainly not. I mean it’ll be too late if we don’t go now.”

“What’s there to see on Khivrya?”

“Oh, something you’ve never seen in your life. Hurry up!”

Khivrya is the name of our hill. It’s steep on the sunny side. The grass is scorched here, the ground is hot, and the smell of wormwood hurts your eyes.

We climb to the top of the hill. It’s closer to the sky here, and you can see the steppe, the road embankment, and the telegraph poles standing at an equal distance from one another, like toy soldiers.

“Sit down, Nina,” I say, patting the hot path with my palm. We sit down facing each other.

“Can you guess who lives here?” I ask pointing to a small hole hidden skillfully in the grass. You could only put your finger in there. But it’s good building work. The walls of the round tunnel are smooth and polished and lined with a thin layer of cotton. It doesn’t matter that the hole is in the ground; it is clean and light.

“A wolf spider lives here,” answers Nina.

“That’s right. We’ll have a talk with him now.”

I take my gear out of my trouser pocket — a nylon thread and a piece of pitch. I knead the pitch with my fingers and blow on it to soften it, and then make a “tongue” of it. I fasten the “tongue” to the thread and lower it cautiously into the hole.

“Pull it,” I say. “But not too hard.” I show her how to tease the spider and explain that he whistles when he is angry, which is a lie.

“Well?” I ask.

Nina is bent over the hole with a mysterious look. She uses one hand to sway the “tongue,” and the other to make a warning gesture.

“Ssssh! He touches it...trying to grab it!”

“When you feel he grabs it — pull!”

Then it happens. Nina jerks backward, pulls the thread, and the spider pops out of the hole like a crayfish that has caught a bite. He’s big and gray on the back, and his claws are dug into the pitch. He’s swaying before Nina’s nose, wiggling his hairy legs. Well, you know how a girl is. She jumps and drops the spider and screams and gives me a slap on the back of my neck.

“You liar! To scare me like that!”

The spider pulls his claws out of the pitch and darts back into his tunnel, while we’re pushing each other and giggling.

“How do they spin a thread?” asks Nina.

“Who they?”

“Spiders of course.”

“I think, um, I think they catch fluffets and use them for spinning. Spiders make threads, and webs to catch flies, and cotton for their young ones... Why?”

“Nothing. Look, what a thin thread.” Nina moves her finger in the air. There’s a fine gossamer spread between two stems. It’s shining in the sun. The stems stretch the gossamer like a string and it’s singing in a soft dreamy voice.

“It’s an antenna,” I whisper. “A spider’s radio.”

“Let’s listen to it.”

“Let’s.”

I put my ear to the gossamer, shut my eyes and say:

“It says ‘Ni-i-i-na, Ni-i-i-na.’”

Nina also puts her ear to the gossamer, listens for a while and says:

“It says, ‘Sa-a-ash-ko-o-o, Sa-a-ash-ko-o-o.’ ”

I hold my ear to the gossamer again and say:

“ ‘A lie...a lie...you’re telling a lie, Nina.’ That’s what it says.”

Then Nina holds her ear to the humming gossamer and says:

“‘It’s you who’s telling a lie.’ That’s what it says.”

We both try to bend over the singing gossamer at once, our heads bump against each other, and the silky thread snaps with a ting.

“What a pity,” says Nina.

“What a pity,” I echo with a sigh.

We get to our feet and follow the flying gossamer. Twisting and swerving, it’s like a merry living thing, traveling across the steppe. We hurry on after it.

“Look, it clears the weeds.”

“Look, it flies away from a swallow.”

“Look, it turns toward the road.”

We turn after the gossamer and scramble over the road embankment. We’re ready to follow it to the white city, with big white houses, white kiosks, and policemen wearing white belts. We would have walked to that city, but a rush of wind catches up the gossamer and sweeps it high into the sky — above the telegraph wires, above the darting swallows, way up toward the fluffy cotton clouds. The gossamer vanishes, melts away in the distance.

But the telegraph poles, with their white cups and the taut wires between them, are still on the ground within our reach, and they must be humming, too. I put my ear to the black pole. It trembles and says in an irritated voice, “Buzz-buzz-buzz.” The powerful buzzing comes from the ground runs up the pole, and then far away along the wires.

“Hey,” I call out. “What are you buzzing about?”

“Buzz-buzz-buzz,” repeats the pole.

“But what does it mean?”

“Hummm...hummm,” says the pole.

“Oh well,” I wave my hand in resignation. “Buzz-buzz...hum-hum. That’s all you can say. No use talking to you poles... Nina, let’s go home, we’ve got rather far this time.”

Only now I notice that I’m really far from my home. We’re standing on the hilltop, there’s nothing around us but the sky. I can see a tiny house far below. It’s like a white mushroom — no doors, no windows, only small dots. Dot-dot-dot. A figure standing in the yard reminds me of an exclamation mark (!), and the waving hand is like an ant’s leg. Oh my! Mom must be calling her Sashko, while Sashko goes gallivanting.

“Nina, let’s run down!”

“Let’s.”

“Let’s have a race!”

“Let’s.”

I go whizzing downhill, and I pretend I'm on Marble, flying over the bushes and the ditches. The green ricks of the willows are rushing on me, and the fresh air from the river is cooling my face. Whew, here's the ford.

"Nina, will you come tomorrow?"

"I don't know."

"Please come. I'm so lonely here."

"All right, if nothing bad happens with Adam."

"See you tomorrow, then."

"Goodbye."

"...ko, whom are you talking to, I wonder."

I can hardly lift my heavy head; too much sun. There are dark blue patches on my chest and elbows — perhaps I've been lying too long on the hard stone. Every bulge and hollow of its rough surface is imprinted on my skin. I can see only dark for a while, and I can't make out who is speaking and what the point of the question is. Aha, it's Mom. She came with the bucket and an armful of the washing. She's going to swill it in the river.

"I'm asking whom you're talking to, Sashko," Mom repeats.

"Nobody. I'm just lying here, that's all. Whom can I talk to, with such a shortage of boys around here?"

"Poor thing," says Mom in a bitter voice. "He's been roasting on this burning hot stone for a whole day. There's just no one to play with. He may grow up a hermit, God forbid."

Don't worry, Mom, please. I've been lying alone on this stone, and I've never left it. But at the same time I managed to visit a white cave, hunt for a spider, and wander in the steppe. In a word, I've had enough of running and talking today.

EVERYTHING SAILS AWAY

Have you ever heard the noise of the approaching soft rain?

Mom had opened the window and the cool air was coming from outside. I was sitting and listening to the noise beginning in a faraway unknown world. It was not a noise actually, but the whispering of the earth, the stirring of dry grass, and the rustling of yellow leaves. I strained my ears: maybe I had overslept and it was the noise in my head? No, I could hear it coming slowly through the orchard, then there was the pattering on the window and the wall — a steady, frequent and soothing sound. The smell of the rain and silent dreams entered the house. My eyelids grew heavy, and I was wrapped up in warm comfort. The noise lulled me to sleep, but my ears were sharp as ever, and I could hear the squeaking of a tree swelling with water.

When there was no more purring noise under the windows and it had died away behind the house, it seemed that someone touched my shoulder. Hey!

I shook off the sleep and glanced out of the window; the rain had stopped. The sun was hiding behind the clouds, but its light had added a rosy tinge to the gray sky,

and the drops of rain on the wet plants were glistening, reflecting its cream-colored glow.

A breeze came from the drowsy field, and the shaken-off drops plopped down on the earth. The breeze became stronger; it was probably gathering speed in the steppe. Something was brewing out there. It was a chase probably, I didn't know. One thing was clear — panic broke out there, and it was a terrible panic. Then I saw the first swift-footed runaways, racing and bouncing helter-skelter. Gray and shaggy, they leaped over the ditches, stopping only for a moment to draw their breaths, and then rushed on again. They were pursued by the same shaggy balls. The runaways were stampeding all over the field like a frightened flock of sheep, hiding frantically as they reached orchards, bushes or ditches. What were they? Hares? Wolves?

One such rolling ball broke off from the flock and veered madly, like a wounded hare, toward our house. It leaped into the yard and shot under a shock of straw. I rushed out of the house and ran to the shock. It was a tumbleweed. It hid into a snug nest and seemed to be trembling from the cold. That was a hare for you.

It was just the wind blowing wet tumbleweeds about the field. I felt sad.

Only yesterday we were rushing, like these rolling tumbleweeds, to the house of Grandma Sirokha. There was a truck standing in the yard, people were milling around, cymbals were clanging, and some men put a coffin onto the truck. The coffin was long, it stuck out from the truck. When they raised one end of the coffin, I saw Adam. His face was strict, and he was looking strictly up into the sky. There was a deadly glow over the face. He had died because he could not breathe, laugh, or talk. Life was burnt down in him to the last drop. He was already smelling of earth, and he was on a journey from which people never come back.

A woman, blinded by tears, was sobbing over the coffin, Grandma Sirokha was lamenting, other women were crying. Each time the cymbals clang my heart was racked and I had a lump in my throat.

Adam was buried under a thin old elm tree.

I didn't know whether storks liked to build their nests in elm trees. But I thought they did. Because they liked kind people. Those who treated ill birds with herbs, or built singing water mills.

“Nina,” I said after a long silence. “Your boat is leaking.”

“It is,” she nodded.

I noticed bags under her eyes, and she was silent as she had never been before. An hour passed, then another, but neither of us said a word. Nina was gazing at the water, the wind stirred the black ribbons in her plaits. Adam had died. What was there to talk about?

The day was gloomy. Timid shadows flitted over the river. Some of the treetops had grown yellow, and the cold transparent water reflected the crimson colors of autumn. A few yellow leaves had stuck to Nina's paddle. I had a better look at the boat and saw that it heeled over to its right side. The birch bast on the sides of the boat, once white and beautiful, had darkened. Some boards at the bottom had warped and water was oozing between them. It had flooded the bow, covering Nina's white shoes.

“Look, Nina, your boat is no good.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll do without a boat.”

I couldn’t imagine Nina without a boat. How would she come here then? I could see her only sailing to our ford: on fluffy clouds, then across the meadows, and along the river.

“Nina, I’m going to make a boat for you.”

“Can you?” She glanced at me and her lips curled in a bitter smile.

“I’ll try.”

“What will you make it out of?”

Really, what could I make it out of? I became thoughtful. I was not strong enough to make a dugout. Besides, our river was too shallow for it. Those rapids and the gorge — it was all my fancy. But in reality the place between the two stones where Marble had stuck was too small even for my foot. I needed light and soft material that would float on the water and would be easy to cut, so I could make a handsome boat out of it. Then it struck me. There was such a material! In the parcel!

Yesterday Grandma Sirokha had come to our place. She stopped under an elm tree, dark and withered, and gestured to me.

“Come here.”

She was tottering along as usual, never looking round, only her back was bent with grief more than before. When I went into her house, the smell was still there, I mean the smell of candles, wax — the smell of death. There were deep and dark hollows on the grandma’s cheeks, as well as under her eyes. I was afraid even to look at her. It seemed she was ready to follow Adam.

“Here,” said she gloomily. “The parcel is addressed to him... It came today.” He’d been in the earth for three days now, and he would never get a letter, or a parcel, or anything. This “today” made her cheeks twitch, and she pushed the plywood box into my hands and added, “Take it. I think, he wanted to please you...”

I couldn’t quite understand who wanted to please me, but I took the parcel and went home wearily. There were a lot of curious things in the box: green and ripe pine cones, plump acorns that looked like suntanned fellows wearing berets with pig tails at the top, a thick piece of pine bark, a gray-green fir twig, a long gray feather of a crane or a stork, and a handful of smaller things.

Fascinated, I put all this out onto the table and began examining every thing. What was Adam going to do with them? And who had sent them? Then it struck me: a return address! I looked at the box, but instead of a return address there was a drawing in ink on the cover. It was a little man like this:





The man was greeting someone, as you can see. But whom?

I would have never solved the mystery of this parcel, would have never known who the man was that had sent a feather and a fir twig and all the other things to our village, had it not been for Nina.

When I thought of making a boat, I remembered about that piece of pine bark which had come by mail. I rushed home, took the box with all the treasures in it, a knife, and a lot of other things that would come handy in my work, and returned to the river. Nina might be curious to see all these things and play with them while I would be building a boat, I thought.

Nina darted a look at me and paled as soon as I stepped on the stone.

“A parcel? When did it come?”

She jumped to her feet, rocking the boat, and leaped onto the bank. She rushed to the box, perfectly at a loss, tears welling in her eyes.

“Wow. He’s packed everything I asked for. Everything I need,” she whispered, putting the cones, acorns and dry twigs into the raised skirt of her dress.

“Who’s packed everything? Do you know him?” I asked in a puzzled voice. Grandma Sirokha had said, “I think he wanted to please you.” But it turned out the parcel was meant for Nina, and the girl had been looking forward to receiving it.

Meanwhile, Nina put her hand into the box and fished out something which was hidden under the moss covering the bottom.

“That’s it. A note!” She unfolded a sheet of paper and her eyes ran over the note.

“Read it aloud,” I said.

“There are only a few words. About you, too. Here.” Nina gave me the note. It ran:

Dear Adam,

I can’t and I won’t console you. You are a man of courage. I’m glad your true friends will stand by in your last minutes. I’m sending what you have asked for them. Let the smells of the forest country come to the steppe. My best regards to Nina and Captain Sand.

Yours,

Ols.

Next came a drawing of a little man raising his hat in a greeting gesture, just like on the box cover.

“Nina, who’s this Ols?” I asked.

Nina, as if spellbound, was examining thin reddish twigs, birch catkins, dried leaves, nutshells — touching them, sniffing and putting them into the skirt of her dress. I repeated my question.

“Nina, can you tell me who this Ols is?”

“He’s like Adam. They went to the institute together.”

“What’s he doing now?”

“Making a nuclear sun, like Adam was.”

“Isn’t he afraid it might burn him like Adam?”

“They don’t think of themselves there. I met them. They say, ‘We must... We must

put another sun over the Earth. We must make it stronger than the one we have.' They always say, 'We must.' "

"Why is this *must*? Can't we do without it? Don't we have enough of the sun, grass, crickets, butterflies, and dandelion blowballs? Why should they invent another sun?"

Nina's mouth was shut tight, as if sealed by that resolute *must*. I knew she would say nothing more.

We sat silent for a minute or two. Then I said:

"All right, Nina. I'll make a boat for you."

"Of pine bark?"

"Sure."

"Oh, fine. I've been dreaming about it for a long time. I wanted just this kind of boat, of pine bark. It's the best: beautiful, light, and it never leaks. Adam was going to make one for me, but he didn't live to." She bent down her head.

Nina's knees were trembling. Her sodden shoes were coming to pieces, and a swelled toe was peeping out. It's autumn, I thought, she's cold. Her miserable look wrung my heart.

I took the piece of pine bark (it was quite a piece, Ols must have picked it off an old tree) and looked it over. It was like a chocolate layer cake, with brown and white layers. And it looked tasty. I even licked it once. It was tart and smelled of resin.

Nina rested her head on the clenched tiny fists and was watching my preparations closely, hiding a thin smile. What a strange boy, she must be thinking.

I looked at the pine "cake" this way and that, trying to figure out how to shape the body of the boat. First, I thought, I would remove everything I wouldn't need, then I'd make the bow and the sides. After that I'd pick out the middle.

I took up the knife; it went through the wood easily. The reddish dust was falling down, the shavings were curling up. The work went on smoothly. Soon you could see a long pointed body of a boat. It was rather crude, but you could say already it was going to be the real thing. One thing troubled me, though. The upper flakes of the bark came off as soon as I made a sharp movement with the knife. But then I got used to handling this kind of material, and the work went ahead.

Nina was thoughtful, watching quietly. She didn't say a single word. This made me respect her more than ever before. If it were not Nina, but someone else, they would certainly start talking: "This is not the way to cut wood, you're cutting it in the wrong place, let me show you how to do it..." The ill-timed remarks would certainly make you spoil it sooner or later. The spoiled thing would encourage them to even more critical remarks: "I thought I told you, look what you've done..." Nina was not like that at all. Her quiet thoughtful face was propped up by her small fists and her eyes were full of patient waiting. Now she was in the sun, now in the shade from a passing cloud.

"Look," I said. "There's *Santa Maria*. It's just dropped anchor."

It was a yellow leaf that had dropped on the water from a willow. It was long and glossy, its stem curled up proudly. It looked like Columbus' caravel *Santa Maria*, the picture of which I had seen in a book. A gust of wind rippled the surface of the water

and swept the ship away from the bank. It was racing along, turning its bow right and left, as if looking for the best place to pull in.

“Sashko,” asked Nina. “Can you make this boat with a high bow?”

“I can. That’s the way I’m making it. Here.” I held up the almost finished boat: brand-new, of dark red color, smelling of resin; well planed strong sides slanting toward the bottom, a high bow.

“Wow,” Nina said softly, and her eyes glowed. “It’s a real *Santa Maria!*”

It wasn’t long now. I had only to pick out the middle. Using the sharp point of my knife, I made deep long cuts along the sides, the bow and the stern. It was easy to scrape out the bark now: its flakes almost came off by themselves. The boat was becoming deeper and more spacious. I was figuring out where to make a bench and cut out holes for the oars. Finally, I hollowed out the middle and blew out the dust. Nina gave me a sidelong glance, hiding a smile.

“What’s the matter, Nina?”

“Nothing. It’s just your red mustache.”

“What about it?”

“Makes you look like a pirate.”

I blew off the mustache, shook off the chocolate dust which had covered my shirt and pants, and held up the little boat.

“Ready,” I announced. “I’ll just cut out the oars, and that’ll be all.”

Our boat was on the water at last, rocking gently. The pine oars were gleaming in the sun. Dark red shadow from the red side of the vessel was dancing on the waves. Nina was also dancing with the boat, reflected red light playing on her face. She was quite different from the sad girl that was sitting on the bank. Leaning forward and peering into the distance, she looked like a seagull ready to take off. Her hair was tousled and her dress fluttering in the wind.

“Wait a moment, Nina! What about a sail? I have a piece of cloth, I’ll make it in a jiffy.”

I put up a tall mast with a yard and fastened the sail with a piece of string and glue. The sail billowed in the wind and flapped restlessly. The boat moved into midstream.

“Sashko, get in!” Nina shouted. “We’ll go together.”

“What! Me too?”

“Why not!”

Indeed, it was not an ordinary boat. It belonged to Nina, and I made it out of the pine bark, and the bark came from mysterious Ols greeting everybody with a raised hat.

The swift current carried the boat toward the gorge, and I jumped in just in time. The next moment we plunged into the spray and the churning water. I leaned forward against the right oar and yelled, “Watch out!” I steered the boat so it would pass safely the sharp-edged stone. There was another jolt, I was splashed all over, and we sailed into the wide stretch.

Dripping wet, we were sitting side by side under the sail, watching the passing banks: the caves undermined by water, with intertwined tree roots looking like the arms of an octopus; the white sandbanks strewn with snails; the ledges running along

the steep clay walls dotted with holes where swifts lived (now they were darting and screaming over the meadow). Then we sailed through a green tunnel made by overhanging willows, where clusters of ripe red showball berries glowed in the dusk overhead.

I was sitting at oars, steering. Suddenly Nina tapped my shoulder. I looked back and saw Nina's abandoned boat drifting slowly downstream. Perhaps it didn't want to remain alone at the ford and, though half-submerged, crept after us.

"There's someone riding on it," said Nina.

"Where? I can't see anyone."

"Look, in the back."

Indeed, there was a yellow dragonfly in the back of the boat. My imagination immediately transformed the boat into a small aircraft carrier and the dragonfly into a flimsy biplane. Or maybe the plane had crashed and the boat was taking it to the nearest airfield? While rounding one of the bends, the half-submerged boat ran into the bank and stuck. The dragonfly hopped off at a jolt. In the air it looked even more like a tiny plane. I could see the pilot waving his helmet. We waved goodbye to him.

However, soon our boat also stopped. What on earth could this mean? The water was churning and foaming, but we could not even budge. We had come on a snag. But what kind of a snag? The strong current was gurgling under the surface, breaking through an obstacle. The boat was shuddering like a living thing, but wouldn't move an inch. We exchanged glances, unable to grasp the situation. I bent overboard, peering into the water. After a while, I spotted something sticking out of the foaming water. This something looked like a wicker basket.

"Ah-ha!" I exclaimed. "Now I see!"

"What is it?" asked Nina.

"A fish pot! Gawker's fish pot. He has an enormous one, so he can block the whole river. You know, people say that Gawker opens the lock on the upper pond to let the water out into the river together with the carps that belong to the fish farm. It's easier for this fox to steal it from here."

"I can see that the river was overflowing here," said Nina.

Indeed, it was evident, if you had a close look. There was a fresh cover of silt on the islets, the grass was bent to one side, moss was hanging from the lower boughs. I wonder, I thought, what did Gawker manage to catch in that fish pot of his?

I took a pole and put it into the bubbling water. The pole did not go far, I felt something quivering underneath. I poked the water and suddenly — splash! splash! It was like a bundle of firewood falling into the river. The fish were thrashing and churning the water with their tails. One huge carp swung its powerful tail, leaped out onto the bank, gasped several times, and bounced back into the river.

"What a catch! The pot is swarming with fish," I said. "I stuck in the pole and it wouldn't fall."

"What shall we do? It's a crime! Should we call someone for help?"

"What for? We'll think of something... Look. Gawker stops his fish pot with a bundle of straw. I'll take that bundle out and let the fish go wa-a-ay down to the lower pond."

“All right. Hurry up.”

I went into the river. It was a deep place. Besides, my legs sank into the mud up to the knees. I bent down so that my ear touched the water, and groped first for the pot and then for the stop. When I pulled out the bundle of straw, the fish rushed out, tickling my legs, brushing and bumping against them.

“Here they go! Tons of them! And all free now!” I yelled laughing.

Meanwhile, the fat carps were swimming lazily downstream, as if towing the waves rolling over them. They were twisting their tails slowly, with an important air, and the scales on their sides were gleaming like gold. They were not afraid of us, so they were streaming quietly along the bank. We watched the carps swimming for a long time, until they came upon a new obstacle. The water was swirling and foaming again. It appeared Gawker left nothing to chance. He had installed one more fish pot to be on the safe side. I pulled out the stop here too — a bundle of rotten straw. The way for the fish was free now from the upper to the lower pond.

“What about the fish pots?” asked Nina. “Gawker will use them again. And will continue stealing fish.”

Humph...the fish pots. What am I to do with them? I thought.

“Nina,” I said. “It’s growing dusk. We’re wet and cold. See, there’s gooseflesh on your elbows. Let’s make a fire.”

“Oh, wonderful!”

We gathered dry stems and brushwood in the growth of bushes on the bank. I went to the river to pull out Gawker’s fish pots, while Nina was laying a fire. The fish pots had been in the water for quite a time, they had become even dark, and you could smell mud and fish scales a hundred meters away from them. I leaned the heavy fish pots one against the other. This resembled a frame for a big tent, and there was a place for a fire between the two things. When the flames leaped up, we saw a fantastic sight: the fish pots began to steam! The hissing snakes were creeping up through the woven twigs and then swirling into a thick column.

“Look!” cried Nina. “It’s like smoke rising from an igloo. And we’re two Eskimos eating the meat of a polar bear.”

“Fine,” I said, cowering with cold. “Eskimos. Only sitting wet on the snow.”

Maybe the fire made it darker, or maybe we just didn’t notice when darkness fell. Night closed in on us. The dark bushes on the bank also moved closer, and damp air came from them. When the fire pushed the darkness back for a moment, the crimson light fell on the bank, and we could see the drowsy boat with the mast and the sail. The stars were twinkling overhead, blue, like the sparks of the Bengal light.

I threw more brushwood into the fire, the flames leaped high, reaching the top of the fishing pots. The damp twigs were hissing and sizzling until, at last, they caught fire. The red tongues shot into the sky, and the fish pots were blazing like huge torches, lighting the meadow around us. What a beautiful sight it was!

Nina jumped to her feet with glowing eyes and went dancing round the fire, her plaits flying out behind her, her hands clapping. I followed, striking an imaginary tambourine. The high fire was crackling, scattering around hot cinders. We seemed to be in the jungle, dancing to a roll of tom-toms. Suddenly — there was night again.



The fire died down, we were cold, lonely and sad. The night separated us. I was holding Nina's hand, but I could not see her face. We felt timid like orphans without the fire. A lonely bird swished overhead.

"Autumn has come," said Nina.

"It has," I agreed. "Birds are going to the warm countries."

"I must go, too."

I felt a gentle squeeze of her hand.

Nina was going to sail away. Everything sails away in autumn: clouds, gossamer, birds, schoolchildren, combine harvesters. Everything is sailing away and saying goodbye to summer. And so was Nina.

We met at the ford as usual. She was sitting in her boat, I on the stone. The shadows of the flying cranes flitted across the water.

"What grade will it be?" asked Nina.

"Third."

"That means you'll soon forget me."

I shrugged and thought: Oh well. Why should we go into this empty talk?

"Yes, you'll forget me," Nina repeated in a soft but firm voice. "I used to have many friends, but they all have grown up and are beginning to buy motorcycles, transistors, tickets for soccer matches. When I come to visit them, they just blink sleepily and don't recognize me. 'Who are you?' they ask. 'I'm Nina,' I say. 'I don't know any such girl.' Then I try to place myself. 'Do you remember both of us listening to a spider radio in the steppe?' 'Such nonsense! Spider radio indeed! Stop fooling us and go away!'"

I was not sure whom Nina meant, but I saw Gawker as large as life, gawking at his gramophone sleepily, because when he was drunk he always listened to the same song:

*Hey, Dunya, pretty girl,
You're, honey, best of all.*

"Not everybody is like that," I sniffed, because I felt hurt. "Adam didn't forget. He often mentioned you."

"Adam." There was a peculiar tone in Nina's voice. "Adam was a child. A big child. He had his own Tocky, and his own bogy, and his own mushroom lamp. My lamp is a present from him, you've seen it."

"Oh, so it's a present from Adam!" Only now did I learn where that mushroom had come from. The one that was glowing like a moon in the cave.

I fumbled in my pocket and took out my treasures. Then I waded up to her boat and said, "Nina, here are two stones. My best. See, one is white all over, the other is shot with crimson. You can use them to strike fire. Take them when you're terribly scared and strike them, like this — crash, crash. The fear will go."

"Beautiful stones," said Nina and wrapped them up in her handkerchief. "Well, Sashko, it's time for me to sail away."

She got into her tiny boat and dipped her oars into the water. The pine bark was light, and the boat sailed smoothly into midstream and then glided among the yellow leaves which covered all the river. Gossamers were flying over Nina, and still higher — cranes. The river twisted along the valley and disappeared beyond the brown hill. The tiny boat was sailing away until it became a speck glimmering in the distance. I could only see the melancholy girl glowing in the sun like a candle.

“Nina, goodbye-e-e!” I waved my hand.

“Bye-e-e!” repeated the echo.

“I’ll be waiting for you next summer! Do you hear?”

“I do! I will come!”

I stood on tiptoe, but the boat was like a distant shadow of a crane. Suddenly it seemed to me it was a real crane. It took off the water, swished over the land, soared into the sky, and swerved into a curve, following its swift comrades.

Then I saw Nina. She was steering her winged boat into a blue bay...paddling among the clouds. The clouds were looming over her like rocks. Her sail resembled a white feather. And the water was crystal clear, but so deep you couldn’t see the bottom. Nina had sailed away to the warm countries. After the birds.

Even now I’m not sure whether there was such a girl. Maybe it was just my fancy.

Irpin. March, 1969

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ЗЕМЛЯ СВЕТЛЯЧКОВ

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