STORIES

Stepan Vasilchenko

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СТЕПАН ВАСИЛЬЧЕНКО

Оповідання

Translated from the Ukrainian
by *Oles Kovalenko*

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by *Vasil Yevdokimenko*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The work of Stepan Vasilchenko (1879—1932), an outstanding Ukrainian prose writer, belongs to two eras. Before the October 1917 Revolution, the ignorant, poverty-stricken village folk were his heroes, and wasted talent and strength his leading theme. He created a whole gallery of characters of village school teachers whose noble aspiration to bring "all things wise and fair" to the people breaks over the cruelty of bourgeois society. After the Revolution, the tone of his works changed completely, and he wrote mostly about children — the future builders of the society the writer had dreamed about.

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PEASANT 'RITHMETIC

"Would you happen to have a newspaper or a book, Vasil Ivanovich?" Antin the wagoner asked the storekeeper, tying up into a handkerchief the money he'd just received for a haul.

Vasil Ivanovich, a middle-aged gentleman, red-faced and round-bellied, took a drag of his cigarette and blew out a cloud of smoke.

"What on earth do you need a book for?" he asked, knitting his sparse brows.

"I'll have some fun reading over the holiday, because I can't even remember the last time I had a book at home," Antin explained. "I may have forgotten the alphabet for all I know."

"And I bet you're none the worse for that," Vasil Ivanovich said. "To tell the truth, reading books is a waste of time. And anyway, it doesn't suit you at all."

"True enough, I probably shouldn't care so much for books," Antin agreed. "When a fellow's busy working, he sometimes has no time to look up at the sky, let alone to read...."

"Well, as I was saying," Antin started again after a while, "could you find something for me? I'd like to do some reading after dinner, just to pass the time."

"You know what?" the storekeeper said after giving it some thought. "I'll fetch you the Psalter. A more suitable book for the holiday couldn't be found."

"I've got a Psalter, Vasil Ivanovich," said An-

tin. "Don't you have anything else? Maybe something about freedom and land?"

Vasil Ivanovich squinted and glanced away, biting his lip.

"I just don't keep any books like that, brother. You'll get locked up in no time flat for such books." He looked sternly at Antin. "Here's a bit of friendly advice, Antin — don't play with fire, keep away from those books. And if you're so keen on reading, wait a minute and I'll get you something else."

Vasil Ivanovich passed into another room, opened a bookcase and rummaged through a pile of papers and books. He pulled a tattered copy of Yevtushevsky's *Arithmetical Problems* from the bottom, flicked the dust off it, and carried it to the wagoner.

"Here's a book for you, Antin," he said, handing it to him. "And a useful book it is, too — not some worthless piece of junk. Every problem here is like a riddle. You'll have to do some hard thinking to figure any of them out."

"Thank you, Vasil Ivanovich," Antin said. He took the book under his arm without even looking at it, said goodbye, and went. The storekeeper stood at the door and watched him for quite some time. Then he giggled softly. Grinning under his reddish beard, he went to have his dinner, merry and pleased with himself.

Having rested after dinner, Vasil Ivanovich took his walking stick and went for a stroll about the village. Groups of men and women sat outside their yards and houses, chattering. There were children playing on the grass, and girls were singing somewhere. There were no "masters" in the village, except Vasil Ivanovich, and there he felt like a petty prince. People would bow low to him, and he would nod pleasantly. He

was certainly pleased to see them show such respect to his person.

The peasant Litovka approached, a giant of a man, and there he was bending humbly, like an oak-tree in stormy weather. Vasil Ivanovich knew Litovka was bowing so low because his IOU was almost due, and the man was forever short on money.

"All right, I can wait," he thought to himself, "so long as he pays the interest on time."

Vasil Ivanovich walked along, humming a religious tune and looking about the village with a master's eye to make sure everything was in order. He scolded some children, telling them to stop fooling around, and reprimanded a woman who was drawing water from the well.

When he reached Antin's yard, he saw some men talking and laughing in the cherry orchard near the house. Among them was Antin with the book.

"Aha! They must be reading my book!" Vasil Ivanovich guessed. "Well, let them read." Stopping at the orchard, he called out to them:

"Well, how's the book? Do you like it?"

"Not bad," Antin replied. "It's a funny book."

"All right, read on then," said Vasil Ivanovich and went on his way. "A funny book!" he laughed to himself. "They're just wagging their tongues for the hell of it. And guffawing, too! What have they found so funny about it, anyway?"

Presently, he felt the temptation to go back and listen to them. He turned around, stole up to the wattle fence and pricked up his ears. Antin was reading haltingly:

"A peasant undertook to bring from town 50 lamps on the condition that upon delivery he would be paid 5 kopecks for every undamaged lamp and have 1 ruble 20 kopecks deducted

from his pay for every broken lamp. During transportation three lamps were broken. How much did the peasant earn?"

Having read the problem through to the end, Antin lifted his face, flushed with the effort, and gazed at the listeners with his merry eyes.

"It asks how much he got," he explained in his own words, laughing.

"Oh, he must've earned a lot!" said an elderly peasant clad in white pants. Then he took his pipe out of his mouth and burst out laughing.

"Well, I can't tell exactly how much he got this time, only I bet that if he keeps it up, he'll soon be left without a horse. To hell with earnings like that!" chortled Okhrim, a brisk red-haired fellow.

"I guess he got about the same kind of deal as Zakhar's boy did on the estate," the peasant in white pants spoke again. "He spent a week there working on a thresher, and then he came home Saturday night. 'Well, son,' his father says, 'out with the money, because I'm going to town tomorrow and I've got to buy some things.' But the boy just stood there. Finally he said, 'You can yell at me all you want, but I haven't brought a kopeck.' And his father says, 'What have you done with the money, you rascal? Have you lost it or was it stolen?' 'No,' he replied. 'I wish it had been lost or stolen, because I never even touched it.' Then he recounted how some section of the winnowing machine had broken down. They had made out like it was his fault, and when he went to collect his pay, the steward had just bawled him. He hadn't received a single kopeck and was told he had to come back for another week to work off his debt. His father listened to the whole tale and then said, 'That's the way to work, my son. You just keep

on earning money like this, and you'll soon be standing on your own two feet.' So I mean to say that the other fellow must've got about as much carrying lamps as this lad did working on the estate," the man concluded. Everyone roared with laughter.

"Lamps are fragile stuff," somebody said. "If your wagon bumps once, the glass will be smashed to bits. What made him take such a job, anyway?"

"You'd take it, too," said a grim-faced man, "if you hadn't a crust of bread in the house."

Having thoroughly discussed the lamp business, the men fell silent, and Antin picked up the book and resumed reading.

"So that's what it is then," Vasil Ivanovich thought and strained his ears even harder.

"A landowner had 857 dessiatines in his first field," Antin continued. "His second field was larger than the first by 130 dessiatines, and his third field had 150 dessiatines more than the second. How many dessiatines of land did he have in all?"

Having finished reading, Antin proceeded to interpret the problem in his own way.

"It says here the smallest field he had was 857 dessiatines and then he had another one that was 130 dessiatines bigger. But he also had a third one that was the biggest of all! And then it asks" — Antin lifted a finger and screwed up one eye — "how much land did the man have all total?"

"Why, he must surely have had more land than our whole commune put together!" one of the men said, grinning. "If we had just one of his fields, it would be enough for all of us, and our children as well."

"Those are some fields!" Okhrim said, winking. "Nothing like what you or I have. With all that land, a fellow can farm in a big way. But I'd like to see what kind of farmer he'd make if he had a small plot here, a patch there and nothing else. He'd be out hauling lamps in no time flat!"

"It would be nice to know, though, how much each household would get if all that land were to be divided among our villagers," said the grim-faced man.

Vasil Ivanovich could stand it no more. Emerging from behind the fence, he chided the peasants.

"What are you blabbering like this for? That's not why this book was written at all; it's for learning arithmetic and here you're doing God knows what with it. The way you're reading it, you shouldn't have started at all!"

"We were just bored, Vasil Ivanovich," some of the men spoke apologetically. "We've just been reading to kill the time."

"If you've got nothing better to do, you should've tried to figure each problem out," the storekeeper preached at them. "That's what arithmetic is all about."

The men sitting in front affected respectful attention, while at the back Okhrim winked at those around him, muttering softly:

"This is what kind of 'rithmetic it is: the landowner's busy stowing away all that grain from his fields, and the peasant has got nothing to grow grain on, so instead he's to rack his brain figuring out how much land the other man has!"

Several men choked back laughter.

"See?" said Vasil Ivanovich hearing them. "Now you're laughing for no reason at all. But I'm sure that none of you could make sense out of any of these problems."

"There's no way we could," those in front agreed. "We've never had much schooling, and some of us can't even read, so how could we count up all those big figures?"

Behind their backs Okhrim droned on:

"Here's how it could be. You, Mikita, how much land have you got? Half a dessiatine? That's also what I have, more or less. So suppose we should meet and say: let's count the landowner's land, because we've got so damned little of our own. You say he's got a lot. And I say you're wrong, because it adds up to this and this. And you say it's a lie. Then I say who are you calling a liar? Here you grab me by the hair, and I punch you in the nose, and we've got our 'rithmetic going!.. And Hritsko comes by and asks what are those two fighting about? Or are they brothers who can't divide their father's land?"

All the men roared with laughter without bothering to control themselves. Vasil Ivanovich showed signs of anger.

"None of that prattle really makes any sense!" he fumed. "What I'm trying to tell you is that when somebody writes a book of problems, he just makes up all those stories, so you'll have something to count."

"That's what we've been saying, too," Okhrim broke in. "If you've got not a damn thing of your own to count, then you're supposed to —"

"Tfu!" the storekeeper spat with rage. "Give me that book!" he shouted at Antin, snatching it out of his hands.

"Why are you trying to read books at all? Twisting oxtails — that's all you're good for!" Vasil Ivanovich spun around and started away from the men. Everybody was dying with laughter.

"Know what, Vasil Ivanovich?" Okhrim called after the storekeeper. "If we were to divide up your ninety dessiatines among us, we'd probably manage with our own peasant 'rithmetic somehow."

"Why, surely we'd manage!" the grim-faced man echoed him.

Vasil Ivanovich stopped dead in his tracks, as if somebody had tugged at his coat from behind, turned around and was about to say something. But then he spat again and hurried on to his store.

"Did you see him turn up his nose? I bet he didn't like the sound of our peasant 'rithmetic!" the men laughed.

"Where in the hell did he come from?" one of them said. "Where two or three men gather together, there the devil brings him, too, and there's no help for it! Today he didn't even let us read as much as we wanted. A pity, because it was such a funny book!"

VOVA

Antin Vova, a young country teacher, donned his brand-new suit, looked into a small glass, combed his unruly curls, and was about to go out. Then he sat down at the table and fell to thinking. He had worked all of six months in the village, but he still had no friends among the local intelligentsia, although there were quite a few of them. He had long intended to make their acquaintance, but so far he had been unable to do so.

Perhaps it had something to do with his character; he would pace up and down his solitary room daydreaming, then decide it was about time he went out to meet some learned local residents, and he would even dress properly to go and visit the doctor, for example. But once on the street, he would change his mind and direct his steps to the constable or Mulyar, the village solicitor.

On the way, he would make up excuses, reasoning to himself, "It looks easy enough to call on the doctor. But what would it be like? What if I were to come and he were to ask me, 'Do you want to tell me something?' Or: 'What can I do for you?' What would I tell him? And then again he might be busy or sleeping. Well, I'd better wait until some other time... one of these days... later."

He would return from the constable moody and dissatisfied, and he would again pace about his room for quite a while. Then he would get out his diary and record his unhappy thoughts.

Today, however, there did not seem to be any way Vova could wriggle out of confronting the village intellectuals. Today the first public readings were to be held at the people's tearoom — an occasion requiring the attendance of all educated members of the community. Vova, too, was expected to attend — after all he was the schoolteacher. Earlier that day, even the priest had reprimanded him for failure to take part in preparing for this important undertaking. He had also promised to introduce him to the members of the enlightenment committee there.

Although it was time to go, Vova lingered in the room by his small lamp, trying to imagine how it would go, what he could possibly tell them, and what they might say to him.

From habit, his hand reached for a pile of books to draw out the diary, a trusty companion to which Vova often turned for comfort and guidance. Leafing through it mechanically, he ran his eyes over pages filled with his small handwriting.

"...In my leisure time I read everything that I can lay my hands on, but it all seems wrong," he read on one of the pages. "My soul yearns for meaningful words, but where will I hear them? The company of those whom I have so far befriended is not exactly to my liking — vodka, cards, an uneasy drunken existence, dirty conversations, obscene jokes, attacks on the peasant-as-villain... What do I have in common with them — I, a young man in search of enlightenment, beauty and justice?

"Sometimes my flesh crawls when, after a drink, they start revealing their thoughts to one another and relating their dirty dealings. They must feel that I am a stranger, for they often

look askance at me while telling some odious story in my presence.

"I sit with them, listening to their drunken talk and often watch them fight over cards. My heart gradually fills with despair."

Little by little, Vova became absorbed in the diary and was unable to tear himself from it, although it was all familiar and had been read many times.

"...Tomorrow is Christmas," he found on another page, "a big holiday, a feast of youth. Many young people have come to stay with our intellectuals — gymnasium and university students, young girls; tomorrow they will be riding around on sleds, singing and reveling, and I will go to have dinner with the old deacon... We will dine in silence, because old deacons are generally gloomy men. Then I will return to the mute walls of the schoolhouse and pick up a book — but I will have little taste for reading.

"...Sunday. Outside it is dark and thawing... The weather is cheerless. The wind wails in the chimney and tries to tear the roof off. My large, dismal room is chilly and uninviting. The lamp is flickering on the table and I am pacing back and forth, listening to the echo of my steps, humming tunes, trying to remember the songs we used to sing at the teachers' college. Those songs are nice, but something eats and gnaws my heart, so that I feel like thrusting my face into a pillow and crying."

As he finished reading the last filled page, Vova slowly reached for a pen, dipped it into the inkwell and paused, thinking. After a while, he began to write:

"I will now go to meet those people — educated, intelligent people — and I am glad and apprehensive at the same time. I am afraid, because

I am rather shy by nature, not smart and not glib, and I do not know how to behave among such people so as to avoid being mocked. For I do not really know any intellectuals as such. I grew up in a faraway village and was educated at a teachers' college in one of the remotest and darkest corners of the land. The teachers were bossy and kept us at a distance, and I have simply had no chance to meet other educated people."

The school watchman came in to tell him that the factory management, the doctor, the court investigator and some young ladies and gentlemen had already gone to the people's tearoom.

Vova imagined a young lady who was a relative of the investigator. He had often seen her stroll past the schoolyard and heard her melodious voice; her slender figure and fair face with its beautiful eyes had been haunting him amidst the bare walls of his room. Now he would see her close up and maybe even talk to her, while those wonderful eyes gazed at him... and then maybe... who could tell? Vova glanced sideways into the glass, which stood nearby, to see fair curls, shy gray eyes, full of latent fire, and a youthful face with delicate down above the upper lip.

He shook his head and grinned.

"Take courage, Antin!" he scribbled at the bottom of the page. Then he replaced the diary, put on his overcoat, turned off the lamp, and resolutely strode out of the schoolhouse.

Taking off his overcoat and overshoes, Vova stood in the dark corridor, one hand on the latch. Through the foggy glass of the door leading to the room where the enlightenment committee was in session, he could see women's dresses that

made him think of flowers in a garden, and the buttons of men's uniforms flashing in the light. His heart was beating fast and loud.

"Turn back! Who cares?" stirred a tempting thought, but something inside him revolted against such timidity, so, mustering his courage, he pulled the latch.

Everything swam and flashed before his eyes. Vova stood rooted at the threshold, not knowing where to go or what to do next. Fortunately, the priest came to his rescue. Taking him by the arm, he led him about to introduce him to the others.

Blushing self-consciously, Vova bowed to his new acquaintances, at the same time looking for a safe place somewhere in a corner. Spotting an empty chair, he hurried to it and sat down, sighing with relief.

He would have an easier life there, he decided, and began to survey the crowd. But before he could sufficiently recover himself, he became aware that the florid-faced lady seated next to him was staring him in the face, saying something. Vova realized that she was addressing him but failed to make out anything of what she was saying. "Pardon?" he said.

"I said," the woman clearly enunciated every word, "that not long ago there was —"

Because of the general commotion, Vova did not hear that time either, although he strained not only his ears but also his eyes and even his whole body. He assumed it would be churlish to ask her to say it all over again, and, hoping that no answer was expected from him, told himself not to worry and dropped his eyes. The woman, however, did not take her eyes off him; she was obviously waiting for some reply. Vova glanced at her once more, blushed and turned away.

"Why is she gaping at me? What makes her do that, anyway?" he asked himself and resolved not to look at her again. But some time later he stole a glance at the woman; she was no longer looking in his direction but was leaning over to the dark-eyed girl next to her, whom Vova remembered having seen before, and speaking into her ear. Listening, the girl looked at Vova and smiled. Vova blinked rapidly and again turned away.

Meanwhile, everybody was talking loudly, sauntering back and forth, and getting ready for something. Some clustered around the magic lantern, others tried the gramophone or looked through the books. All were busily walking up and down the room, laughing and arguing noisily over this and that; only Vova had nothing better to do than sit silently in the sanctuary of his corner. There he sat, sensing that his situation was becoming critical: he was hard put to find a remedy. He hung his head, thinking with all his might... When he looked up, his heart sank: the girl with beautiful eyes who had been haunting him, was now walking straight toward him, looking at him and smiling pleasantly. Vova was petrified.

The young lady had apparently taken upon herself the charitable mission of raising the young man's spirits. Approaching him, she took a seat beside him and started a conversation.

"You have been sitting here alone, as if you were bored. Are you?" she asked frankly.

"Why, no... I'm not really," he stammered. "I'm... I'm all right."

"But why aren't you doing anything or speaking to anybody?" the girl pressed him.

"What can I tell her?" Vova wondered. His face was burning. In a voice that seemed strange

even to himself, he muttered something to the effect that he would rather watch the others first. The girl began to realize that her self-imposed task was beyond her ability and also blushed.

"Try to cheer up a little; it must be really boring sitting like this," she said in conclusion, and, slightly embarrassed by her failure, walked off.

Vova even felt sorry for her. "Poor thing," he thought. "She must have hoped she could liven things up for me, and now she might even be suffering." Nevertheless, he discovered he could breathe easier now.

"That's enough!" he decided. "I wish they would leave me in peace."

However, his ordeal did not end there. Shortly afterward, a smart-looking young gentleman — some excise official in a button-ridden tunic — suddenly appeared before him, apparently out of nowhere. Speaking distinctly and mincing no words, he completely demolished Vova.

"Why are you all huddled up like a wet hen, young man?" he chided him. "There are no wolves here, and you are in no danger of being devoured. Court the young ladies; tell them something interesting instead of sulking in the corners."

Having thus rebuked Vova, he turned up his mustache and hurried to join the girls.

Vova's ears, neck and face were burning, and beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. "That's a fine dressing-down the rascal gave me," he thought. "It surely felt like whipping with birch rods in a steam bath!" It was long before his face stopped burning.

Now Vova had a feeling that he was unlikely to be disturbed again, but the realization brought him little comfort. He sat glued to his chair and

thought that nothing could make him rise to his feet now, just as nothing could enable him to hover about the room as easily and freely as that dandy, for example. He cursed himself for those bold intentions he had harbored before coming. A bell rang. One by one, everybody drifted to the adjoining room where the readings were to be held and from where the hum of the common villagers' muted voices had been heard for some time. Vova dragged behind the rest.

As lectures were delivered and pictures shown, the audience buzzed. It was merry and interesting.

Now nobody was paying any attention to Vova, so he gradually grew bolder. "I may have cut a poor figure at first, but there is nothing terrible about it," he reassured himself. "Give me a little more time, and once I get used to it all, I'll surely feel more at ease... But isn't it nice to do something useful in the company of good, intellectual people!"

The readings were soon over and the factory manager invited everybody to come over to his place, urging them to proceed there without further delay. There was a general rush for hats and overcoats; everyone hurried to dress, making arrangements for riding together.

"Will they invite me too?" Vova wondered. "If they do, why, I'll be a changed man. And now I'm bold enough to face it, too. Of course, it has all been new to me, so I haven't really been at my best, but now I'm going to improve." The priest went past him, looking away for some reason. The manager's eyes fell on Vova and he, too, turned away. Somebody nearly bumped into Vova and nodded, as if to say goodbye.

The crowd melted away. He could hear departing sleds creak and squeak in well-pressed

tracks outside. It became quiet. And suddenly Vova felt that all those people were strange to him, and that he had nothing in common with them.

"What a fool I was to think so!" Suddenly, he felt painfully ashamed. He stood alone in the corner, hanging his head, his eyes wet with burning tears of shame.

Quietly, like shadows, his old companions appeared beside him — Mulyar, the clerk, the constable. Vova had not noticed them in the crowd earlier and was annoyed to see them now.

They approached him with sardonic smiles and greeted him with exaggerated politeness.

"Why didn't you go to the manager's, Antin Petrovich?" Mulyar inquired slyly. "Haven't all the gentlemen gone there?"

"They're not my kind of people... big shots," Vova replied with an effort.

"They're human beings all the same," Mulyar said in a changed voice with mock emotion. "You are the teacher around here, you've studied a great deal, so you, too, should be considered an educated person, and here they didn't even bother to shake hands with you before running away. Or maybe you think we didn't see. We saw everything all right."

Vova kept silent and felt terrible. He wanted to end the conversation as soon as he could and escape from them. But he just stood there, grinning sheepishly.

"Which means," Mulyar went on, "that your place is with us, not with them, and that your trying to climb higher up the social ladder is ridiculous."

They went outside. The night was frosty and starry. The manager's building was ablaze with gay, bright lights. They began speaking about

the readings, and Mulyar ridiculed the rich people's show. Vova ached inside and did not listen. Involuntarily, he looked over his company — faces swollen from drinking, dull, wicked eyes.

Then he realized that only four gloomy walls awaited him at home, remembered that for a full six months he had been suffering from loneliness, and he wanted to cry.

"There's no reason to be so sad," the clerk unexpectedly spoke to Vova, showing that he understood well what was going on in his heart. "They don't want you — so ignore them; you can live without them quite well."

Vova came to himself and made an effort to somehow get rid of these unhappy thoughts. He tried to listen to their conversation, but in spite of all his efforts, he kept returning to the previous subject.

Yawning, the clerk intimated that it would be nice to drop in at "the club," meaning the place where they often went to get drunk together. The idea instantly appealed to Vova; it seemed to be a way out of his very unpleasant situation, and he seized upon it at once.

"Sure," he seconded the clerk. "Why don't we go and have a drink at that place of yours, wherever it is."

"Would you join us?" Mulyar asked incredulously.

Affecting indifference, Vova agreed to follow them, as if there was nothing extraordinary about it. His companions' spirits rose.

"We should've done this long ago!" Mulyar said, clapping Vova on the shoulder.

They walked faster, talking in livlier voices. Vova felt something sad and gay at the same time well up inside him. "Well, let them..." he

thought, mentally shrugging. "If that's the way it has to be, I don't care."

A ramshackle house stood in an out-of-the-way corner of the village. A dim light shone through a red curtain. Turning up their collars and pulling down their hats, they waited silently at the low, old door. Leaning down to a window, the clerk tapped his fingers on the pane.

"David! David!" he called, keeping his voice low, so that it would not go too far. "Open up!"

One corner of the red curtain was pulled aside, and an old Jewish woman peered out at them. "Who's there? What do you want?" she asked grumblingly.

"It's us," said the clerk. "Let us in, Dakha."

"Who's us and what do you need?"

"Just open up and you'll see!" the clerk urged her impatiently. "Don't you recognize us?"

The curtain in the window fell again. After a while, a door squeaked somewhere in the house, a bolt creaked and the outer door opened. One by one, they slipped into the hallway, groped for the other door, and passed into the room. There was a dampness in the air and a musky smell.

The furnishings were unkempt and messy: a bare table that wobbled on three legs stood in the middle of the room, two chairs with some wisps sticking out from under the oilcloth upholstery, and a ragged sofa without a back were the sole comforts. The bare gray walls sadly stared at the newcomers.

On the earthen floor in one corner, two Jewish children, wrapped up in some rags, were sleeping on a pile of straw. It was so cold that their breath turned into clouds of mist. Hoarfrost formed on the windowpanes...

Roused from sleep, the children stuck their heads out from under their rags and gaped at the visitors with their big, black eyes.

In came David, a sleepy old Jew wearing flat-soled shoes over bare feet and a gown over an undershirt. Mulyar whispered a few words into his ear.

"One?" David asked in a low voice.

"Get us one for a start and then we'll see," Mulyar said aloud.

They took seats around the table. Dakha came and covered it with an old stained cloth. Then she brought a plateful of sliced herring, some bread, a goblet of thick glass, and copper forks covered with a moss-like greenish film.

David fetched a bottle. Mulyar took it from him and struck the bottom with his palm; the cork popped out, and the raw smell of cheap vodka spread throughout the room.

"The first glass goes to our guest of honor!" the solicitor announced, passing the full glass to the teacher. Vova downed it smartly in a single gulp. The glass went around the table; their voices grew louder and louder; their eyes glistened, and their faces turned red. David brought out another bottle and then another.

Leaning close to Vova, Mulyar drunkenly whispered something to him, tenderly stroking his head and smirking. The teacher listened to his drunken prattle, nodding and grinning tipsily.

"All right — give me your hand! Let's kiss!" Mulyar shouted, hugging Vova.

They exchanged smacking kisses. The constable and the clerk also clambered to kiss the teacher.

"Are you one of us now?" They clang to him, squeezing him in their arms.

"I'm yours, I'm one of you, my dear devils!" Vova yelled in a drunken voice, struggling to tear himself from their embrace.

"That calls for another one!.. David!" Mulyar commanded. "Two more and something to drink them with!"

David complied. The goblet was dispensed with in favor of a large tea cup which was filled to the brim and handed to Vova. Without taking their eyes off his face, they urged him to drink it.

Vova took the glass and drained it without even making a wry face.

"Good fellow!" they yelled. "He's one of the boys! He guzzles the stuff like a true Cossack!"

"Let's toss him!" somebody shouted, and Vova suddenly became aware that his head was pressed against the low ceiling.

He felt sick and dizzy and remembered little of what followed. Later he would only recollect, as if through a mist, that they shouted, sang, and mentioned somebody's godmother. His memory would also retain the warm, neat interior of some house, icons decorated with towels and dried flowers, a table covered with a clean cloth, cherry brandy, and a cheerful black-browed young woman in a red kerchief.

It was past midnight. The moonlit night was quiet. The trees stood covered with hoarfrost, and snow sparkled along the road. In all the houses, people were asleep.

Their hats tilted to the backs of their heads, Vova and Mulyar dragged along the sleepy streets, swaying, stumbling and lovingly embracing each other. They were shouting some song at the top of their voices, and their drunken, discordant wails echoed throughout the village.

"Hey there!" a voice shouted behind the couple. "Look out!"

Vova and Mulyar stepped off the road. A sled with guests returning from the manager's party flew past them with merry din and laughter.

Vova stopped, his hands on his hips, and looked after them with narrowed eyes.

"The hell with you," he blurted out disdainfully. And he spat.

1910

AT THE MANOR

Larko plodded down the street, stooping and swaying. His knitted hat was pulled low over his ears and his scarf was carelessly wrapped about his neck. He also wore a rusty-colored jacket of coarse felt and boots of time-hardened leather. His mustache and short beard were covered with ice; his head was drawn into his shoulders; and under one arm he had, of all things, a violin wrapped up in a torn kerchief. White butterflies of driving snow swirled around him, blinded him, clung to his hat and his beard. A crowd of children followed behind.

"Come on, Larko, play us a tap dance! Oho-ho! But he's loaded for sure!"

"Larko! Will you come again to play at a wedding near Boiko's Dam?"

They hurled frozen dung at him and tried to trip him and push him down into the snow.

"Get off! A plague on you! Shoo!" shouted Larko, chasing the children all over the street and scaring them off like sparrows.

"Why are you walking in the snow, Larko? Why don't you keep to the road? Aren't you going the wrong way? You should be going that way!" The boys pushed him in the opposite direction.

"That's a lie," he muttered. "I see everything and I know everything... you can't fool me...."

Indeed, Larko did know and see everything: he saw trees in blossom all around him and he

saw that all the houses were covered with blankets of white. He also saw yellow patches of netted light, and so he knew that it was night. He also knew that tomorrow was Christmas and that he was going to the hamlet to praise Christ with his music at the manor. There he would be fed and given plenty to drink and some money; and if his luck was good, he would also manage to steal something, as he had done the previous year. Where he had been earlier in the day he did not remember, nor did he care to: for wherever he had been, he was no longer there.

The white butterflies flew into his face no more, and he could see better. He was already outside the village. Way ahead, something loomed in the dark by the road — a weeping willow. The Burned Forest lay beyond the village, and a little farther on was the hamlet.

Pulling a bottle out from under his jacket, Larko tilted it to his mouth. Then he carefully put it back.

"What's Larko?" he muttered to himself. "Larko's not as simple as that. Oh no! Larko's a valuable man. Everybody knows him."

They certainly knew him. They also agreed that he was a valuable man, even though he was often scolded and beaten, even though they often saw him drunk, lying in the weeds or in a ditch with his violin. Everybody saw that his life was miserable, but nobody ever heard him complain — at least not in words. He used words only to ask good people for something when he was sober or to shout curses when he was drunk. Of his misery and his pain, he spoke in some lonely place only to his violin, and the violin wept, like a human being, carrying his bitterness far and wide. Often in the middle of the night, people were roused from sleep by its sobbing

strings, and then they knew that Larko had awakened somewhere under a fence and was giving vent to his sorrow.

Often, walking across the steppe, Larko would sit down by the road, all alone, press the violin to his chest, tenderly like a baby, lean his poor head to it — and the strings would weep and wail, as though Larko's heart were speaking through them. At such moments he would often cry. And people riding past him would also cry.

That's the kind of man he was.

Now he was quite drunk, plodding through the snow across the fields. And it seemed to him that Panas the tar-maker and Taran the wheeler had somehow appeared by his side and were walking with him, telling stories, laughing and pushing him, making him fall face down into the snow.

"What're you doing that for, fellows?" Larko reproached them, struggling to his feet. "Stop fooling around! That's enough! They did not mind him, though, and each time he stood up they pushed him down again. He sat in the snow, cursing. Having rested a little, and, seeing that Panas and Taran were gone, he rose and continued on by himself. Walking down the middle of the road, he suddenly became aware that somebody was standing in his way and would not let him pass. He stepped back, hoping to avoid the obstacle — and walked straight into it again.

He stood, thinking. "Ehe!" he laughed. "I must've reached the hamlet already. I got here so fast I didn't even realize it at first." He straightened himself up before going to see the master.

"Strange folks, these landowners," Larko mused, climbing up something. "Funny people: they've built their house so high a fellow has to climb up to it... I hope I don't fall and break

my neck." Even so, he slipped and landed in the snow several times before he made it to the top.

Oh Lord, how rich and beautiful it all looked! Everywhere there were tables covered with expensive-looking carpets and long rows of chairs upholstered with velvet. Wonderful flowers grew in exquisite pots, and a crystal censer hung in the middle of the room. There was a chandelier and plenty of silver and gold. Everything shone and glittered. But whatever he touched and wherever he tried to sit, everything was shaky. Larko looked around, and through the stone walls he somehow caught glimpses of the starry sky. Now he could no longer understand whether he was inside the manor house or outdoors.

A star fell, flying so low above his head that he ducked to avoid being hit.

"Well, you can never tell anything with these rich folks," he reasoned. "This one has taken the sky inside his house."

Walking about the room were gentlemen, ladies and their children, all dressed up in silk and gold. One young girl with a face as white as cherry blossoms and eyes as dark as marigolds trode as lightly as if she were weightless.

"If I were a painter," Larko thought, "I'd paint her face and put it with the icons." He walked around admiring everything...

But why did they all turn away from him? He wished the girl would look at him and say something, so he could ask her about the flowers and all the rest. He tried approaching her from one side, but she turned away pouting; he tried from the other side, and she turned away again. Even the children did not want to look his way.

"Why are they so unfriendly? What have I done?" Larko wondered, feeling his heart slowly filling with sadness.

A gray-haired, stern-faced gentleman came up to him.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Larko did not know what to say, but then he remembered:

"I'm Larko, sir, the fellow who plays at other folks' places."

"And what are you?"

Larko would have told him, but he did not really know what he was.

"And why are your boots dirty? Why do you have straw all over you? Why is your hair uncombed?" the gentleman pressed him.

Then Larko remembered. He remembered everything: that he had been drinking, that he had fought with several men, that he had slept in the bogs and in a stack of straw out in the fields — and he dropped his eyes.

"And why are you here?" the gentleman asked. Larko kept silent.

"Don't you know? Then I'll tell you: you have come here to steal something, like you did last year when you stole a silver spoon which you later traded for drinks at Penko the Jew's in Ichnya."

Larko grew restless with shame. The gentleman went on:

"Get out of here, Larko, for you are a thief, a drunkard and a knave!" He pointed to the door.

Young ladies then spoke softly, in voices that reminded of rustling leaves:

"Throw Larko out! He smells of vodka." They covered their pretty noses with silk sleeves.

The children said:

"Throw Larko out, or he'll carry us away in a sack!"

Suddenly, Larko felt terribly sorry!..

The young ladies raised their voices, one after another.

"Get out! Get out! Get out!" they shouted, running to him and shoving him in the back with their tiny fists.

Weeping, Larko went to the door. But as he reached it, he felt such a pity for himself that he could walk no further.

"Please!" he begged, pressing his hand to his heart. "Don't throw me out — I didn't want to steal. I... I have come to praise Christ," he remembered. "Let me play, please!" He lifted his tearful eyes to their faces.

The old gentleman stood with his back to Larko. He was silent, and no one else said a word either.

They had relented and he could play, Larko decided and immediately felt better.

Hurriedly, before they changed their minds, he prepared his violin.

There he stood, playing on the threshold, obsessed with only one desire — to tell them everything, the whole truth!

Larko felt his heart speaking to the strings, as it had done before so often. "Now I'm going to show them...," he thought.

The strings broke into sobs and wails, and a hot wave surged through Larko's body. Something inside him welled up, thrashed about and squeezed his heart so firmly that he suddenly felt a mad urge to smash the violin against the wall. His fingers clawed at the strings, the bow flew over them, and Larko knew that the strings were now speaking the truth. A heavy burden was shifted off his heart; his soul was soothed, and hot tears were running down his cheeks.

He looked at the gentry. They had all turned to him and were staring at him, as if they wanted to say, "So that's the kind of man you are!" Their faces became kind and thoughtful.

"Wait — you don't know Larko! Not yet!" He was so carried away he did not even feel the violin in his hands. His heart had hardened, but although it was as hard as steel, it would not stop aching. Something kept striking at the metallic lump that was his heart, sending forth a shower of silver, white and golden sparks and Larko stood bathed in the glowing light.

But something above him was wailing and clamoring, telling the truth about him. He guessed that it was his violin.

He looked up again. The young ladies drooped their heads, crying and wiping their eyes with white handkerchiefs. The old mistress of the manor and the children were also weeping. The master, too, was crying, leaning his head on his hand and placing his elbow on the corner of a table.

"What do you say now?" Larko thought. "Is Larko really a drunkard and a thief? Now you know what he is!"

Suddenly they all ran to him, weeping. "Enough, Larko, stop playing, please!" they implored him. "Enough or you'll break our hearts."

The children, too, begged him, crying, "Enough, enough! Please stop..." They grabbed his hands and the bow.

"No, I won't stop — not now!" Larko thought.

"Larko! Larko!" He distinctly heard other voices that sounded louder and louder.

"Larko! Get down or you'll freeze to death!" He felt a stick poking into his back.

He climbed down from the willow and saw the moon shining above the tree and the snow-car-

peted steppe all around him. He also saw some men, women and children dressed in their Sunday best...

"What's happened to you, Larko? Come to your senses! It's just us — the villagers going to church."

"Cross yourself, Larko!" they urged him.

He wrapped the violin, pulled down his hat and, without a word, quietly walked away from them into the steppe.

"How terrible!" a slender black-haired young woman spoke. "To think what people do to themselves!.." In the moonlight her hazel eyes shone with sadness and pity.

They stood by the willow, speaking and glancing at the small, lonely figure disappearing into the steppe that sparkled with tiny stars.

OFF FOR A STRANGE LAND

The spring night was quiet and sad like a young nun. No din or singing came from the village. Everything was shrouded in shadows. In the moonlit night, white houses with darkened windows appeared to be dozing or thinking.

They were probably thinking that in the morning, a joyless celebration was to be held in the village, after which many of them would be deserted; and then wind would wail in their chimneys in bad weather, and they would be haunted by goggle-eyed owls, and look nightmarish and sad.

Not two or three families but nearly half of the entire community would leave their native village in the morning for a strange faraway land where the peasant's fate was said to be wandering the wild steppes with blizzards.

That day, the villagers had been packing and there was plenty of voices and noise, but now everything had quieted down. Wagons loaded with all kinds of belongings stood in the yards, ready for the trip; and the travelers had lain down to sleep in their houses for the last time. Only were they asleep?

From one of the houses came the squeak of a bolt, the sound echoing far across the village.

Old Zhuk came out of his house. He was barefooted, hatless and clad all in white. The whole day, his head had been full of worries, but

now they had all subsided, and his heart had filled with sorrow.

Silently, like a ghost, he hovered over the yard and the kitchen garden, pausing, brooding... His white figure could be seen from afar in the beaming moonlight.

What was the old man thinking about? Maybe he was remembering his father and grandfather who had spent their lives in this yard; maybe he was reliving his adventures. Or maybe he only wanted to look his fill, so he could remember it all far from his native land... In front of the house stood an old ash-tree; its limbs spread over the entire house and half of the yard. It was the tallest tree in the village and newcomers could make out its green shaggy top from a distance of several miles.

Zhuk stood in the middle of the yard, folded his arms and looked up at the tree. The ash had been just as old and mighty as far back as he could remember. When he was a little boy, he had believed that its branches reached the clouds.

"Who was it that planted and nursed you?" Zhuk wondered. Had it been his grandfather or great-grandfather, or maybe some even more remote ancestor?

Once a man had offered to buy the ash for firewood.

"You can have it," he had told him, "if you pay two hundred rubles and then wait till you see me weep two hundred times."

And now it had gone practically for nothing, thrown in with the whole lot.

Zhuk had asked the new owner not to fell the ash, and the man had promised he would not. But who knew what the future would bring?.. Zhuk would go away, and they would probably cut it down, and he wouldn't even know. And

then there would be just the sky overhead and the place would look empty and sad...

He came up to the tree, embraced it as he would a brother, leaned his gray head against the trunk and cried. "Goodbye, my comrade, my old and trusty friend," he said softly, as if speaking to a human being. Then he sat down under the tree, propped himself on one arm and fell to thinking. He knew that he was sitting under the ash for the last time; he did not expect to come back even for a visit — he was too old.

Another white figure came out of the house, approached Zhuk, and silently sat down next to him. That was Zhuk's elderly wife.

There they sat, silent and thoughtful...

What was there to speak about? They certainly had no visions of happiness, for it was not in search of happiness that they were leaving for a strange country in the autumn of their lives.

The moon hung in the middle of the sky, pouring silvery dust onto the shimmering cross and blue windowpanes of an old wooden church. Beyond the church there were crosses and more crosses, and the mournful white figures in the shade of the ash-tree seemed to be leaning towards them.

The mournful song of a nightingale reverberated across the estate garden. Where the walks and the flowerbeds ended and the wild part of the garden began, a boy and a girl stood under a hawthorn, enveloped by the dark.

It was not the first time after night had fallen and everybody on the place had gone to sleep that the girl had stolen out to meet him; more than once they had stood there, holding each other until it was light. But there were no more jokes or laughter, and they were standing gloomily, reproaching each other with past

nights, neither of them daring to look into the other's eyes.

"Didn't you know all along that it would turn out like this?" the girl spoke through her tears. "Then why did you keep coming? Why did you turn my head?.. You've ruined my reputation and now you're leaving. No one will have anything to do with me now. Who would want a hired girl abandoned by her boy-friend? Loved, kissed and abandoned... Can't you say something?" Now the tears were pouring from her eyes. "Didn't I get rid of all the other boys myself? I chased them away, because I thought I'd never need them. I hoped and believed we were destined to spend our lives together. I never thought that because of you I'd have to wear my hair in the braids of a maiden for the rest of my life. So I'll braid it and cry, but you'll know no happiness in that new land, for you've broken an orphan's heart."

"What makes you say such things?" the boy asked in a low voice. "I'm going not because I want to: hard luck is driving me there — and you know it. Suppose I stay here and we marry, where would we go? Where would we make our home?"

"Didn't I tell you to try to get my master to hire you? I would work in the kitchen and we could get by somehow..."

"And spend our lives working for somebody else?"

"We'd save until we could build a house of our own."

"Such money leaves a bitter taste in my mouth — it makes me nauseated."

"Even if it were hard, at least we'd be living in our native land — not in some strange country."

"I'm afraid I don't feel so happy about living in my native land."

The girl fell silent except for her sobs, and stood fumbling with a white flower picked from the hawthorn bush.

"Didn't I ask you," the boy began, "didn't I beg you to leave your job and come with me? But you'd rather live as a hired hand, trying to please your masters, than work for yourself. What good is there in staying in our native land, if it gives us no chance of even earning a decent living? There we would have some land and a house at least, and after a while we would feel at home in that strange land."

"I'd never feel at home there!"

"But other people go there, and somehow they get used to it. We would, too."

"I could never get used to a stange land as long as I live. I wouldn't even get there — I'd wither on the way like cut grass."

"What do you have here that you can't part with? Your masters' manors and estates?"

"I'd rather be buried alive than leave here."

The moon appeared from behind the poplars. It peered into the nook where the boy and the girl were grieving, and it was unmoved; all sorts of things happened in this world. As the song went, "Not all are wed who love."

All was quiet. Only the girl's muted sobs could be heard. The hawthorn also seemed to be mourning, shedding its white blossoms like tears upon the grief-stricken couple.

The spring morning was clear and gay. Nearly half the eastern sky flamed red. In the orange glow of the dawn, the blossoming orchards seemed to be covered with snow; the meadows

and the roadsides were green with grass. It seemed as if the village had dressed up and decorated itself with flowers for a holiday.

Despite the early hour, everyone was up; all the villagers — old, young and children alike — gathered on the common near the store to see the settlers off.

The noise did not resemble the usual din of the marketplace; it was some other kind which, even when heard from afar, created a mood of anxiety and sadness. Something grave and sorrowful could be discerned in its high tones.

On the common, people were standing and sitting on and around the wagons. Red, white and blue kerchiefs and skirts, black and gray coats, shaggy heads all stirred and swayed, the various colors playing in the sun. Amidst the people one could see wagons loaded with all sorts of peasant property: barrels, chests, plows and other household goods.

The villagers clustered round the wagons. Boys and girls stood together apart from the rest, talking. Glasses and bottles of vodka glittered in the sun. Faces red from weeping bore an expression which was solemn and sad at the same time; eyes shone with a subdued glow.

Oxen were bellowing; here and there sad songs and women's wailing could be heard, and loud melodious speech, imbued with profound sincerity, sounded everywhere.

"I'm not going!" an embittered voice emerged from the sea of sounds. "Let them try to drag me — I'll cling to the doorpost, but I won't leave my fathers' land! And I won't let my sons go either. Set the house on fire — I'll throw myself onto the ashes and burn until I die, but I won't abandon my nest!"

"Well, brother," a calm, sad voice answered him, "the way you talk, it seems you've never had it really bad in life."

Among the wagons, surrounded by her family, a tipsy elderly woman with a tear-stained face was hopping and singing:

Bom, bom!
We're going to Tambov.
Life is good there — it's true!
There we'll drink some vodka, too!...

Then she stopped, leaned her head against the side of a wagon and broke into a wail:

"Where are we going! My old bones will lie there at the end of the earth where the winters are dreadfully cold and there aren't any people — just beasts and ghosts. It's a place where the sun doesn't rise and the stars don't shine, and no wind from our homeland ever blows there!"

"Mother, mother!.. Calm down, please; there's nothing we can do about it!" a fair-haired man with blue eyes red from crying tried to sooth her and placed his arm around her shoulder.

At the other end of the crowd, a drunk man with a dusty, tear-splotched face was attempting to clamber onto his wagon. His wife held him back, grabbing his coat from behind. He pulled himself free and tried again, finally succeeding.

"Listen to me, good people!" he shouted, standing up. "Pray for my sinful soul — and farewell forever!" His wife tugged at his coat and he landed on some sacks.

A tall old man stood hatless, holding a glass of vodka in his hand and singing in the frank voice of the aged:

I don't care to be wealthy —
What do I need money for?

Just give me six feet of land
And add four boards.

His gray hair was ruffled by the wind, and tears were rolling from his eyes.

The hour of the departure was drawing near, and it was also felt in the general din; the speeches grew louder and faster, as though the people were anxious to say everything while they still had the chance. The clamor of voices grew in intensity.

A harsh, stern voice rose above the sea of sounds, and all hearts were stung to the quick. It was difficult to make out what was being said, but everybody knew that it was time to go.

"It's time, harness the horses," the villagers were saying. "We must be at the station on time." The human sea surged and billowed.

The crowd stirred and crawled up the hill along the wide road. It stretched out into a long ribbon, which grew thinner and thinner in the middle, until it snapped. It was as though a living organism had broken in two. One half turned back to the village, the other continued down the road.

The wagons climbed higher and higher up the hillside.

"Farewell, farewell!" those above shouted to those below.

Presently, the settlers reached the top of the hill. The entire village with its green grass and white blossom, everything bathed in golden sunlight, was spread down there before their eyes.

Back in the village, the people, moved to tears, left in groups for their homes, speaking loudly.

The village was half deserted.

1910

IN THE HAMLET

Night was falling.

The steppe was growing dark and quiet.

The last voices and noises of a long summer day hurriedly went into hiding. The red glow was not yet extinguished from the west, but above it an evening star shimmered already like a hot coal in the ashes in the dark of the distant sky. The moon, whose pale circle had hung inconspicuously in the bright sky of day, immediately came to life under the dark wing of Night, glowing with a magical silvery light.

A sea of soft light poured down from the sky, flooding everything on the Earth. The gossamer shadow of sightless sleep flew over the steppe.

Night fell.

A small hamlet lost in the steppe clung darkly, like a tiny cloud, to the edge of a deep ravine.

Small houses showed blue in the moonlight. Long shadows stretched across the ravine.

The hamlet was still like a petrified realm from an old fairy tale.

Sickles, scythes, wagons, and harness lay near the houses like toys scattered by children before bedtime. Stacks of freshly cut wheat loomed in the yards, and fields covered with glistening stubble stretched far and wide beyond the houses.

On the fields, the ungathered sheathes sprawled like dead soldiers, heaps of unraked hay spread out in long rows, and lonely patches of uncut stalks stood here and there in closed ranks.

The smell of the fresh steppe hay hung thickly above it all.

The steppe was bathed in bliss and beauty.

At the bottom of the ravine, it was dark and sad. The moon shone down from above. A long file of willows lined the way. Ghost-like shadows separated from them and sailed into the moonlight. Snorts were heard from the oxen. A shaggy figure emerged along the path in their wake.

Its head was wrapped up in rags, the long coat was belted with a strip of white cloth; it wore men's high boots and held a whip in one hand. A marble-white girl's face with enormous eyes that were quite beautiful peered out from that bundle of tatters. The girl leaned against a tree and threw back her head to face the moon. She closed her eyes, hung her hands as if in a daze and stood smiling.

Then the somnolent air trembled and flocks of shimmering sounds, twisting and lilting, flew along the ravine and spread far and wide over the steppe. And ringing words that seemed to be forged of silver cut through that sea of noises:

Along the ravine there're fields of wheat
And heaps of oats.
But that's no way to treat a girl,
Young Cossack...

Every word echoed loudly; not a single one was lost. The girl fell silent and dropped her head. It was quiet again. Only somewhere far away, the last reverberations of the song died down and were trembling in the air.

The willows stood motionless. Distant stars showed through their branches here and there.

The girl lifted her large eyes and stared into the silvery distances for a long time, raising her

hands, whispering to herself, and nodding her head bitterly.

Then the air stirred again and silver sounds awakened the steppe.

She shut her eyes, dreaming and singing.

The poor girl clad in old rags had a vision in which she was no longer an orphan working on a farm. She was the only daughter of a rich father. She had blouses embroidered in silk, expensive carpets and necklaces of silver coins. But none of it gave her any pleasure, because she could not win the love of a young Cossack. Such fellows as her Cossack were not to be found anymore: his clothes shone like the sun, a black horse shod with shoes of gold danced under him. The saddle had stirrups of silver. Now he sat mounted before her, handsome and free as the steppe wind, and she stood before him gloomily, softly reproaching him, telling him that this was no way to treat a girl....

The voice moaned and wailed, and the vivid story of the girl and her unfaithful Cossack resounded over the dreamy steppe.

"Spread carpets in your yard," the Cossack advised her mockingly, "cover it all with them, so my horse will not hurt its gold shoes — and then I'll come to you."

"Then, plant a willow by your gate — and I will come to you."

But she would not be deceived! Her heart sensed the bitter truth and the final words of her song were filled with a soft, hopeless sense of sadness:

I planted and watered it —
But it would not grow.
You're lying, my young Cossack —
You do not care for me.

. . . . . .

The girl stood, leaning her head against the trunk of the willow, wiping her tears on the sleeve of her shabby coat. Her heart was filled with sorrow, and she herself was saddened and enchanted by delightful visions of the ancient, long forgotten, free and easy way of life in her native land.

Something unusual was going on in the quiet hamlet: the people awakened, came outside and listened in wonder to the song that came from the ravine and swept through the hamlet.

A door creaked, and the white figure of a girl or young woman stood on the threshold, clasping her hands together across her chest. The moon shone down on the white figure and the house.

On the edge of the hamlet, where the steppe began, an old man was resting in the entrance way to his house, dreaming that a string was singing right above him. He was dreaming, but the string persisted — and he awoke.

Blue beams of moonlight poured through the half-open door, and the hall was filled with the echoes of the song. The man went outside to listen, and stood leaning against the fence. As far as he knew, everyone was asleep, for there was resonant silence all around him — pierced only by the strong young voice that reached him from the ravine, defying sleep and piercing the nocturnal somnolence.

The voice wailed on, and the old man involuntarily began to respond to its modulations, bending slightly, then straightening up, or pressing a hand to his chest.

A strange thing was happening to the old man; it seemed to him that someone had taken his old heart in his hand and was slowly squeezing it. And he felt a lump in his throat.

Quite a few men were already sitting in the grass by the fence. There were white shirts, disheveled heads, and bare feet. Sleepy eyes gleamed softly in the moonlight. The figures seemed to be carved of white stone.

In the middle sat a young man with big black eyes, seriously telling them something in a low voice. The white figures leaned toward him, listening.

In the quiet of the hamlet, his words sounded like the murmur of a small stream. The fellow was telling them the story of the unusual girl from some faraway village whom their rich neighbor had hired not long ago. She was wild, timid and strange. She would twine a garland of flowers, put it on her head and wear it the whole workday. Or else she would gather the children around her and tell them some unusual fairy tales or her own dreams. But once she started singing, her voice was really moving.

Noiseless shadows sailed up to the gathering, sank onto the grass and listened in silence.

Then they spoke, softly and seriously, without interrupting one another. They remembered earlier singers and all the unusual people who had lived in their midst at one time or another. Every now and then, the hot waves of the song swept over them with renewed vigor, penetrating their hearts, and then they fell silent. Then, after a pause, they went on.

They recalled a certain Ilko, a shepherd who had once enchanted a rich young lady. What a remarkably powerful voice he had! He would stand on an ancient burial mound and strike up a song — and his voice would brighten the whole steppe. People in the hamlet would abandon their work and go out into the steppe to listen. He had been a sincere and fair man. The lady tried

to persuade him to run away with her, but Ilko did not want to ruin her husband's life and instead, left himself for the Black Sea. He had never been heard of since...

A new song was heard from the ravine, this time bitter and burning. The girl sang about her own misery. She was an orphan and people were not kind, so she had no one to turn to for consolation. She complained, saying that she had never known happiness, that she was wasting her youth doing hard work for her master.

Back in the hamlet the people listened, remembering other singers.

And all those who were the most talented of their own people, the favorite children of their dismal land, like that miserable and downtrodden girl, had been the poorest of the poor, the darkest of the dark, hired hands and outcasts.

IN THE VERY BEGINNING

The village of Vishnivka had the best school in the entire district, which was largely due to its trustee — the rich and generous gentlewoman Olexandra Andriyivna. Everyone was certain that they would not appoint just anybody to head such a school, and when word spread that the new teacher had already arrived, more than a dozen villagers, driven by curiosity, turned up at the schoolhouse before the day was over. Yakiv Malinka was a lithe, broad-shouldered fellow with a good-natured, slightly pockmarked face — and they liked him. He was fresh out of teachers' college, and his curly hair and every crease of his clothes still smacked of easygoing, devil-may-care student ways. He plunged into hectic activity almost as soon as he moved in, unpacked and arranged his books, tuning forks, scores and suchlike in his room. In the evenings, the classroom rang with singing, on holidays men gathered for a chat in the schoolyard and new books began to circulate in the village.

Within a week everybody knew him. The young people idolized him, while good, respectable men were saying:

"He's still too young but it's all right. Give him a little time to settle down and he'll do fine — unless the gentry get rid of him."

Even the elderly Father Yakiv took a fancy to the cheerful, vigorous teacher.

"You should go and see Olexandra Andriyivna

without delay," he advised Malinka. "She likes very much for the new teachers to pay their respects to her. If you make a good impression, it'll make your life here so much easier."

Malinka thought about it, twitched his little nose, which his fellow students had called "the button," and inquired:

"Just what the deuce do I need her for, your Olexandra Andriyivna?"

All present at the conversation waved their hands at him: objections were out of the question, he had to go whether he wanted to or not. Such visits had long become a ritual.

So Malinka finally agreed. On that day when, having donned an old suit coat borrowed from his colleague, a parochial school teacher, he solemnly departed from Father Yakiv's house and headed for the estate, the priest's entire family walked with him. They encouraged him, heaped advice upon him and joked, reminding him that the lady was still young and, supposedly, flesh and blood like everybody else. Malinka smiled and blushed as he waved them away.

In front of the estate gate, the young teacher dismissed his escort and confidently strode to the mansion, whose white walls could be seen through the green ivy vines.

At his ring, a smartly dressed housemaid appeared at the front door.

"Do you want something?" she asked surveying him.

"Is Olexandra Andriyivna at home?"

"Yes, she is. Have you come to see her?"

"Yes, I need to see her."

The girl let Malinka in and led him to the sitting room.

"You wait here a while; she'll be out soon," she said. "What name shall I give?"

"Just tell her I'm the new teacher," Malinka said wiping his face with a handkerchief.

The girl left the room, and his self-assurance grew as he walked around, examining the furnishings. Then he went to a low sofa and sat down, stretching out his legs.

But as soon as his glance fell onto them, he immediately drew them up, terrified by what he saw: his short trouser legs had drawn nearly up to his knees. Leaning forward, he tried to pull them down, but as soon as he straightened up, he discovered that the sleeves of his jacket had somehow shrunk to the elbows. He hastily drew them down — only to notice that the trousers had again bared his socks. As he bent forward once more, something snapped on his neck. He jumped to his feet, patting his false shirtfront; his tie remained in his hand, its fastener broken beyond hope. Malinka's forehead was bathed in a cold sweat. Quickly crumpling up the tie, he stuffed it into a side pocket. He then tore off the paper shirtfront and tried to do the same with it, but it would not fit. Glancing around, he stooped and threw it under the sofa. He could breathe a little easier now. Strolling again up and down the room, he stole a glance into the mirror and recoiled in horror. He saw a red-faced, sweaty fellow in a tight, faded jacket and a peasant-type embroidered shirt, with an untidy mop of hair on his head — and he did not even recognize himself in that expensive mirror.

"I've got to run!" the thought flashed through his mind. "Later I'll somehow explain it away..."

But there was no time left to run: Malinka suddenly became aware that a middle-aged, stout lady with a well-cared-for, haughty face appeared in the door. The lady was eyeing him sternly, and her arched eyebrows expressed her sur-

prise. Instinctively covering the embroidered collar of the shirt with his hand, the teacher was about to say something, when she suddenly drew back, clicked the door and was gone.

Malinka stood before the closed door, blinking.

"Was she angry or did something bite her?" he wondered.

It occurred to him after a while that she must have forgotten something, and he decided to wait. Shortly afterward the door opened again, but it was not the dignified lady who came in but the same pretty, dark-eyed housemaid who had let him in. She had a tray in her hands.

"The mistress asks if you would like to have something," she said, smiling gently to Malinka.

"Thank you, I'm not hungry," Malinka said wonderingly. "I ate dinner not long ago. I wanted to see Olexandra Andriyivna."

"The mistress can't come now, because she's busy... So have some of this..."

The girl offered him the tray with a big glass of vodka and a chunk of ham. A silver twenty-kopeck coin also lay there, but Malinka paid no attention to it.

Momentarily, he had the vague suspicion that there must have been some mistake, but he was reassured by the girl, who stood before him, nice and merry...

"Just go ahead and drink it," she told him, smiling kindly, her eyes gleaming playfully.

What the devil, Malinka thought to himself. Run when they beat you, but take what they give you... And so he took the glass.

"Here's to your health," he smiled and, nodding to the girl, drank up.

"Thank you..." she replied willingly, bowing politely.

"Please tell your mistress," he said, munching the ham, "that before classes on Sunday we'll have a public prayer at school and the priest and I would like to see her there."

The girl looked up at him in surprise and shrugged her shoulders.

Unbuttoning the tight jacket and exposing his face and chest to the fresh air, he made his way home in an excellent mood.

"This way everything has really turned out for the best," he reasoned. "As they say, I've fed my goats but I still have all my hay — I have that boring visit behind me and the lady gave me no trouble at all..."

. . . . . .

Several days later Malinka was sitting in the inspector's office, looking disturbed and puzzled. The elderly, dried-up inspector with the face of an old fox and a sharp nose was peering at him with his inquisitive bug-like eyes.

"Do you really have no idea why I have summoned you so urgently?" he asked again, without taking his eyes off Malinka's face.

The teacher shrugged, giving the inspector a look that was as pure as the morning dew.

"Did anything happen when you paid that visit to the trustee? Were you rude to her?.. Or were you tipsy by any chance?.. Make a clean breast of it — you may have slipped up for once. That happens: a horse that has four legs still stumbles once in a while, you know."

"God knows I didn't!" Malinka was genuinely surprised. "I called on her, of course, but I didn't speak a word to her."

"Well, tell me frankly how it went — and don't leave anything out," the inspector pressed him.

Malinka paused for a while and then calmly

proceeded to relate his visit. Leaning against his desk, the inspector listened silently. But as Malinka continued, it could be seen that the older man was getting restless, nervously rubbing his hands together.

"Go on! Go on!" he urged him impatiently.

Malinka told him about the housemaid and the vodka.

"And you drank it?!" the inspector screamed, jumping to his feet.

"Yes, I did," Malinka said guiltily.

The inspector began running up and down his office.

"What have you done! Do you realize what you've done?" he shouted, grasping his head. He had turned red in the face. "You have dishonored yourself, me and all teachers. Where have you been all your life? Whoever brought you up in such a way? Don't you understand even now what you did?" He stopped before Malinka who was bewildered and embarrassed. "Do you know what she took you for?"

The inspector rummaged among papers in a drawer and got out a letter.

"Just listen what she wrote about you." Looking through several lines he read aloud: " 'Owing to the extremely poor condition of his clothes, as well as his deportment, I could not assume that this young man was our new teacher. Taking him for one of those degenerate persons who go about posing as former students, teachers and other intellectuals, I received him in the appropriate manner, which apparently did not surprise him in the slightest'."

Next the trustee wrote that she would find it embarrassing having to meet the said teacher again and asked the inspector to reassign him as far from Vishnivka as possible.

"Now do you understand?" the inspector turned to Malinka.

The teacher's flushed face and blinking eyes told him that he did.

"Now I simply must reassign you — must, mind you!" the inspector said. "The trustee donates money for the school and has considerable pull with the local government, so I cannot fail to comply with her wishes. You don't need to worry, though," he said after a pause. "The other school will be a little worse but —" He glanced at Malinka's simple face. "You'll have an easier time of it there. No visits for one thing. I made a mistake in sending you to Vishnivka," he added in a lower voice. "I should have sent somebody who had been around — a good clean fellow who would know how to get along with the gentry. The lady is not without her whims, as you can see..."

After leaving the inspector's office, Malinka stood for a long time on the street, scratching the back of his head and staring at the toes of his shoes.

ON THE RIVER ROS

Before we knew it, dusk began to fall, and a village I had never seen before appeared ahead of us, spread over the hilly far bank of the River Ros. My companion, an elderly teacher who had never married, paused under a willow, took off his straw hat, and mopped his bald head. His face, deeply tanned like a gypsy's, showed every sign of a pleasant mood, and his broad chest heaved like a bellows drawing in the fresh spring air.

"Well, we are nearly there," he told me, stopping under an old pear-tree that had been hit by lightning. "Do you see that orchard by the church?" He pointed his hand across the river. "That's where Rayko lives. All that smoke must mean the old boy is cooking some gruel for supper..."

I looked where Vobliy was pointing: on the high bank a fire flickered among the trees, and a long cloud of bluish smoke rose above the green treetops of the orchard and floated down to the water.

"He does this every year," Vobliy went on. "As soon as the children are out of school for the summer, he leaves the schoolhouse, rents this orchard, builds a hut, and lives there until the fall. The old fellow goes wild — he even does his own cooking and washing."

Jumping from rock to rock and catching at bushes for balance, we went down to one of the

fishermen's houses to ask for a boat. A fisherman's wife gave us the key and the oars, and before long we were rowing across the river in a small boat. Dusk had fallen and reflections of the stars shimmered below us as if they had fallen into an abyss. Along the banks there were whimsical rocks and heaps of gray stones resembling old ruins amidst large patches of dark green weeds. Every now and then, small rapids frothed and gurgled over the rocks.

"The old rascal surely has chosen a fine place to live." Vobliy lowered the oars and looked around. "Why, it's sheer paradise! His soul certainly responds to beauty, even if he is old."

We lighted cigarettes and resumed rowing; the high bank approached faster and faster until the boat cut into the sand, clinking the chain, and jolted to a halt. Making our way among the bushes, we soon found ourselves in a clearing with a blazing fire and smoke-filled air. A little hut made of sheaves of straw emerged from the darkness all around; it was lit up by a small fire. A saucepan, plates, pots, a saw and other household articles were on a bench near the hut. Several beehives could be discerned in the dark. And finally, there was Rayko sitting on a stump by the fire, lost in thought.

He was a supple and obviously tall man with a bald head and a thick gray beard. His clear gray eyes, staring thoughtfully into the fire from under thick gray brows, were those of a wise and gentle soul.

His long coat, his peasant boots and his coarse calloused hands made him resemble an aged peasant beekeeper: it was only after a close scrutiny of his eyes and face that one could discern the intellectual in him. I had heard much about Rayko from my teacher, an old friend of his.

A cunning and practical man, seasoned by all manner of experiences, Vasil Timofiyovich Vobliy always spoke of Rayko in a joking tone; however, it was obvious that he was strongly attracted to his old friend.

"Still alive and kicking?" Vasil Timofiyovich called out to Rayko from a distance by way of greeting.

Rayko lifted his head.

"Ah, so it's you, old sinner!" he said joyfully, recognizing Vobliy. "So at long last you've made up your mind to come and visit me. And who is that with you?" He peered at me.

We approached and greeted him. As we shook hands, he held onto my hand and peered into my face.

"Haven't you found yourself some priest's daughter big as a barrel?" Vasil Timofiyovich winked at Rayko.

"My word!" Rayko laughed. "How can I think of priests' daughters with my health like it is? You're a different case, though — you look fine. You could still play around, I bet. Look, Vasil," he changed his tone, "you ought to marry, indeed. At least in old age you would live decently. And then, too, you should have someone to leave all that money you've piled up to — you're rolling in it, but what will become of it after you die? When you're gone, your money will be lost..."

"What makes you think I have any money?" Vasil Timofiyovich smiled and unhurriedly drew a bottle of vodka out of his pocket.

"That was really thoughtful of you!" Rayko said merrily. "Thank you very much! I can't afford the stuff myself!" He turned to me. "And then it's only fair that such a rich fellow should treat the others." From the hut he brought out a blanket, a glass, some bread and a few green

onions. We made ourselves comfortable on the blanket near the fire. Rayko again sat down on the stump, facing the fire.

Vobliy sat with his back to the fire, and I felt its heat on my cheek. The old men drank, exchanged a few words about this and that and then reverted to joking.

"Have you heard, Feodosiy Andriyovich, that country teachers will be made to wear a special uniform?" Vasil Timofiyovich asked, wiping his mustache. "Brass buttons will surely become your beard — you'll look like a government minister!"

For a while Rayko did not speak.

"Well, Vasil Timofiyovich," he said with an emphasis, after a pause, "they will go even better with those scars on your forehead. You'll look like a battle-seasoned general!" He laughed merrily and good-naturedly.

Vobliy's forehead was indeed scarred, but the scars were said to have been caused by the rolling pin with which he had once been driven off a married woman. Now he immediately bit his tongue, casting a sideways glance at me.

After a while he asked Rayko in a businesslike tone:

"By the way, when are you going to plow your field? Other people's wheat is forming ears already, and your land still lies unplowed."

Rayko looked at him in surprise, blinking. "What land, Vasil?"

"Don't you understand? There's so much dirt stuck to that bald head of yours that you might as well plow it up and grow wheat."

Rayko looked ashamed.

"Stop that!" He smiled. "You'd better fill the glass."

From banter, the old men gradually turned to a more serious conversation.

"Wait, I nearly forgot to ask you about something," said Vasil Timofiyovich some time later. "Exactly how did it go between you and the inspector? There have been rumors that he very nearly intends to exile you to Siberia."

An expression of annoyance flitted, like a shadow, across Rayko's face and he sighed.

"It's not something I like to remember," he said. He paused, fixed the fire and began telling the story. I had already heard about the incident and now I welcomed the chance to hear about it from him. I drew closer.

This is how it had happened according to Rayko. He had been collecting tuition fees from the children from other villages, and that money — about twenty rubles — just lay there, doing nothing. His last month's pay was long overdue, and he desperately needed money to send to his son who was studying at a gymnasium. Finally, he mailed him the tuition money, hoping he would receive his pay soon and return the borrowed sum. But as bad luck would have it, the inspector came around, out of the blue. Going through the school papers, he came across the accounts and demanded to know where the money was. Rayko told him the whole truth. The inspector did not accept the explanation and kicked up a fuss, threatening prosecution.

"I certainly got into trouble," Rayko said. "Even in my wildest dreams I had never seen myself stealing money in my old age, but it looked as if I'd become a thief. Then the inspector also reprimanded me because my room wasn't clean enough to suit him — he said it smelled more like a barn than a place someone actually lived. 'It's certainly amazing,' he said, 'that in

all your long years of service you haven't learned to keep your quarters decent...' I guessed it was no use trying to tell him about the misery I had to live in: He didn't need to know that sometimes I had to go for weeks on end without a white shirt... Then how could I possibly have those decent ways? So when I heard him start talking like that, my spirits sank. It was clear which way things were going — he plainly didn't like me from the start. But what could I do about it, poor devil? To toady to him, to tell him some funny joke so as to put the young fellow in a good humor and make him soften towards me? You're quite good at it, Vasil Timofiyovich, no offense meant, and I sometimes wish I were, too, but I'm not and that's that. Besides I wouldn't have had the stomach for jokes, what with my heart in my mouth! Also, that wry face he kept on all the time told me he couldn't stand the sight of me anyway..." Rayko sighed and became silent.

The fire was dying away, and the darkness around us had thickened. Rayko took a stick and stirred the fire.

"Fetch some more brush, boy," he said to me. "Your legs are young and strong, and mine give me lots of trouble every time I try to get up after sitting around for a while. This blasted rheumatism drives me crazy. You'll find it behind the hut... No, son, not there," he called to me, seeing that I was looking in the wrong place. "It's on the other side, behind the bucket..."

We put some brushwood on the fire, and dry twigs crackled in the bluish smoke. Rayko's gray beard and his glittering bald head reappeared from the dark. Vasil Timofiyovich's face, sharply outlined by the fire, looked so dark it seemed to

be powdered with dust. The fire illuminated the branches of a young pear.

"Well, I thought he'd have me fired and prosecuted," Rayko went on. "That would mean dishonor and misery in my old age — a fine reward indeed for nearly forty years of dedicated service! It all made me so desperate that my blood ran cold — believe it or not... Finally I told myself: come what may, you have to talk it out with him! I can't understand how I got up enough courage... 'Sir!' I said in a shaky voice, feeling that I was on the verge of tears. 'Rayko has served in the public schools for thirty-eight years, and in this service he has spent his youth and his health. Although he is a poor man, he would certainly hate to see his good name dishonored in his old age because of a ridiculous twenty rubles. I didn't steal that money — I borrowed it when I found myself in a desperate situation. It would be unfair of you to leave me in my old age disgraced and penniless!' Then I broke down and wept, after all..."

Rayko grew silent and hung his head.

"So what happened next?" Vasil Timofiyovich asked after a while.

"He didn't say anything at first. He stood there frowning for some time and then he said, as if to himself, 'These unwise people really give me a headache!' He said nothing more, not even goodbye — he just walked out and left. So that I'm not sure what he's going to do about me. There's been a rumor that he has threatened to transfer me to another school. That certainly wouldn't be the worst he could do, but what if he prosecutes, after all?"

"Don't let it worry you, Feodosiy," Vasil Timofiyovich tried to cheer him up. "Nothing will happen to you as long as you live; the inspector

is a young man. He may have flown into a temper, but he won't harm you. He is only a human being after all."

"You can expect anything from human beings, my dear," said Rayko with a sigh.

The glass was refilled.

"Make me a cigarette, son," Rayko told me, seeing that I was going to have a smoke. "Only you roll it, please, because my hands are pretty numb."

For a while, nobody spoke.

"A transfer wouldn't be the worst, you say?" Rayko turned to Vasil Timofiyovich, although he had offered no comment on the possibility. "When you are transferred once or twice, it's all right; but if you are made to run here and there and have had to change schools eighteen times, as I have, it's another matter entirely. Each time I have to start my life anew, as it were. I had to set up house, meet new people, and get used to a new school and new children. Looking back on my life, all I can see is just one long chain of transfers: here I had practically no place to live, there the priest was bad; another place it was the police chief who was nasty; somewhere else I had to go hungry, there I got fired. And when I try to remember some joys and really happy days, nothing comes to mind..." He shifted his glance onto me. "The only time worth remembering are those eight years I lived with my wife. But when I come to think of it, I can find little true happiness even there. My wife was a good person and a cheerful, hard-working woman, may she rest in peace, and the first year after we married was probably the happiest in my whole long life. But misery and troubles soon crushed her. From year to year she got quieter, and before long she sang no more

and began withering away. She was often sick, until one fall she finally passed away. It was a terrible blow for me — I don't even know how I managed not to lose my sanity. I had no money to bury her with, so I left our two little children in the house with her dead body, took my hat and a stick and walked twelve versts to a teacher friend of mine. It was pouring rain and the road was all muddy... I reached his place and found him at home. 'Help me out, friend!' I said and told him everything. He's probably dead, too, but he was a fine person, and he did save me by giving me his last ten rubles. That's how I buried her, and then I was left alone with two small children. That was when it all started — long, sad nights, boring days, misery and loneliness. My children were running around unwashed, hungry and dressed in rags, but I was scarcely aware of it, walking around as in a mist. Then I slowly came to my senses. Meanwhile, my good neighbors, may God bless them, saw me acting as if I were out of my mind and helped me by looking after the children and washing their shirts. They brought food, too — now some beets, now some potatoes, now a loaf of bread, now some milk for the children... It was really hard to accept all that, but what could I do? So I would thank them and take it, but it was awfully embarrassing..."

He was speaking frankly and truthfully, and his voice showed not a single note of regret or complaint. He was pouring out his memories like a fairy tale, an ancient ballad about somebody else. His story was only colored with the quiet sorrow which alone had lingered in his heart after his violent and bitter experiences.

Vasil Timofiyovich was silently staring past the fire into the bushes; his mocking stone-hard

face seemed to have undergone a transformation and now looked unusually gentle, and his brown eyes, normally sly and squinted, were piercing, thoughtful and sad. I had never seen him like this before, and I now understood what attracted this cunning, husky, elderly man who knew how to prosper under any circumstances to his eccentric old friend.

"I look at you, Feodosiy," Vobliy spoke softly, "and I don't believe my eyes — could this be the Feodosiy Rayko — the same curly-haired, fiery-eyed young man who was once famous throughout the district?" He turned to me. "Back in those days, whom do you think the community would send to speak to the governor? Rayko, of course! Who would argue with the mediator or the police? Again Rayko!.." Back to him: "And do you remember what a hullabaloo you raised when a punitive expedition came to Hrihorivka? Eh, Feodosiy, we have surely grown old..." Vobliy sighed.

"Oh, yes, those were the days..." Rayko nodded. "All kinds of things happened then. They flew by, those days, and now they are gone without a trace. You, Vasil, you were smart enough even when you were young. So you have managed to make a heap of money — unlike the rest of us, fools,— and now you don't have to worry... Even if they fire you, you won't have to go from door to door. But then again, nobody would even think of firing a man who knows how to make a good impression on his superiors so well that they send him one message of gratitude after another. You're a lucky man, Vasil, because God gave you that special talent," Rayko said, sighing, without irony.

The fire had gone out and only a few red coals flickered in the ashes. The shadows had

grown thicker, and now it was completely dark. Overhead, the sky appeared amidst clouds, and among the multitude of glimmering stars, the silver-headed nails of the Pleiades were already quite high.

Somewhere on the Ros, young voices poured forth, intertwined in a song:

Where are you wandering, O my fate?
I cannot find you anywhere!..

Rayko paused to listen to the words which rang out like a bitter complaint in the spring air. He nodded in that direction:

"Those are some of the seminary students, my former pupils... They are eager to get on with life and meet up with their destiny. They are still enjoying it, thinking they can conquer the world, but as soon as they go to teach in country schools and stick their heads into the yokes,— oh, dear, it will be gone in no time at all! But let them enjoy it while they can. Think of the sun and get warm, as they say... May fate give them all they are asking of it — plenty of joys, a merry youth and an untroubled old age..." Rayko murmured like a prayer, lifting his gentle, sorrowful eyes to the sky.

About an hour later, Vobliy and I were back on the boat, crossing the river in silence, our oars splashing softly. Somehow we didn't feel like speaking. We were both deep in our private thoughts. I don't know what the old man was thinking but for me, a beginner teacher, this was the first time I clearly realized the choice facing me. Should I follow Vobliy and pursue an easy and profitable career without delay? Or should I let my own youthful impulses lead me along the thorny path of Rayko? Or, maybe, before it was too late, I should leave the miserable and

treacherous fate of a teacher to others and roam the world in search of a happier lot?..

It was night. The mist was rising above the water and there was a chill in the air. The sky behind the rocks was getting lighter: it would soon be dawn. Silently, like a shadow, the boat glided toward the shore.

1911

FATHER-IN-LAW

With those large gray eyes, which surveyed everyone suspiciously from under a high forehead, and with his dignified walk, Vasilko inevitably drew smiles from the adults. If one chanced to hear him shout to scare a cow from a buckwheat field, without seeing him, one would probably think the voice belonged to the old bearded shepherd Mikita — certainly not to little Vasilko who had gotten his first pants only the previous fall.

At home, he kept everyone amused with his "adult-like actions." If anyone, be it a member of the family or a guest, crumbled bread or spilled some borshch, Vasilko would immediately bawl out the culprit, "Try not to be so messy, please!" Or if somebody did not take off his hat inside, he would climb onto a bench or a stool, reach out, pull it off, and then say sternly, pointing to the icons with his finger, "Look what's there!"

Whenever he discovered something he did not approve of, he clambered onto the stove, slipped under a rug and started complaining about all the things that were wrong in the household: this was bad, that was bad and that was done not the way everybody else did it.

Listening to all that, his father would often tell him:

"You're so bossy, Vasil, you'll grow up to be a big chief or something."

That was the kind of boy he was. No wonder they called him Father-in-Law at home.

Despite his nickname, every morning he would still crawl under the stove where he had a heap of toys stowed away in a corner. There he would often sit from morning till lunch, playing and muttering to himself.

"You'd better take a primer and try to learn your letters," his mother once told him. "You're big enough to marry but you hide under that stove every single day, gathering dust."

"Then marry me if you think I'm big enough," he called from under the stove.

"What a thing to say!" his mother laughed. "Don't you want to go to school first?"

"Will I be able to make a living from that school?" Vasilko grumbled in his grownup way from his corner, sorting out bits of tin and glass.

In the evening the whole family gathered at home: father, mother, two elder brothers and an unmarried sister. After supper, the father sat down at the table, propped his head with his hand, looked at the mother and the children and spoke:

"The devil take it all! I don't want to work anymore: my feet have gotten stiff, my back aches and my hands hurt. I must be getting old. We'll probably have to marry one of the boys off and let him take charge of the household. Then the young folks can work and Mother and I will finally get some rest."

Vasilko was sitting on the plank bed by the window and appeared to be looking at the moon whose silver horns could be seen above the willows, but at the same time he pricked up his ears so he wouldn't miss a word of what his father was saying.

"Only which of the three shall we marry off?"

the father mused aloud. "Mikola's going to the army in the fall, Petro isn't finished school yet — that leaves Vasil. Besides he's more keen on running the house than on schooling."

Vasilko shot a suspicious glance at his father and again stared out the window, feigning indifference.

"What do you say, Vasil?" the father called to him. "Shall we marry you off or maybe wait till Petro finishes school?"

"Hm!.." Vasilko giggled, shyly covering his mouth with his sleeve. He liked his father's talk, but he was wary, fearing that he might simply be joking.

"Well, there's nothing to laugh about," the father spoke gravely. "Just tell us — if you want to get married, we'll marry you off and if you don't, we'll wait."

"Tell us, Vasilko," his mother broke in, "and we might still manage to get you engaged before the night is out."

Vasilko looked around all the faces, and nobody was smiling.

"But really — why don't I marry?" he thought to himself. It would surely be nice to have a wife who would do the cooking and wash his shirts while he was lying about on the stove calling to her, "Just give me a light, old girl, and I'll smoke my pipe for a while."

"So what about it?" his mother asked. "Do you want to marry or don't you?"

Vasilko wiped his nose on his sleeve, blushed slightly and said, covering his mouth with his hand:

"I — I do!.."

"All right!" his father said. "All we now need is the bride. Or do you already have someone in mind?"

Vasil did have someone, in fact. He had long fancied a certain dark-browed Hanna ever since she had rescued him from the mire where he had gotten stuck on his way home from church. First she had pulled him out and then his boots, which had sunk so deep that only the tops were still sticking out of the mud. She wiped his nose and tear-blotched face and kissed him into the bargain.

"I want Hanna," Vasilko spoke in a bolder voice.

"Let it be Hanna then," his father agreed. "That's up to you. She's a good girl too — good family, nice-looking and... maybe she'll even bring you a nice plot of land in dowry! God help you, Vasil!"

Vasilko had a feeling that he ought to thank his father but he still felt shy and only snorted.

"Let's not waste any time then," his father went on. "Let's get dressed and fetch the towels... Get him Petro's coat!" he called to the mother.

The mother pulled down a coat and a red sash from a hanging pole and told Vasilko to put them on. He got down from the bed and edged to the middle of the room, holding a finger in his mouth. He looked quite timid — no wonder since the whole thing was new to him. The mother helped him into the coat, belted him with the sash, put the father's pipe into his pocket and stuck a pack of tobacco behind the sash. The father took a loaf of bread from the table and told him to hold it under his armpit. Taking the loaf, however, Vasilko could barely hold it with both hands.

"All right, son, let's pray to God and go before it gets too late," the father said. "Only I've got to ask you something before we start. Will

you go to the commune in my place and pay the taxes?"

Vasilko would be only too glad to attend the communal meetings, but the prospect of having to pay the taxes appealed much less to him.

"Where would I get the money?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" his father seemed surprised. "Won't you be earning it? Won't you work — plowing, seeding, harvesting? Because you'll have to keep the place going. And the rest of us will obey you."

"Eh!" Vasilko drawled, now not so sure of what was going on.

"You'll be on your own — feeding and clothing yourself and your wife. You'll also marry off your sister and take care of Mother and myself for the rest of our lives. Will you do it?" his father asked.

Vasilko suddenly felt terribly hot and his ears reddened. Now he wished he had stayed clear of all this marriage business.

"I don't wa — " he started and broke into sobs, his eyes filling with tears.

"And what did you think?" his father spoke softly. "Who else would feed us and take care of us? As long as we were strong enough, we worked, feeding all of you and bringing you up. And now that we've grown older will you drive us out of the house to go begging from door to door?"

For some reason Vasilko was suddenly afraid, and oh Lord, terribly sorry for his father and mother...

The loaf fell from his hands and he yelled at the top of his voice:

"I'm still too young!.."

They could not contain themselves any longer and broke into merry laughter.

Vasilko looked around and realized that they had been joking all along. Relieved, he also laughed but then felt ashamed and covered his face with his hands. Then he pulled off Petro's coat and leaped onto the stove-bed.

He was often asked after this:

"Say, Vasil, are you going to marry soon?"

He would pause for a while and then reply gravely:

"There's no rush... It's such a lot of trouble, the devil take it all!.."

1911

THE RAIN

The air was still and sluggish, and the heat was infernal...

It couldn't last much longer; something was bound to happen — and soon.

Then thunder growled in the distance, somewhere beyond the dark ribbon of forest.

The centenarian oaks of the thick estate park heaved a deep sigh of relief, and the small panes rattled softly in the windows of a low and lonely dugout hut that clung to the edge of the manor park. A wave swept across the fields of sun-dried rye.

Something formidable was drawing near.

Then it grew dark and the dust whirled in the wind.

The thunder claps drew nearer like logs being dropped onto a wooden platform, and the skies reverberated with its rumbles and rolling.

The wind died down. A heavy, steady rain made the leaves rustle. The thunder continued; lumber was being hurled, split and smashed on high, echoing above the clouds throughout the broad expanse of the skies.

Amidst all that din, a cooling rain poured lightly down, like flour from under the millstone, falling in dewy droplets onto the withering leaves and the sun-scorched grass and rye.

The grass murmured softly in the rain; the dry earth avidly gulped the water; the branches of the trees splashed and snorted.

Turning their broad chests to the clouds, the fields did not stir, it seemed they were inviting the waters to soak their burning hearts through...

The clouds poured more and more — generously and unsparingly.

Three children — a girl and two younger boys — were sitting by the window in the hut. Because of the oak trees and the tall, thick flowers that blocked the small windows, it was always dark inside; and now it seemed to the children that it was already evening and that their mother would soon be back.

She had left them bread for breakfast and lunch, which they had long since eaten. They had scraped up the leftovers and had had some dinner; but now they were hungry again, so they welcomed the dark.

The girl and the elder boy showed patience, but their little brother cried, demanded to eat and called for his mother.

It was gloomy and cheerless...

Suddenly something slashed open the clouds, silently brandishing a fiery rod.

A soft, melancholy glare trembled on the dark walls, the dish shelf and the icons.

Bang! Boom! Thunder crashed and rumbled over the hut. Everything shook: the panes, the plates in the cupboard and the pails on their stand in the hall.

"Give me some bread!" squealed the little boy.

"Sh-h-h!" his sister whispered furtively, pointing to the window with her finger. "There's the Lord shining a gold rod at you and saying, 'Stop that now! I'll show you some bread!' "

The boy opened his eyes wide and grew quiet.

Now it was dark again. Only the rain continued to fall onto the fields all around.

The window above their plank bed brightened. The children marveled: they had thought it was already night, but now it looked as if day were breaking once more.

Then the sky was blue again, and from it, the golden sun was throwing out hot, shining sparks. Lively rivulets ran along the road, twisting, winding, dancing, murmuring happily.

The woods, strewn with glittering drops like precious beads, looked splendid in the sunshine. The rye, already in blossom, became lusher, radiating the fragrance of its blooms. Among its stalks, cornflowers sparkled like blue-burning icon lamps. Red lychnis glowed in the sun and bees hummed. A gull cried high in the sky, flashing a silver wing.

From the road came the creak of wagon wheels and merry voices: people were returning from the market.

This was a lovely stretch with a wall of oaks on the one side of the road and thick rye on the other. A man on one of the wagons took off his hat to admire God's beauty.

Running out from the hut through the flower garden, three shabby, ghost-like figures hovered expectantly by the road.

"Please, give me a candy," the little boy called timidly to the man on the wagon.

"Hush!" the girl scolded him sternly. "It's a shame to beg. Mother'll give it to you when I tell on you!"

And they all stood silent, staring fixedly at the wagons rolling past.

The wagons passed them and nobody paid any attention.

Behind the wagons, an old woman walked spryly, with the aid of a stick.

The children stood side by side and waited, their hands pressed together on their chests.

"Good afternoon!" they greeted the woman, bowing low to her all at the same time.

She paused.

"Good afternoon, children. Why are your faces so green, my dears?"

They wiped their noses on their sleeves and stared at her with their big, sad eyes as if to say, "Who knows?"

"And where's your mother?" she asked, eyeing their threadbare black shirts.

The girl pointed sideways with her eyes:

"Over at the manor, cleaning up the master's rooms."

They kept looking at her hopefully.

The woman felt sorry for the children and spoke to them gently:

"You're so sweet and nice... but I've got no candy for you — I didn't buy any."

She stroked the elder boy's head. He closed his eyes, laughing happily.

"Do it to him too!" He pointed to the little one who had just learned to walk and was now barely standing on his tiny legs, which were as thin as stalks of wheat. "Good... Good..." the child valiantly tried to bow, nodding and curving his rope-thin neck.

The woman fondled him, and, looking at the girl, who had intelligent, sorrowful eyes, stroked her head as well. The girl's pale face flushed, burning like a red lantern, and her eyes sparkled happily.

The woman went along, and the children ran merrily back to the hut. There they sat down and looked at the sun, which took such a long time setting that day.

And somewhere beyond the fields, thunder was

still rumbling, but quieter and quieter. It was as if a stern father had suddenly come home, shouted at his children, washed their frightened, tear-blotched faces, given them candies and gone away grumbling, severe but loving, leaving everything blooming and beaming behind him.

Only the three children at the dugout hut marred the beauty of this spot like three wilted flowers someone had forgotten to put out in the rain.

THE GULL

> "...This is not for the first time that you ask me when I last went to our village and if I have had any news from Mother... My dear sister, it has been several years since I was there, and in all this time I have not heard from Mother... Yesterday winds blew from those parts. All night long they did not let me sleep, pressing into my windows and rattling the panes, as though they had brought a message..."
>
> (From a letter)

Winds raced each other through the gardens under a starry autumn night. Tall ashes surrounded the small house on all sides, dropping dry leaves onto stacks of stale straw and wilted irises. Their catkins were trapped by the weeds below. Through the weeds shimmered the panes of a low window in a blue frame, showing a patch of whitewashed wall inside the house. A peasant in a sheepskin hat stared gloomily from upon the wall. The picture was hung with marigolds and an embroidered towel, but the man in it was proud and sad....

A woman was sitting on a bench facing the picture. Her right hand was pressed to her chest, and her left hand froze under her cheek, holding

a folded sheet of writing paper. She had gone to ask a neighbor's son to write a letter, but she had not found the clever boy at home. So now she was sitting there thinking and trying to remember all that she wanted to put into the letter...

She had never thought that in her old age she would find herself sharing that ancient, empty house with no one but the gloomy-faced man on the wall...

The winds howled, the ashes groaned — and the woman dozed off. She dreamed that it was her children swinging on those groaning branches.

Up and down! Up and down again!

She had three sons. Maxim was the eldest, Petro was the middle one, and luckless Andriy was the youngest. The fourth child was her daughter Marusya.

Maxim had loved books, Petro had liked to build things with his own hands, and the luckless Andriy had kept busy painting the house — ashes and all. Her daughter had been pretty as a flower and had early been married off to a rich family. Meanwhile, her sons had grown up. They had given her enough headaches as little boys: one would have no shoes, another would need a coat, and the third one would have to buy a book... Then they were no longer little boys, and she watched them grow older with a heavy heart. Now they had to get a start in life — but how? The family certainly had no money in the house, and there was little land around it. The boys wanted to continue their studies, but how would they pay for it? "Fly away, my children, to seek your destinies somewhere in the wide world."

So they flew away.

All the three of them were hired and sent cheerless letters back home. Their mother would

spread those letters before her in her empty house, complaining to a neighbor, "He writes he's bitter, and the other says it's hard. And poor Andriy has it worst of all. He's gone through sickness and hardships working in all those places — Taurida, Odessa, then those coalmines, and the Crimea, and now somewhere else..."

She would wonder sorrowfully if all widows' sons were just as unlucky as her three boys.

Then it came like a storm!

Freedom!

They came back to their mother, all three of them — lean-faced, in shabby clothes, but in high spirits. They filled the house with their voices, arguing, singing and reading aloud from a book that they brought with them.

"Why don't you explain to me what it is you're reading from that book?"

Luckless Andriy, who had always had a soft heart, opened the book and told her, "Come sit here beside me." He then began reading, and it sounded like a golden trumpet to her:

Are we ever to meet again?
Or have our ways parted forever?..

Suddenly, tears flooded her face.

"I can now see, sons, that my house will soon be empty again. Where will you go?"

"To study, Mother."

"Will you take Andriy, too?"

Andriy made a face and said reproachfully, "Am I to spend the rest of my life in ignorance?"

"Studying is good for anyone, if you ask me, but where will you get the money?"

"Cheer up, Mother," her eldest son spoke. "Justice is coming to the land. All poor people who want to study will be able to do so for free."

"Oh, no-o-o, children," she sighed. "You will probably never live to see it!"

"We will!" their eyes flashed.

It'll be so or the Sun will rise
To burn up the Earth defiled!..

The widow's brother-in-law, her late husband's brother, was a well-to-do peasant who owned land and cattle. He was a tall, lean man with a jealous face. His hair had turned gray, but his eyes were black as a gypsy's and had a greedy, cruel stare. Hearing that the widow's sons intended to study, he became alarmed, fearing that they might get to be somebody yet. Though not in the habit of calling on her, he now turned up, making sure the sons were not at home.

"What's this big idea of yours, my dear sister-in-law?" he began as he came in. "Are you sure that with your poverty it's the right thing to do to have your boys study? Do you really need it? Better let them get jobs and learn to work instead."

"They've had enough of those jobs — they're sick to death of them."

"Do you want them to find easy ways to make a living? They'll get nowhere fast the way they're going." He then got around to it: "Do you know what kind of times these are? All this freedom isn't going to last. And instead of those easy ways, your smart boys may yet land in jail and get to eat government food!"

The widow grew angry:

"They may or they may not, but here you are already, croaking like a black raven."

He reddened with rage:

"Is this the way you pay back for good advice? If that's so, here I curse you for the rest of

your life and I'll never cross your threshold again. Don't come to my place either!"

"Don't worry, brother. I've never haunted your threshold and I'm not going to start."

He went away.

Just as suddenly as they had come, they were all gone again. They had left her the picture of the sad peasant from the book: "Take him, Mother, so you'll have somebody in the house. We've chosen this man for a father, because we never knew our own. He teaches us and shows us the way."

She looked at the picture and smiled. "That's some man you've found." And she decorated it with flowers and an embroidered towel.

Came a fierce, freezing winter. It was cold in the house and the windows were iced over. The widow lay groaning on the cold stove: she was ill.

Her brother-in-law broke his word and came over. But he did not do so to cheer her up or to help — he came to add to her sadness and grief.

"So, my dear sister-in-law, how does it feel to be a big lady? You've got three fine sons — but here you are, shivering alone in a cold house. How do you like it? You probably thought they'd send money, but you don't even hear from them. They may have been locked up already. That happens often enough these days."

He walked about the house, shooting sharp, evil glances in the direction of the picture on the wall. Finally, he lost patience:

"What is this hanging here for? Wreathed in flowers, to boot! You've surely found a fine fellow to put flowers around. Don't you know this

character spent all his life in one jail or another? A lazier soul was never born. He didn't want to work: he only made trouble. Burn it. Or let me burn it for you."

"Leave it where it is. Don't touch it," she groaned.

"Then watch out, because it may yet get you into trouble. Or do you think they won't touch you just because you're an old woman?"

"I don't care. In any case, I'll be the one in trouble — not you."

He grew angry. "The hell with you, stupid woman! All right, suit yourself."

He left. While he was in the house, she had restrained herself. But as soon as he was gone, she burst into tears:

"Oh, my sons, why have you left me here alone, an old woman?"

Still, she did not hear from her sons.

Winter ended, spring came, and summer was drawing near when rumors of arrests started. Her heart was full of foreboding. She went to fortune-tellers, and even the old witches must also have sensed something was wrong, for they all told her the same thing: "It looks bad, sister, for your sons — not just one of them but all three."

Her brother-in-law made her heart bleed with what he was telling the other villagers:

"They must be in the clink, all right. All of their lot are being arrested now, so those three must have been taken as well. Ha! They thought it would last forever and they would get the upper hand. But it's turned out differently!"

The old raven had not been croaking in vain. Early in the fall, before trees had begun shedding their leaves, the news reached her: "Fly

to help your children, old gull, for they are in trouble!"

One of her sons had roused a village against the local landowner and was now being held in Kiev; another had refused to serve the czar and had been arrested in Katerinoslav, and luckless Andriy had sought justice and had been treated so badly he was dying in a hospital in Lubny.

It was not they, however, who had written her about it. Her daughter Marusya had sent her a letter in which she also cursed her fate: "For a poor girl it is better to drown herself in the lake than to marry a rich man!" She begged her mother to come and visit her.

The widow rushed to sell some of her clothes and her new linen, and flew there like a gull hurrying to rescue her young. She had never been to a big city in all her life, but now, in her old age, circumstances forced her to travel...

On her way to Katerinoslav she called on her daughter. She arrived in good time, too — Marusya was sitting at a table, her face weary and tear-stained. As soon as she saw her mother, she broke into sobs, pressing her face to the old woman's shoulder: "Oh, dear Mother, I've wasted my life!"

"Has he been beating you?"

"He treats me terribly and beats me nearly every day!" It had been somewhat easier before, she said, but now that her brothers had been arrested, he had made life really impossible for her. Her brothers were his enemies, he told her; so she, too, was his enemy. She had received a letter from Maxim and wanted to send him a ruble or two. But he had caught her at it and beaten her up. "Don't you dare send money to those tramps, you bitch!" he had shouted at her.

A door banged in the hallway and Marusya shuddered.

"What's the matter, daughter?"

"It's my husband! Mother, dear, please don't try to protect me if he starts beating me!" she pleaded.

"He won't dare lay a hand on my child before my eyes — I'd sooner go away than look at it."

He came in, drunk and red-faced, his eyes glowing like coals.

"Who are you whispering with here?"

Seeing it was her mother, he did not even greet her.

"Aha! So you've called for your mother. Trying to scare me, eh? Or has she come for money, too? Damned beggars!"

"I don't need your money — I've come to see my poor child," the widow told him. She reached for her sacks and her stick. "I'm going, daughter; come see me to the gate."

"I'll even open the door for you," he snapped. And he did.

Without looking back, she walked out of the yard.

She was crossing the steppe outside the village when she heard somebody running, calling and weeping behind her:

"Mother!"

Marusya was bare-headed, with fresh bruises on her face.

"I've been wanting you to visit for so many years. Come back and at least stay overnight."

"I couldn't spend a single night in that beast's house."

And they sat down on the steppe and had a long talk and wept together. In the end, the widow told her daughter, "Leave him, Marusya.

He can go to hell with all his property. Leave him before he ruins your life completely."

The daughter became thoughtful and then broke out crying again. "I've thought about it more than once — but what about my children? They'll be as good as lost with such a father."

"Don't think — take the children with you. We'll manage somehow. That's my last word to you, Marusya."

Before they parted, Marusya got out some coins tied up in a handkerchief and gave her mother three rubles.

"If you see my brothers, give each of them a ruble."

"I won't — because I'm not going to take them. Your brothers will manage without his money."

"Oh, Mother! But this is my money! Don't you think I've worked hard enough to..." She broke off and cried bitterly. "I'm so unhappy, Mother. Why should you try to make it worse for me, too?"

Out of pity, the widow took the money. But as she walked away, those rubles seemed to burn her. When she reached the city, she chose a poor-looking yard and tossed the coins into it, hoping the children there would find them.

The train rumbled on.

The car was full. Near a window, people clustered around an old woman with a couple of patched-up sacks. The woman was weeping and wailing, telling the strangers about her misfortunes as though they were her relatives or friends. She told them all about her sons, her daughter and her son-in-law. After a while, she would start again telling them about her sons — Petro, Maxim and that luckless Andriy. Her head was full and she confused names. She would tell

her story once, twice and then start all over again:

"So I arrived in Katerinoslav to see Petro, but they told me he'd already been sent to Kharkiv. And when I got to Kharkiv, he was no longer there. I should've come sooner, they said, because he had already been sent all the way to Narim...."

"So you didn't see him at all, did you?"

"I just stood at the gate and looked at those terrible stone walls, had a good cry, and now I'm going to Andriy. But I keep thinking about my third, Maxim, because he's in trouble as well and I've got to see him, too...."

"And where's this Maxim of yours?"

"They've got him in Kiev."

"Do you mean he's in jail?"

"Where else?"

A wealthy-looking young man sat nearby, toying with his rings. He could not sit still, but kept sniffing and fidgeting. Finally he broke in:

"You must've brought up your sons well if two of them are in jail. Maybe the third would be there, too, if he hadn't been sick, eh?"

He glanced at a neighbor, grinning. The woman hushed, and bent over, her face distorted with pain, as though these words had stung her physically.

She fared no better in Lubny, going from the station straight to a cemetery...

There was so much gold there — the sad gold of fall. It was everywhere — amidst crosses and graves, on benches and even on crosses and tombstones. The entire cemetery was aglow with it... The first glance at this sea of yellow leaves would cause one's heart to skip a beat; for a moment it would seem to spellbound eyes that

the cemetery was flooded with hot, golden rays of spring sunshine. But at second glance, one would be sick at heart — for there was no sunshine. There was just golden sorrow. Mourning...

At a fresh grave, young people were stirring like a green garden. The breath of youth filled one with quiet enchantment. The glitter of young eyes, ardent speeches, a din of voices...

She stood there with her sacks — a weary, old woman... She was crying.

They surrounded her. "What's the matter with you? Who are you, Granny?"

"Oh dear, but this is my Andriy you've buried here!"

The crowd stirred: "His mother! His mother!"

They let her cry, asked her some questions and finally began telling her about her son, interrupting one another.

"Do you realize, Granny, that your Andriy was a great talent?"

She lifted her tear-filled eyes to them. "What do you mean — a great talent?"

"He could've become a really wonderful painter," they explained.

They spoke and comforted her until sunset.

"Come with us, Granny, we'll put you up for the night."

"Oh, no!" she said worriedly. "Just leave me here."

They did not insist and quietly dispersed, leaving the old mother alone with her son. And upon that fresh grave she spent the whole night, talking to her son in the starlight. Time and again, she pressed her head to the mound, asking, "Do you hear what I'm telling you, my son?"

At daybreak, she washed her face with dew and went to the marketplace.

"Do you know any place here where they'd

hire me to plaster houses or carry water?" she asked everybody.

Kiev... Like a night shadow in broad daylight, an old woman shuffled along a boulevard. She could barely scuffle her feet, and the dust rose in the wake of her bast shoes. Either her feet hurt, or her eyesight was poor. Sacks were slung over her shoulder and she leaned on a stick. She paused by a bench on which some merry young men were sitting. She stared at the youths as if she wanted to ask them something. Her eyes sparkled with sincerity and then dimmed again — she was afraid to speak to them.

They noticed her. "Do you want something, Granny?" one of them asked in a friendly way.

She started to say something, but her lips only moved silently.

"Speak up, Granny, we can't hear!"

She approached them: "Would you please show me the way to the deportation jail?"

"It's further on — right over there. Do you see those poplars? It's beyond them. Are you going to visit somebody?"

"I'm going to see Maxim, my son, but I'm not sure they'll let me in. At least, I've been told that they probably won't."

"Is he under investigation?"

"That's right — under investigation."

"Then they probably won't let you see him."

"I've been advised to speak with the chief warden — it may help that I'm so old and have come so far."

"Where are you from, Granny?"

"I'd better sit down here and have a rest." She sank onto a bench.

"I live a long way from here. Maybe you've heard of the village of...."

Soon she was telling them about her daughter, Petro, Maxim, but mostly about Andriy. She recalled so many things about him. Once, she remembered, he had come home sick from the Crimea and asked her to buy him a watermelon.

"He liked them so much — ever since he was a child. His face was twisted with pain, and he said, 'I'd really like to eat some watermelon, Mother — I'd like it a lot...' "

She had laid aside a silver ruble in a chest to repair the roof that fall; but she hadn't wanted to spend it, so she had not bought that watermelon for him.

She sighed and shook her head sadly:

"A great talent, they say... But it was a bitter talent, my son."

The woman wiped her tears with a hem of her coat.

"My poor son! If I'd known that you'd grow up to be really good at something useful, I wouldn't have slept a single night working to help you. I would've gotten a job spinning or doing something else..."

They stood around her, tight-mouthed, listening. Their eyes grew sadder and sadder; their faces darkened and clouded. One of them sighed deeply: "So that's how she's visited her children, poor old woman."

"Oh yes," she picked up. "One night I talked with my daughter out in the steppe and another I spent at the grave of my son. I don't know yet if I'm going to be any luckier here. Oh dear!" She fell to thinking.

After a while, she rose suddenly to her feet, slinging her sacks over her shoulder.

"Well, I must be going. If they don't let me see him, maybe at least they'll accept a parcel for him. I've bought him some pears and plums

and a loaf of white bread... I should probably have gotten something better, but I'm short on money. I've had to earn it, too. A Jewish family in town hired me to plaster a house...."

She paused, and for a moment her eyes clouded. Then she sighed, shaking her head.

"The way they live down there! Those poor children are growing like weeds — boils all over them, dirty faces, uncut hair. I washed them, cut their hair and got them some medicine. 'Mind you, Khaika,' I told their mother. 'This is how you must keep them.' She shouldn't have had children if she was going to abandon them as if they were a litter of puppies...

"Goodbye, children. Thanks for showing me the way."

Inside, behind the bars, there were plenty of inmates — so many that all of them could not sit on the beds at the same time. They were all young, as green as grass, and they talked and sang as though they had gathered for a celebration. But their song was a premonition of faraway exile:

Wild woods will be moaning
Where we are going...

One of the inmates — a boy still too young to shave — stuck by the window from morning till night, always holding a copy of Shevchenko's *Kobzar*, like a prayer book. He was curious about all that was going on outside — a man on a wagon, somebody's goat...

"Look, comrades," he called. "There's a woman down there sitting right across from our cell. She was there all day yesterday, and today she's been there since early this morning. She just sits and looks at our windows all the time."

One by one, they crowded by the window, peering through the bars.

"Poor old woman — her son must be in here."

"She must've come a long way, too — her clothes surely look strange."

They made guesses: one said the clothes looked Volhynian to him, another thought she was more likely from the Desna area.

"She's brought him a pie of snowball berries, poor thing," the inquisitive boy noted ruefully.

Maxim was lying on his plank bed. That night he had dreamed about their house under the ash-trees, the marigolds in the garden and his brother Andriy — not sickly but gay and cheerful as he had been in their childhood... He had spent most of the day pacing up and down the cell, as if in a trance, thinking about fate which had scattered them.

Hearing the conversation, he rose and went to the window. As he glanced over their shoulders, he thought that such coats were also worn by women in their village. He leaned forward to get a better look and suddenly rushed to the window, silently pushing the others apart. His eyes glittered, his face glowed, and his heart hammered so violently that they could almost hear it. Reaching the window, he thrust his face into one square, then another, until it finally froze to the cold bars.

He shouted at the top of his voice:

"Mother!"

The other inmates sprang away from him.

"Mother! Koval's widow!"

Down the road, the woman stirred, raised her head, and moved her eyes along the windows. Seeing him, she jumped up and darted to the

wall. She ran, hindered by her sacks and flinging up her arms, like wings, as though she sought to fly up to the barred embrasure. She shouted something he could not make out.

Like a black hawk, a guard flew out at her, his arms outspread to intercept. The woman stopped, begging, bowing, pressing her hand to her heart.

The man stuck his bayonet to her chest.

"Mother! Get away from him, he's a mad dog!"

She did not hear; bending forward, she tried to catch and kiss his hand.

The guard fiercely pulled her shoulder, spun her around and shoved her in the back with his huge fist. She landed on the road, face down, the hem of her white petticoat flashing. The sacks rolled; a loaf of bread, a linen shirt and some pears tumbled out....

Voices thundered from behind the bars:

"Scum! Swine! You'll pay for that. We'll bring you to justice yet — all of you hangmen!" The bars trembled.

Back under the ash-trees, the entire lot overgrown with weeds, looked deserted. She walked around the garden and the front yard, then returned to the house.

Inside, she found her brother-in-law. The old man was standing near the wall holding a nail. His eyes glared wolfishly and his whole body shook as his hand drew near the picture.

"What are you doing?" She grabbed his hand.

"Let me be! I'm going to put out his eyes! This is the convict who's ruined your sons. It's his road to hell they have chosen."

He charged to the wall but she pushed him aside and stood between him and the picture.

"Now stop that silly business, brother. Do what you like in your house, but not in mine." She was breathless.

Roosters crowed.

When they crowed for the second time that night, she was still sitting just as before.

The wind wailed...

The wind wailed; the ash-trees groaned, and the old woman dozed off.

The lamp spluttered, about to go out. Heaving a deep sigh, she rose and adjusted the wick.

She stood in the middle of the room, looking at the peasant on the wall. Her brother-in-law hated him and threatened to cut up or burn the picture some day, but the old woman had grown used to him, as if he were a human being sharing her dwelling with her, almost a kinsman.

She came up to the portrait, smoothed out the towel, straightened up the flowers and spoke softly:

"You're always so sad, and gloomy, so cheerless. Tell me where you've led my children. Where am I to look for them? Where shall I send my letters?" She brushed away her tears and sighed.

"It's like in that song:

I wrote my letters at night,
And sealed them with my tears,
And sent them with the wild winds...

"Isn't that so, gloomy sir?"

But he maintained his sorrowful silence, and his steely features remained frozen — his sharp gaze fixed, his brows set firmly. Yet his proud face was animated, and it seemed that a rebellious golden bell was tolling softly and secretly in the old house:

There'll be justice in the land,
It must come, or the Sun will rise
To burn up the Earth defiled...

TALENT

> "In the village of K., a member of the church choir took her own life for romantic reasons. The local priest refused to give her a burial after the liturgy. So the villagers brought the coffin with the body into the priest's yard, put it under his windows and left. The body was buried by the police."
>
> (From a newspaper)

I

Fall had already gilded the lush greenery in the garden, which here and there was so dazzling it seemed to be on fire.

My room was quiet. The window facing the garden stood open, and fresh, cool, wine-scented air poured in. Pink and greenish reflections cast by distant clouds shimmered high upon the wall.

I sat bent over my travel bag, hastily sorting out loose bits and pieces of paper before my departure, skimming through what had been written long ago. The paper rustled mournfully in my hands, like a Psalter over a corpse.

There were letters that I could not remember who had written, some pages torn out of a diary... poems — green as grass... It had all faded away and was dead — as dead as dry leaves shed by

the trees in the fall. Calmly, without regrets, it was now being torn up and tossed out the window. Wasted evenings and sleepless nights were scattered for the winds to play with.

A sheaf of time-yellowed pages, some notes, drawings, fancy patterns of mathematical symbols.... What did I need all this schoolboy's rubbish for? Why had I been carrying it around all this time? I was looking at it and thinking...

On the margins and amidst all that thicket of thorns and weeds that cluttered the pages, stalks and leaves appeared here and there, sketched in a thoughtful mood. There was the beginning of a poem or a song...

Could it have been my hand that had written it all? When? Where?..

And then it rang out in my ears — as vividly as it had that morning when her voice had suddenly filled my room:

"Have you stayed awake all night, you hermit and bookworm?.."

And the time-yellowed pages came back to life. Ever so slowly, a pair of shining brown eyes wreathed by long lashes appeared before me, as if surfacing from the depths of the ocean. Next, I made out a braid fair as flax with a blue ribbon plaited into it.

She had looked into my window, laughing:

"Have you stayed awake all night?.."

Some force picked me up from my papers, made me pace the room, led me to the window, and left me there, rooted to the spot, facing the setting sun. Clouds succeeded one another in an endless procession of smoke-like puffs, now fanned out into a flaming red, now slowly fading to pink, then dark blue, then a stormy gray... The evening sun, lost among the heaving waves of the clouds, was slowly sinking, thrashing about

in an invisible net, clinging to the clouds with its rays, desperately trying to burn through the net of molten gold.

Then the wreathing clouds gradually took shape before my spellbound eyes...

Presently, the clouds on the horizon were no more, and I saw a forest — a wall of somber old trees. Out of that forest, which loomed dark in its mournful majesty, a silent solemn procession emerged. Violet and black banners were streaming in the wind, and under swinging fiery-red gonfalons, a body was borne, smothered in flowers, ribbons, garlands of white chrysanthemums and golden wreaths...

There was the corpse being carried in its coffin on a litter.

Those brown eyes — they had belonged to her whose lifeless form was now being carried by old, gray-bearded priests to be buried in the cold ground... Yes, it was her body — the mortal remains of the girl who had been so restless, so indomitable, so full of sparkling vitality; the body which had once been as fresh, white, and sweet-smelling as bird-cherry blossom on a spring night...

I knew already that I was about to be buffeted by a stormy cloud of remembrance...

And here I would stand, with my head bowed, until this fanciful rain cloud of memory passed by...

I would relive it all — from the first yellow leaf of fall to the last...

. . . . . .

The ruins of the house stood before my eyes, walls dark, as if blackened by fire or like a human being whose face was shadowed by grief. The thatched roof had caved in in the middle,

almost reaching the ground on one side. The rotten door, for some obscure reason covered with sheet iron, bulged outward.

A rusty padlock hung on the door. The schoolyard was overgrown with weeds. Some of the vines had even climbed all the way to the thatch, covered with moss as it was; in the dark it looked like a hanging garden.

I went around the schoolhouse, looked over the yard, and then walked back to the door where the wagoner had unloaded my bags. The sun had set, and the sky was overcast. A biting cold wind came in from the fields, where a marshy pool glittered in a gully. Presently, I couldn't see my hand in front of my face, and it began to drizzle. Everything about the place was depressing.

A voice boomed in the dark:

"Wait, I'll open it for you."

A tall silhouette appeared before me. The man was wearing a shaggy hat which looked like a wooden pail in the dark.

"Who's there?" I called out.

"I'm the watchman. To tell the truth, I didn't expect anybody tonight. Andriy Markovich told me he wouldn't be back until Sunday, so I figured I might as well stay home. This mess gets a man down, if you know what I mean."

He spoke as if he had known me for years. He didn't even bother to make sure I was the person they had been expecting.

He unlocked the door, taking his time, and led me inside through a cramped passageway.

"This will be your room," he announced, lighting a small sooty lamp.

There was nothing but a broken table, a couple of decrepit chairs and a bed — a slapdash job of

old boards covered with straw. The straw was fresh, though...

I stood by the bed, taking it all in. The old man stood beside me, obviously admiring his workmanship.

"I nailed it together just any way, but still, it'll be a better place to sleep than on the floor."

He chattered about this and that and then decided it was time to go.

"I'd rather sleep at home tonight, too. It's already getting quite chilly after dark, and I didn't bring along enough clothes. You just get a good night's sleep and don't worry — I've never heard of any robbers around these parts."

He wished me good night and left.

Somehow I did not feel like unpacking or even taking off my overcoat. I took the lamp and went to have a look at the classroom. The murky stillness seemed to be shaken and scared by the scant light. There was the cool, damp smell of a cellar. I could see that the ceiling was low and slanted even lower farther on. In the middle, where it caved in so low that I could touch it with my hand, it rested on makeshift props. Along the walls, there were rows of battered unpainted desks marred by the standard schoolboys' penknife carvings. The black night pressed hard against the windows. The patter of the rain could be heard outside, and somewhere drops were falling heavily on a desk. I placed the lamp on the table and sat on a chair, still wearing my overcoat.

Now, I thought, I would have to make a fresh start, to get used to the new surroundings and make myself a nest in this dismal, God-forsaken place. I would be going through it all over again — priests, police chiefs, vodka, arguments and my own powerlessness. At least, I wouldn't

stay long — not here! But still, how long should I stay?

Gradually, I drifted away into a reverie about my secret ambition, something that always lit my path and warmed my heart — the university! All the rest faded from view.

For some time I wandered up and down the room in a daze, stumbling against desks like a drunk man. And I visualized this magic temple of youth, standing somewhere far away, towering above the clouds. And all the paths to it, but the only paths that remained to me, a poor young man without a gymnasium certificate, were blocked by impenetrable jungles, barred by high walls and deep moats. But in a daring, irresistible rush I was trampling through the jungles, cutting down the thorns, pulling down the walls, flying over the precipices... I was flying...

The mute solitude of the room resounded with my measured footsteps, and my heart was ablaze with the fire of my dreams.

I grew impatient and restless and was suddenly overcome with a burning desire not to sit around idly, not to waste time but to translate my dreams into reality. And I was drawn, as if by a magnet, to my suitcase, where my textbooks and notes lay at the bottom. I realized that it was ridiculous, but I wanted to look at them then and there.

It was all right, I told myself: ridiculous or not, nobody was watching me. And I ran to fetch the suitcase.

Before long, my bundled shirts were hurled out of the way, a loaf of stale bread skidded across the floor, and I snatched out a book with a pencil marking the page. Leaving my things scattered all over, I sat down with the book before the

lamp. I would only take a look, I reassured myself.

And opening the book, I was immediately absorbed in it...

In the corner, a piece of plaster banged against the floor. I jerked violently, as if roused from sleep. Where was I?

The patter of rain continued outside, and under one of the desks a mouse was scratching monotonously, dragging around a crust of dried bread. The lamp flickered before my eyes like a red beacon through a mist. The rain continued unabated, its sound growing louder and louder, and the night seemed darker still.

All around me, windows were moaning and weeping. They were disconsolate, shedding bitter tears of hopelessness and despair, murmuring plaintively that there would never be sunshine or clear days.

But joy sparkled in me like wine, and I felt pity for those childish complaints and futile but copious tears. The windows reminded me of a little child, still too young to know better, who breaks into tears when his mother stays out late visiting. In the dark of the night it seems to him that his mother will never come back.

The silly tear-stained windows were wrong, of course. There would be sunshine, bright happy days, songs, flowers, laughter and joy... It would all come!

. . . . . .

Through the drumming of the rain I heard the hoarse, plaintive sounds of reed pipes coming from behind the schoolhouse — the roosters were heralding the darkest hour of the night.

II

In the morning came a knock at the door.

"Who's there?"

A constrained voice said, "Excuse me, may I drop in for a minute? I'm the local deacon."

A man came in. He was wearing a gray hat, his coat was unbuttoned, and he carried a watermelon under his arm. He had bold gray eyes and fair, silky curls — he was quite good-looking.

"I'm Zaporozhets, the deacon," he introduced himself. "I heard you'd arrived and couldn't wait to meet you. Excuse me, but we have simple ways here."

I smelled vodka and noticed a red-capped bottle sticking out of his pocket. He looked embarrassed as he hid it from view.

We sat down and started a conversation. We tried one subject, then another... Then he started in about the priest.

"Greedy, bossy and a bully — that's what he is."

"You aren't getting along too well with him, are you?" I asked.

"We can't stand the sight of one another. He's not a man — he's a rabid dog..." He paused. "Frankly speaking, I've come to warn you to keep away from him. Every time a decent man comes to the village, he drives him away."

He drew nearer to me, and soon episodes of the long, bitter struggle between the priest and the deacon unfolded before me. Of course, the priest would have crushed the deacon long ago, but Zaporozhets's uncle served on the consistory, and besides, the parishoners' sympathies lay with the deacon. Also, there was a Stundist congregation nearby.

"So what?" I asked.

He grinned. Then he said, after a pause:

"You see, for some time they have been trying to talk me into joining them. It looks like they've taken a fancy to me."

I took a better look at his face; the line of his mouth suggested a stubborn, rebellious nature.

He said, intimately:

"You know, every month they haul me off somewhere — to the bishop, before the consistory and sometimes even to the monastery for penance."

"Have you done penance then?" I asked to keep the conversation going.

"More than once. Recently, I spent two weeks in the monastery sifting flour. I only came back last week."

"For what?"

"There was a petty incident: on Maccabees' Day I publicly pulled the priest's beard in church. Just a little," he added with a modest look. He sighed, "Oh, I'm thoroughly sick of it all."

"Why don't you quit then? They can't force you to stay, can they?"

He lifted his head and gave me a serious look.

"If I quit, I get drafted."

He looked thoughtful. Then he roused himself and shot me a sharp, suspicious glance.

"And you — what kind of family do you come from?"

I told him.

"Oh, I see..."

"Why do you ask?"

"I just wondered." He seemed reassured.

He tapped his fingers on the table. Then he started to sing softly; his voice sounding young, gentle and dreamy. He brightened up, shook his

curls vigorously and laughed, his eyes shining in a pure, happy way, like a college student's.

"Do you sing?" he asked.

"I do."

"Do you know this one?" And suddenly the entire schoolhouse was filled with his voice:

Where are you wandering, my fate?..

Next he took out the bottle with a flourish, making it look as natural as though we had already agreed to have a drink, popped out the cork and threw a searching glance around the room.

"Do you have any glasses here?"

I told him I didn't drink.

He either didn't hear or didn't understand.

"What?"

"I'm telling you I don't drink."

"Why?"

"Because I don't."

He stared closely at me, as though he did not quite believe me.

"Are you a Cossack?"

"I am." I laughed.

"But you don't drink?" His eyes glittered with a hostility that must never have been far from the surface.

I said quietly but resolutely, "No I don't."

He stared at me for quite a while, then slowly corked the bottle, looking somewhat perplexed, took his watermelon and rose to his feet.

"Suit yourself. They've been saying lots of things about you, but now I see that nothing good ever comes our way." He waved his hand disdainfully, popped his hat onto his curls and made for the door. He paused at the threshold, screwing up one eye sarcastically. Then he said:

"I can guess where this wind is coming from — you must've heard all that talk already. To hell with it — I won't lose any sleep over it."

He banged the door and disappeared. I looked after him. There was something chimerical about the fellow.

III

Andriy Markovich, the senior teacher, was a brawny red-haired man with a reddish freckled face. His blue eyes possessed that hard glitter that somehow made one think of a submerged rock. He had a castor coat and wore his trousers outside his boots. His head was topped by a cap adorned with a velvet band, an emblem, and a coat of arms. He wore that cap as carefully as a bishop would wear his mitre, taking it off every now and then to blow the dust away.

He was too practical for my taste, extremely orderly, clever and overly curious. At first, I took a dislike to him. I thought him a pettifogger, something like a country lawyer.

He also showed a suspicious attitude toward me at the beginning; my reputation as a restless teacher which had obviously reached him somehow must have been cause for strong disapproval on his part.

After our first conversations I began avoiding him.

The school had not yet started and I turned to my books, often pouring over them late into the night.

Then I noticed that my colleague was watching me. Looking through the window one night, I caught the glitter of a brass emblem. I shut the window, and after that night, I tried to keep even farther away from him. However, to my surprise,

Andriy Markovich visibly warmed toward me, sought my company and willingly entered into conversations with me. I got the impression that he wanted to speak to me about something but lacked the courage.

One evening I heard him knocking lightly at my door.

He looked somewhat uncomfortable as he came in, using some trifle as a pretext. He approached the table, devouring my books with his eyes.

"You must be fond of reading, since you burn the oil so late every night," he said casually.

"I do some reading, yes," I said coolly.

"Do you have any interesting books?" He edged even closer to the table, sharply eyeing an opened book.

"Mostly school textbooks."

"Could you be reading for an examination?"

I had no wish to reveal my secret intentions to him, and my reply was pointedly cold:

"Yes, I'm considering taking an examination."

I silently took the book and closed it. He blushed but did not say anything. I saw, however, that the cooler my words became, the more they appeared to fan his curiosity. Pausing a little, he started again, timidly but with stubborn tenacity:

"May I ask you what kind of examinations you intend to take?"

Thoroughly annoyed by now, I answered in an icy voice with an undisguised desire to end the conversation:

"I intend to take examinations for a high school diploma."

"Are you planning to enter the university?"

I remained silent.

Andriy Markovich's face brightened and acquired an expression of exceptional, almost tender

respect for me. His eyes became clear and trustful, like a child's.

"I should probably explain why I've been so persistent in asking all these questions...." He flushed like a girl and smiled guiltily. "I also have the intention... the effrontery of intending to try to get into the university some day. It will take a lot of preparation, of course, but I'm not afraid of hard work — I'm used to it. Only working all alone comes very hard to me. I wish there were somebody around I could ask for advice and with whom I could talk things over sometimes."

I listened to him and did not quite believe my ears. It had never occurred to me that this peasant, this crude-looking, overly practical fellow could be possessed of such a burning desire for knowledge, such a tender longing for it.

"Sometimes when I come to think of all the obstacles that stand in my way, I get truly desperate. Then I want to go there, stand before the university walls, and shout, implore, catch them by the coat-tails, and beg them to let me in. And if they didn't — well, I'd probably bash my head against those walls then and there..."

The man seemed completely changed and I now sensed something warm in him, something I could identify with.

The conversation flared up like dry brushwood on a fire. It was candid, long and heated.

IV

It was on some holiday or other that I met Tetyana.

She came to Andriy to get some books, or perhaps she had heard that a new teacher had arrived and wanted to have a look.

I had never seen her before, but I had heard many things about her. She had studied in a city school and was said to be a flighty creature. She also sang in the church choir and flirted with precentors and village clerks. Besides, she taught in the parish school as an assistant to Father Vasil, who, if certain stories were to be believed, was buying her pink stockings. It was alleged that on one dark evening, the priest's spouse had gone to the school with a stick to drive her husband home. The lass was fond of jokes and pranks. Much was said about her, and I had formed a vivid picture of her in my mind. But when I first saw her in Andriy's room, I somehow could not believe it was she. I immediately forgot all I had heard about her.

I found myself scrutinized by her curious brown eyes. They were large and credulous and immediately stirred some emotions deep inside me, telling me without any need for words that she was the girl who had caused so much gossip.

Her imposing stature made the ceiling in Andriy's room seem lower than it was. Her hair, carefully combed and braided, descended from the back of her head in a wavy, somewhat unruly bundle. There was something restless about her face, and her mouth had a touch of sadness to it. A rather mysterious person... Who was she? What was she?

I found nothing to say but just watched and listened.

Meanwhile, Andriy was pacing back and forth, droning on and on about some unexciting subject. Noticing the impression his guest had made upon me, he stifled his genial smile and grew silent. His blue eyes shone with an amused gentleness under their soft lashes.

Coming closer to Tetyana, he gave me a wink, placed his sinewy hand onto her shoulder and began facetiously:

"Well, Tetyana Hnativna, are we going to play at theater this year, too?"

Tetyana started as if she felt a pin prick.

"Aw, cut that out!"

Her mysteriousness fell off her like a veil, and her whole appearance changed abruptly. Shyly, like a peasant girl, she covered her embarrassed face with her sleeve. Now I noticed that her neck was burned by the steppe sun and her hands were scratched with stubble. All the fascination was gone.

Andriy did not take his mocking eyes off her.

"Just try to imagine," he turned to me. "They used Vavilo's barn for a theater and a couple of sleds turned upside down for a stage. For makeup they used chalk and charcoal, and with all that, she took it into her head that they had a real theater."

"Never mind," Tetyana said grimly, biting her lips.

"A torn bedspread for a curtain, a cracked pot for a gong."

"Just drop it." She was on pins and needles.

"But the most fantastic thing of all," he went on, teasing her, "was their orchestra: red Havrilo rattling a battledore against a roller and lame Mikola banging an oven door like it was a drum."

She could stand it no more and jumped to her feet.

"That's not true and you know it — that's all been invented by our enemies," she protested heatedly, sounding offended.

Andriy burst out laughing, looking pleased with himself.

Tetyana blushed but then laughed, too.

"That Andriy Markovich is impossible. He just can't keep his mouth shut."

"Ehe-he," Andriy sighed deeply. "You know," he spoke to me seriously, pointing at the girl with his eyes, "when she sings that solo from *My Protector*: 'toil and dise-e-ease...' — then, bless my soul, I feel as if one had poured snow down my back."

Tetyana shot him a grateful look and dropped her eyelashes in embarrassment.

"Oh, you don't know our Tetyana yet... Just let her show you what she can do." Turning to her, he gave her a wink and said merrily, "Tetyana Hnativna, let's try this one." He placed his hands on his hips.

As my mother sent me down
To reap green rye...

"Oh, come on!" She reddened. "Do you think I've got nothing better to do than pipe your songs, or what?"

But she laughed and her eyes shone; it was apparent that she would gladly sing but could not muster the courage.

"Just let her get used to you and she'll sing. She's a good girl, not too proud," Andriy said. "The only thing she's afraid of is books," he added, and his eyes lighted up with a mocking glint. "She says they drive people crazy." He looked at her sidelong. "Once she decided to prepare for her teacher's examination — and after a week she quit."

Tetyana sighed guiltily.

"Oh, Tetyana, Tetyana Hnativna," Andriy softly reproached her. "There was nobody around to keep after you, so you gave up your studies

and stowed the books away to gather dust on shelves."

Tetyana was visibly annoyed by all this talk.

"What the hell do I need them for?" she grumbled.

"Why do you think you don't need them? Aren't you going to take that examination? Or have you changed your mind?"

"I'm not going anywhere and I'm not taking any examinations."

"Oh yes, you'll be performing in the blacksmith's barn instead." Andriy danced clumsily, pouted his lips and sang softly:

Also you'll be baking loaves
And tending to the calves...

"So I will." A stubborn expression was frozen on her face.

"Next you'll be going to the gatherings at Yavdokha's place."

"So I will."

Suddenly, she shook her head and her eyes sparkled with gaiety. She sprang to her feet, drew herself up and, putting her palm to her cheek, she sang in a deliberately crude way, apparently mimicking some haunter of the gatherings held on the village common:

Oh, my green nut-grove,
Why do you smoke and not burn?..

"Tsimbal's Khivrya! By God, it's Khivrya!" Andriy laughed. Then he stopped laughing to listen and nodded toward her: "You see?"

That remark was unnecessary; I could not take my eyes off her anyway.

Having started in a jocular manner, she soon waved her head impatiently, shrugged her shoulders as though shedding something superfluous,

flashed her eyes proudly and, casting the mimicry aside, sang boldly and naturally, revealing a remarkably strong voice with a wonderful timbre.

She played freely with that voice of hers, as if in a conscious effort to cause her envy and rage among her enemies.

Presently she stood with her arms akimbo, looking boldly at Andriy and winking at him. Andriy, stern-faced, lowered his gaze. Without interrupting her singing, Tetyana called him with her eyes and hand. Andriy was stubbornly resisting: he turned away disdainfully and made a wry face, as though saying, "This is nothing! I want to see what you'll try next!"

Suddenly his determination seemed to vanish. He sat there, breathing heavily through his nose and frowning, and then all at once his eyes lit up and turned bright blue, like cornflowers after a rain. He waved his hand and laughed: "What a devil of a girl!" Then he flushed, sprang to his feet and stood beside her, putting his arm round her waist.

It soon turned out that she could sing not only *The Apostle* at church services:

I was taking water by the ford,
And saw those brown eyes across the river.

I stood spellbound, unable to understand just what kind of people they were. When they finished singing, Andriy sighed and hung his head. He looked ashamed of that impulse. He shook his head regretfully and spoke to me, grinning guiltily, his voice ringing with sadness:

"So you've seen it all... It's true what they say: mold him and shape him as much as you like, but a peasant will always remain a peasant. Just scratch him, and it shows." Then he

lifted his gaze to Tetyana, and his eyes again sparkled with blue. "Tetyana, my jewel! Maybe we'll make something of ourselves yet — let's study for those exams."

Tetyana sat there, lost in thought, her ears as red as a rose and her eyes glowing with the golden dawn of her irresistible dreams.

"Do you hear me, Tetyana?"

She sighed. "Yes, I hear you..."

She leaned her head against her arm and sank even deeper into thought. And again, as at the beginning, an unsolved mystery shrouded her face, and again I could not take my eyes off her. Then as before, anxiety began to well up in my chest.

V

After the first early rains, the earth dried and the good weather continued for quite a long time. That year people were late in sending their children to school and we began to fear that they had forgotten about it altogether. But as the nights grew colder toward the Feast of the Intercession, the peasants, as if by common agreement, started coming in droves to have their sons enrolled for the first year. Escorted by their parents, the boys turned up attired in the inevitable oversized boots and their fathers' coats, with tattered primers under their arms, faces washed, hair combed, and noses red from being blown and wiped dry just before entering the schoolhouse. They all came in looking very determined, ready to take the bull of learning by the horns, and there, under their fathers' stern gazes, they recited the Lord's Prayer and demonstrated their knowledge and abilities. The children were brisk, alert, well-primed, and, if

their parents were to be believed, they were all — without exception — able, talented and highly promising:

"I wouldn't have thought of sending the little rascal to school, but what can I do with him being so smart and all? Why, let him start doing something and he'll do it in the right way. I reckon I should have him schooled a bit."

Some turned up without parents. I would hear someone tapping at the door, and opening it I would not see anybody at first. Then, lowering my gaze, I would discover a pair of boots as big as sleds rising above the threshold and a little head topped with a shaggy hat. Breathing hard and making plenty of noise, the creature in the boots would clamber over the threshold, slowly but resolutely plod toward me, hold out a hand the size of a chicken leg, and announce in a hoarse bass that he, "Helman Vashilyovich" (the surname had been forgotten on the way) had arrived to sign up for the first grade. It was a moving experience.

. . . . . .

Our work at school proceeded normally, but we had not even begun our own studies.

To be sure, Andriy was never without his textbooks, and often, during a recess, I would see him avidly devouring a page with his eyes.

We gathered in the evenings, sometimes at our school and sometimes at Tetyana's. Of course, there were more jokes and laughter than studying, since we lay our hopes mainly upon the summer, when we all would be free from school work. Although our labors were difficult, we managed to lead a sufficiently cheerful existence.

For example, Tetyana once told us how a clerk from the district office had declared his love to

her "in gentlemanly fashion." Andriy doubled over with laughter, nearly falling from his chair, ran to the kitchen to drink some water, and coming back burst into laughter again. When he had finished laughing, he sighed gravely and shook his head reproachfully:

"Here we are rolling with laughter and fooling around, but do we have the right, oh fellow miserable illiterates?"

Tetyana, the chief cause of all that illicit laughter, assumed a solemn expression, but her eyes were already glittering at the thought of another funny story.

Sometimes, on an impenetrably black night, when darkness beat against our windows like the waves of a boundless sea, I would hear some din outside, and a constellation of curious eyes — blue, gray and brown — would suddenly beam at me through the glass. They looked like a bunch of inquisitive fish swimming up from the dark depths attracted by the lone light. Then they would burst inside — and books would be cast aside. Our solemn studies would turn into hullabaloo of laughter and singing. A violin would appear and everyone would dance....

The clamor would die away as they receded back into the dark. They would depart amidst shouts and songs, as if leaving on a sea voyage.

One day it would snow and they would turn up, eager for a sled ride. Before long, the three of us would be in a sled going to visit an old teacher in a nearby village. We would hardly see anything around, riding through the driving snow along a snow-bound road, and yet we would behave as though possessed by some mischievous spirit: shouting, laughing, singing, jumping up at every bump and diving into snowbanks, grabbing each other. The driver would scratch the

back of his head: it must have been a troublesome business hauling a sledful of laughter from village to village in a snowstorm.

We never sought these diversions, but rather, tried to postpone them until some time in the future when, as Andriy said, we would have a legitimate right to them. But they were constantly tempting us, falling upon us by surprise, before their time, along with Tetyana. They would sneak in through the doors and windows, playing havoc with our plans but making our room so warm and cheerful that we did not have the heart to resist them in favor of some remote and uncertain but well-deserved future occasions.

"Why not stay here forever?" the idea would flash across my mind in such moments.

...One evening stands apart in my memories of those times. I cannot recollect exactly when it happened and it sometimes seems to me that it was just a dream. A cemetery, a full moon, a clear, doleful night...

I saw two fanciful shadows on the sandy road by a gate; one was weird and shaggy and the other resembled a nun. I came nearer and to my surprise recognized Father Vasil and Tetyana. He shook his mane in a youthful way, brushed her with his shoulder and said something to her secretively. Tetyana looked strangely thoughtful as she silently listened to him. Seeing me, the priest nodded to her and went away, humming a tune. She stayed where she was, standing in the same pensive posture.

"Tetyana Hnativna!"

She did not speak, but only shrugged her shoulders.

"Are you going home?"

She said nothing.

"What's the matter, Tetyana?"

She spoke anxiously and trustingly:

"Tell me, for God's sake — what does he want of me?"

"What do you mean?"

She twisted her face and waved her hand.

"Oh, he's so disgusting — you can't imagine how I hate him. Now I'll probably have to leave my school..."

As I said, it all happened as if it were a dream and was soon forgotten. But now it comes back to me like an unsolved riddle...

It was a quiet village... The schoolhouse stood on the edge of it, and each evening I could watch the dim lights flicker in the windows for a while and then go out. Sometimes the riotous deacon would violate the stillness of the night by smashing the priest's windows. Then the din would die down, and you could almost hear the worms eating away at the beams under the thatched roofs.

VI

All that fall and winter, it was as if we were drifting in an ark down a strange river. Outside the windows, the river banks were continually changing. At first they were clear and melancholy, with trees shedding golden leaves; there were flaming-red sunsets veiled with the lace of autumn foliage; then we floated across a dark country through mists and rains. We floated on and on, and one morning we woke up to find ourselves in a white fairyland. Its landscape filled the gloomy classrooms with the quiet radiant joy of the winter's first snow. We now traveled under a sky sparkling with diamond stars, through nights of moonlit silver and ringing frosts. Then we came to a standstill in a blizzard, with snow

being piled high under our windows and snow-banks smoking like volcanos. And then, all of a sudden, everything stirred noisily around us. Countless rivulets struck a host of tiny bells; churning streams flowed everywhere, murmuring and moaning in gorges and ravines, beating against dams and swelling rivers. Everything that had been trampled over by the snow or stifled by the cold was now joyfully revived and preening. Fields, commons, and gardens were enveloped in a huge conflagration of greenery shining everywhere with the blue sparks of early blossoms. More days slipped by, and the wedding candles of spring were lighted amidst branches in the gardens: the snowy-pink flowers of pears and apples. The grooms in garlands of flowers were driven across the sky by the fast, shaggy-maned horses of clouds. And at the golden sunset, the bride herself, dressed gloriously for the wedding, ribbons streaming and eyes shining, came out to welcome the approaching night. But behind the blissful dreaminess of her eyes, look out! — the thunder roared and the lightning flashed! In the evening, filled with the sweet smell of flowers, when rugged clouds put up walls all along the horizon, erected mighty towers and saluted the coming of spring with cannon salvoes, those fragrant thunderstorms brandished the blue blades of their swords and hurled down their lightning flashes which darted over the gardens like fiery birds, greeting one another with kisses of fire, bathing the white blossoms in their red light. Look out!

. . . . . .

Andriy was in his classroom and I was nearby in my own... The blinding sunlight of a hot summer day was pouring in through the window. The

room was filled with subdued children's cheeping, which made it resemble a cage full of chicks. The azure firmament could be seen in the window, like the mouth of some pit, and an invisible cord drew me toward it. Hastily giving the children an assignment, I walked over to the window and was immediately intoxicated by the sweet green languor of it all. My chest was burning with a vague desire to go somewhere, to do something or see somebody... At that very moment, a familiar voice rang out like a silver bell, across the thin partition between our rooms.

We had not seen Tetyana for two weeks — but there she was. My heart throbbed and the drowsiness seemed to have been washed away by fresh water. I suddenly had an impulse to run and laugh... Even I wondered what the matter with me was.

Beyond the wall, there was some merry argument... Andriy's voice reached my ears:

"Tetyana Hnativna, let us finish the lesson." Then, angrily: "Tetyana, what do you think you're doing? I'll call the guard — bless my soul!"

I heard a rustle of paper, the squeak of a chair or table pushed across the floor, and then: flap! flap! — the sound of falling books...

"Hey, there! Help!"

The children pricked up their ears:

"Fooling around — that's what they are doing!.."

"Ts-s-s!" I waved my hand for silence.

They were certainly fooling around across the wall: we now heard the sound of struggle, the stomping of feet and muffled laughter. Desks were groaning and a door banged... Finally came what sounded like a triumphant battle-cry.

"Why don't you go for a walk?" Andriy's voice called out.

The din died down. Then soft, feline steps could be heard in the corridor.

"She's coming in here!" a boy cried out merrily.

My heart missed a beat at the thought.

She was. Silently and furtively, she opened the door and stood at the threshold. Tetyana looked suspiciously round the classroom, her braid askew, her cheeks burning, her eyes glittering.

The children shouted:

"Come in! Come in!"

Hushing the class, I assumed a businesslike appearance. To Tetyana I said drily:

"Do you wish to see me, Tetyana Hnativna?"

She squinted.

"I do."

"Do you want to speak with me about something?"

"Yes, I do." She pouted.

I noted that during those two weeks she had changed beyond recognition; her speech and laughter were different and the expression in her eyes was bold and mocking.

"You needn't worry — I won't stay long." She approached the table and stood beside me. She did not mention her business, though, but leaned over the table. "What kind of book is that?"

The blood rushed to my face, and my heart throbbed mightily, like a thresher... I stared at the book: what in the hell was it, anyway? I closed it to look at the cover. Why, of course, a book of arithmetic problems!

She glanced at it and pushed it aside.

"Look, I've got something very, very important to ask of you. Can you promise you'll do it?"

"What is it?"

She glanced at the children, lowered her head still more and began speaking fast, heatedly and intimately. I did not grasp what she was talking about immediately: a lock of her silky hair was burning my cheek. Catching a few words, I finally began to understand: they were going to stage *Natalka Poltavka*. She would play Natalka. I was supposed to play Petro.

She peered into my eyes.

"All right? Do you agree?"

I felt the ground tremble beneath my feet. I wanted to grab hold of something and found nothing. I was suddenly overcome with an incomprehensible, incredible timidity and I almost wished I could run away, abandoning the school, the children — everything!

"Wait," I interrupted her just for the sake of saying something — anything. "Didn't we all make plans to sit down to our books as soon as the school was dismissed for the summer?"

She waved her hand in an annoyed gesture.

"Oh, we'll have time..." Again softly, suavely: "Well, what about it? Come on, 'Petro'!"

She stepped back, assuming an ecstatic, dreamy posture, and sang:

You'll leave me, Petro, for her
Whom you now love...

The class broke into applause:

"Sing some more! We want more! Oh, isn't that nice!"

Andriy shouted from his room across the partition:

"It won't work — Father Vasil will break up your gang."

Tetyana jumped up like a fiery steed, her eyes flashing with daring and determination.

"What? Father Vasil? Let him try. Uh!.." She waved her fist threateningly.

"What are they going to do?" the children wondered.

Tetyana went to stand in the middle of the classroom.

"Look, children," she began resolutely. "You may all go home now and you don't have to come back until next Sunday. Then you all come back to the theater and that's an order."

Her words were met with a joyous uproar. Some of the boys grabbed their books.

"Tetyana! Tetyana Hnativna!" Andriy shouted across the wall. "Would you come here for a minute?"

The children quieted down.

"Why?"

"I forgot to give you a letter, come get it, please."

She made up her mind and slowly walked to the door. Pausing at the doorway, she turned to me:

"Mind you, keep your word..." She then half closed her eyes and held out her hands. "Petro, Petro, where are you now? Maybe you are wandering somewhere, poor and unhappy, not even remembering your..."

She went out.

A moment later I heard the click of a key turned in a lock and from across the wall came Andriy's brisk command:

"Lock the door!"

The children grasped Andriy's treacherous scheme at once and switched camps with remarkable ease, rushing noisily to the door.

"Hold it! Get the key! Tie it with a string!"

The door was pushed from the corridor, but it was too late; taking a stick from under his

desk, one of the schoolboys fastened the hasp with it.

"Is that how you treat me? All right! Wait till you come to the theater — I won't let any of you in..."

She grumbled for some time beyond the door and then apparently went away.

The children would not leave the door; they put their ears against it, listening. One of them turned his eager face toward me, raised a finger and whispered mysteriously: "She's still here..."

Which was true, for I felt I shared this heightened stillness with someone young and thoughtful.

A minute slipped by. Suddenly a song reverberated softly in the corridor, as though at the far end of it somebody had delicately plucked a string:

Why is the water muddy?
Has it been stirred by waves?..

She stopped... We froze, catching our breath...

All our hearts were throbbing with the desire to hear that wondrous string again. We waited but it did not sound. And I immediately felt that the stillness beyond the door was empty.

One of the pupils peered out the window:

"She's gone! There she is going by the shed..."

I looked out but caught only a glimpse of her blue blouse over beyond the school garden.

The dismal walls of the classroom suddenly looked so annoyingly depressive that I hated the very sight of them. I felt disappointed and angry without being able to name the cause of it. I had a crazy urge to scatter the books and

throw open all the windows and doors. No, I would not be able to get anything more done — the day was as good as lost.

I dismissed the class.

. . . . . .

Examinations came and went, and at last the school was empty. This was the time when, as we had agreed long ago, we were to get down to our studies in earnest. We thought of Tetyana who had not made herself seen for quite a long time. We sent her a message, but she failed to turn up. Finally Andriy found out what was the matter.

"Well," he told me, "now we couldn't drag our Tetyana here on a rope."

The theater business was going full swing, he said. Some relatives from Kiev had come to the estate, and among them was a student, the lady's nephew. He was now recruiting the village boys and girls for a choir and building a makeshift stage for amateur performances on the estate grounds. That was where Tetyana was spending her days and nights.

"I'm really sorry for the girl," he added sadly. "I still hoped she might make something of herself."

Then he said, "I happen to know that student..."

We talked for some time, sharing our misgivings.

"Well, sorry or not," Andriy summed it up, "we can't help it anyway. We had better get down to our own work."

We roused ourselves to action, suddenly feeling strong and full of energy. We resolved that we would not deviate from our course and would

keep ourselves in check, mercilessly chasing away all temptations of spring and youth to spend the whole summer over our books.

VII

Fields of flowering rye spread out in all their splendor...

Day after day, night after night, the pages of our textbooks seemed to be burning away before our eyes.

We were only dimly aware of the gardens around us shedding their blossoms and of spring waving its wings as it flew away. I would drop in on him and he would be sitting bent over a book, motionless as a rock, stringing lines one after another, putting them away and finally swallowing them, avidly like a boa.

"Andriy Markovich!" I would call out to him.

"What's the matter?" he would grumble without taking his eyes off the book.

"Do you still have enough steam?"

He would lift his head to show his haggard face, tousled hair, and misty eyes. Then he would say, briefly and quietly:

"Stop it."

And he would resolutely bury his stern face in the book again.

We did not go out and nobody came to visit us. Only Zaporozhets the deacon dropped in a couple of times, looking worried and sober. He did not argue or pester us but just lay silently on the bed, smoking and brooding... Then, blushing for some reason, he asked us for a textbook for some friend and left.

Nights filled with fire and ecstasy drifted one after another past my windows. Time and again, roosters crowed, sunsets faded into nights, nights

bloomed into dawns, days merged into weeks and marched away.

There I sat... The room was still. A candle was flickering on the table I was reading...

My room was quiet and still...

I felt as though my jokes and laughs were always at the door behind my back, hushed like schoolboys made to kneel in punishment for their pranks.

A cough, a squeak of the chair, a rustle of a page being turned — and it seemed as though my other, watchful self had stirred deep beneath my somnolence.

I went to the window, slightly opened the shutter and peered through the chink to see if it was dawn.

The sky was dark, and the moon was shining brightly, not showing any signs of growing dim. No, it was still dark.

I stood there for a minute, unable to take my eyes off the sky where a lone cloud was sailing high above me; as if in some nocturnal fairy tale, the cloud, like a maiden wearing gossamer robes, beads of gold and silver plumes, stole up to the moon from behind and covered its face — and everything below darkened with embarrassment...

I sighed and shut the window. No, it was not yet dawn.

I went back to the table... A minute passed, then another — and I sank again into the depths of the lines of print...

As if in a dream, I heard a scratching at the shutters... Then it turned into a knocking, but that, too, failed to rouse me.

It was then that the words struck me... It seemed they had come from the mute wall in front of me:

"Have you stayed awake all night, you hermit and bookworm?.."

I started, not understanding at first where the voice had come from. Turning around, I saw that the window stood open framing the betrothed Natalka of the play, in flowers and beads, against the embroidered black-and-silver backdrop of the night...

"Tetyana!"

She laughed:

"Did I give you a scare!" Then she said, "Come out here, quick."

I went out to her. She was squatting on the porch. Her face was a bit pale; her eyes sparkled under her disheveled locks, and her ears were burning. She evidently did not know what to say.

"Look what a night!" She laughed. "What a night! I walked here across the rye fields and it seemed to me I could hear music and songs behind me... Oh, God, how beautiful the world is!"

Unexpectedly, she pressed herself against my shoulder, her eyes shut and her body burning.

Some apprehension stirred inside me.

"Is something the matter, Tetyana?"

She raised her head and opened her eyes.

"Do you think I'm drunk?" She shook her head. "No, it's not true what the people have been saying — I haven't been drinking and I won't." Her eyes became sincere and pure.

"Listen..." It seemed she wanted to say something but did not dare, as though she did not quite believe it herself. "Listen, only don't make fun of me for being silly..." She pulled my head over to her and whispered into my ear, "They say I've got talent..."

My heartbeat quickened as the mysterious word shot through me like a spark.

She hung her head and seemed to be crying bitterly. But then she lifted her eyes and they were sparkling like golden stars on a dark night.

She told me she had come straight from the theater. Guests from the capital who were staying with the lady had been present at the performance. After the end, they had all pressed around her, offering congratulations and pumping her hand. Also, they had unanimously assured her that she had talent and begged her not to waste it... They had promised to take her to Kiev and see to it that she received proper training...

Tetyana could barely speak for excitement.

"Are you going to Kiev?"

She sighed:

"Yes, I'm going..."

Andriy had meanwhile opened his window and was standing there, his cigarette glowing in the dark. For some reason he was coughing continually.

"Andriy Markovich, come over here!"

"What's the matter?" he replied in a stern voice, as if he were totally indifferent to our conversations.

"Join us and we'll tell you."

He came out carrying himself with dignity and looking grave and businesslike. But his eyes were glowing with curiosity.

"Is there something funny?" he asked listlessly, while his eyes darted between me and Tetyana.

We told him, interrupting each other.

"What? Talent? What kind of talent?" He listened, frowning and looking rather forbidding, but the tops of his ears colored. Then he turned to Tetyana.

"Who told you so?" he asked sternly.

"Everybody said so. There was an actor there, a professor..."

Andriy sounded sceptical:

"Maybe a professor of magic and palmistry?"

"No, no, he was a real one, important and famous — a bald little man with a gold pincenez..." Tetyana assured him heatedly.

Andriy's face brightened and his lips began to part into a broad smile. Then it clouded again and he started questioning her, impatiently and almost rudely:

"Wait, exactly how are you going to study? Where will you get the money?"

"Lidia Vitalyivna promised to help. She said she would try to obtain a scholarship for me."

Lidia Vitalyivna patronized many schools in the district.

She was a rich and influential lady, and Andriy respected her. So he heaved a noisy sigh of relief. His face broke into a broad grin he no longer tried to suppress, his eyes lit up, and he shouted with such unrestrained force that his voice seemed to shake branches of a nearby acacia from their sleep and traveled far and wide over the surrounding fields, echoing in the distant dreamy hamlet:

"Well done, Tetyana! Good for you, Tetyana Hnativna!"

Then, pushing back his cap, he spoke with infinite warmth and tenderness, "So you're going to study, to do something with yourself? What a lucky girl you are: here we torture ourselves, go without sleep for days on end without even being sure that anything will ever come out of it — and she up and goes straight to the capital, as if on wings..."

"I don't quite believe it yet; it seems to me it's just a dream," said Tetyana as in a reverie,

betraying, however, more naive trust than was prudent of her. That magic word had blinded her like a lightning. And together with her, we, too, had been blinded.

I felt extraordinarily lighthearted. I wanted to believe and did believe in human decency, in the power of knowledge, in Tetyana's talent, in my own abilities and in my sunny, happy future.

It was as if a holiday had suddenly invaded our humdrum existence. We were intoxicated, fooling around like children, singing out of tune, laughing without cause and making plans. We visualized those times in the future when we would bring culture to the countryside.

"Ha-ha!" Andriy laughed. "Just let me in there and I'll fetch all that culture here in a nettle sack on my back."

We were dying with laughter.

"In saddle bags..."

"On country wagons!"

"Hey-hey!" Andriy shouted at the top of his voice into the fields. "Unlock your doors, throw open your gates, come meet the delegates from the country!"

The old school guard, frightened and sleepy, thrust his disheveled head out of the window: "What's going on here?"

The laughter momentarily stopped. Then it burst out again, as though a flare had exploded in midair into a sparkling fireball. Soon we were talking again:

"What do you say, Tetyana? Will we make it? Will we carry it through to the end? You've got talent — that makes you strong. With it you can manage everything. Or maybe you'll only wait to get out of all this misery, and then you won't let us near you and will even forget the way to the country?"

"Never! Never in my life!" Tetyana interrupted him heatedly, refusing to take it as a joke. It was apparent that the idea had never crossed her mind before.

"And why not?" Andriy's voice rang with bitterness. "There you'll have fame, luxury, glamor, so what will there be to draw you back here?"

"Why are you jumping on me like this?" Tetyana was amused and angry at the same time. "No matter how it turns out for me, if I have this talent, I'm not going to sell it for money or fame." Her face became as red as a rose.

"Let me shake your hand, Tetyana!" Andriy grabbed her hand. Tetyana pulled it free, and her fiery eyes glowed proudly as she groped for words. Then, as she raised her face to the sky, it brightened; next it turned pale and humble. She lifted her hands to the sky, like a child.

"I'm blessed with only a tiny spark of sacred fire. But tiny as it is, it has lighted up my miserable life and warmed my heart with happiness... I would rather see this spark go out and my life become darker than the darkest night than allow it to be abused or trampled into the mud."

We tried to calm her down:

"Why should you say such things?"

Her eyes were dewy with joy...

She was weeping...

. . . . . .

We dreamed, believed and were happy...

VIII

Ehe-he!..

We waited one day, then another, but there was no sign of Tetyana. One evening, the landowner and his wife drove past us in a carriage with their guests, and there she was among them, as pretty as a flower. But she acted as if she did not know us and did not even glance our way. So we were not quite sure if that enchanted night had actually happened or if we had dreamed it. Then we found out that they were rehearsing at the theater and went to have a look. Seeing us, she blushed and turned away as if she were ashamed she knew such as us.

We could not believe our eyes and wondered what had happened to her.

More days passed. The village filled with rumors:

"She's gotten involved with that student... They're wandering all over the rye fields together..."

So that was it!

Father Vasil was enraged:

"She's abandoned the choir and enticed the singers away from the church. What disgraceful conduct!"

People prophesied:

"No good will come of it for her — you'll see! She's wrong if she thinks he's going to play around with her forever. He'll soon tire of her..."

The village buzzed with gossip. Before that nobody had seemed to notice that she was good-looking. Now they were wagging their tongues:

"Hnat's woman bathed her daughter in sage for good reason — she must've been nursing and grooming her for a gentleman all along!"

Somehow, Andriy and I were angry with her, as if the villagers had opened our eyes. We had abandoned our books and were wandering about aimlessly, steaming with rage.

. . . . . .

The whole day long the fields had rung with scythes, like bells, and ripe wheat had murmured like water. But it was night, and all lay still.

I had roamed the fields for hours, brushing my feet against the stubble, counting ricks and watching stars.

On somebody's garden plot, I sat down on a tight, crunchy sheath.

A shadow loomed in the dark and sailed toward me, rustling the stubble. Now, who could that be? Could it be that Andriy was also awake and abroad? The shadow approached and I recognized him. A mournful, solitary figure, he surely looked like my twin brother. There he was coming, bringing more gloom. What was he coming for anyway? I felt annoyed.

He approached me timidly, with a guilty look. His eyes were glowing with burning pain, and his face, like a child's, betrayed an impatient desire to tell me something, to complain.... He sank onto another sheaf beside me, fidgeting... Neither of us spoke.

He yawned. "You know, we came pretty near to having a fire: Tetyana's school almost caught fire..."

From his pretended, artificial yawn I guessed that he was going to tell me about something sensational. I pricked up my ears. Yet I did not betray my curiosity, asking in a listless twang, "How come?"

"Our Tetyana and her boyfriend almost burned it down."

"Who's her boyfriend?" My heart missed a beat.

"That student of hers."

"How did it happen?"

He told me he had passed by her school "quite by chance" and had seen a candle burning in the room. He had peered inside and they were sitting on the bed, embracing...

"What? Embracing?.."

That was right. He could not care less, of course, and he had continued on his way. He had walked to those windmills that stood out in the fields. On his way back he had noticed that the light in the window was suspiciously bright. Looking inside, he had seen flames. He had rushed in: the door was unlocked and somebody's dog was eating out of a pot on the floor. The candle had fallen onto the table, and a window curtain and some papers were burning...

"If I hadn't looked inside that window, it would've been all over by now." He summed it up: "What I want to say is this: love and kiss as much as you want, but for God's sake, don't leave burning candles around, because that's idiotic, isn't it? Especially at harvest time when people are tired..."

My face was crimson but I did not speak.

He sighed:

"Poor girl. That student has a reputation for such affairs. I've heard about him. He's a real lady-killer. He never misses a chance or shows pity afterward..."

"Is she a baby or what that she doesn't see what's going on?" I said, restraining myself.

"It would've been all right, of course, if they had been equals. But as it is, he'll never

marry her — he'll play around a little, and then he'll run away."

I was boiling with anger.

"So may the devil take her — what business is this of ours? Maybe she's having the time of her life."

Andriy did not seem to understand but went on in the same quiet, sober tone:

"I doubt it. Don't you know our people? They'll make it hell for her. And if, God forbid, she has a child, they'll eat her alive..."

The word "child" stabbed me in the chest like a red-hot dagger. Jealousy flared up in me, and my head burned. I snarled:

"So what? Is it any of your business?"

"And why not? It's a pity," he droned on meditatively. "She'd be lucky to find a decent man who'd marry her with someone else's child. But if she doesn't — what then?"

I had an impression that by a "decent man" he secretly meant himself, and I was overcome with irritation. I felt an urge to spite him, to hit him where it hurt:

"You don't have to worry, Andriy Markovich. There'll always be someone who's crazy about anything discarded by the gentry. You know the type that goes around wearing wornout shoes, shabby jackets, and 'pantaloons'... He'd take her, patch her up, brush her off a little, and he'd go to play the dandy, his hands in his pockets. Such a man would marry her just for the hell of it."

Andriy looked at me with terror, his eyes as round as buttons:

"Wait, what are you saying? She's a human being! How can you compare her with some cast off rag? She's got a soul, a living soul!.." He looked agitated...

"Oh yes, soul! But this soul of hers is exactly what they will take away from her, leaving us with just her body to which this peasant existence will be a torture for the rest of her life."

He stared at me.

"Oh, no," he said. "You are a selfish, cruel, unjust person. You — "

I interrupted him:

"Excuse me, Andriy Markovich, you would have to be a holy fool not to see that..."

"Eh, now you've started saying God knows what." He looked offended as he stood up. "I can't seem to talk with you at all today."

"You don't have to!"

He walked away silently, keeping his dignity.

"To hell with it all!"

I lay down on the stubble and looked up at the sky.

The starry eyes of dusky-faced Night the Reaper were staring down upon me. It was one of those nights that should not be wasted in solitude. A lump welled up in my throat.

IX

Days were burning away, one after another. I rushed about fields and hills, trying to extinguish the fire that blazed in my chest like a dry branch burning in the wind. At times, it seemed to me that I had mastered myself. Then I would return to my room and see a face in the mirror looking like the muzzle of a crying sheep and a pair of languid, misty eyes. The sight made me furious with myself, and I would shake my fist at the mirror, slam the door and flee back to the fields.

Back in the village, every day brought something new: one night somebody smeared Tetyana's school with pitch.

An evil satisfaction stirred inside me; it was disgusting, but only to be expected. Somehow, I felt relieved.

One morning, the old school guard came in, fumbling with his hat and shaking his head:

"Those two got what they'd been asking for — have you heard?"

"What's happened?" I asked avidly.

"The lady threw out the whole lot of them and nailed that theater shut. She sent her nephew packing, right back to the city and drove Tetyana away, forbidding her to enter the grounds."

I felt pity at first. Then a hot, muddy wave of self-righteousness surged inside me: it served her right! I experienced a certain satisfaction; the wonderful image seemed to have started fading away.

The next day brought more news:

She was gone: taking all the money from her mother's chest, she had rushed to the city after her boyfriend.

Her sincere, sorrowful eyes came back to me from afar: "Petro, Petro, where are you?" Her image was as pure, unstained and attractive as ever. I buried my head in my hands...

The whole night I stared at the moonlit green weeds and freshly cut stubble shining like silver on the woodpile. I could not sleep all night but wandered around the schoolhouse like a sleepwalker. I was uprooting her image, tearing it out mercilessly, not sparing myself. It hurt and I was glad — that was the way it had to be done... And as the night began to fade, I felt that my feeling was fading with it. It really was — of

that I was sure. Then suddenly I felt such a wave of pity, such sorrow and anguish, that I nearly collapsed into the weeds, sobbing like a child. My youth seemed poor, shabby and robbed of something important.

In the moonlight, dewdrops glittered like lost keys. I lay down, pressing my chest to the cool ergots and remained there for a long, long time until I felt an icy cold in my chest.

Day was breaking in the east. At the other end of the sky, the moon, paled by the dawn, was rocking on shaggy clouds as if they were waves, like the corpse of an old man caressed to death overnight and dumped in the morning into brackish water. I went to my room exhausted.

I took the mirror: my eyes were sunken and my face was haggard and bore a stern, dry expression. There was no trace left of that languid, misty look: my eyes were thoughtful and clear, and it even seemed to me that deep inside them, I could see the steely glitter I had often noticed in Andriy's eyes. At last!

I smiled:

Well, now nothing would stand in my way, I reasoned calmly.

X

Three days passed and everything seemed all right. In the morning, I called on Andriy and found him with a peasant woman from the village sitting on a chair, her hands pressed to her chest and her face stained with tears. Andriy looked worried and thoughtful, biting his lip, staring through the open window with an absent expression. I listened to their conversation.

"Tell me the truth," he said. "Did you shout at her or scold her when she came back?"

The woman started up.

"I didn't say a word! As soon as she opened the door, I noticed that something was wrong, so I didn't even ask her about anything. I only told her, 'Well, daughter, it's good that you're back — you can help me with the house.' "

I took a closer look at the woman. Her eyes and face seemed familiar. Then it dawned upon me: wait, this must be Tetyana's mother.

"So she undressed and sat on the bench. I spoke to her but she mostly kept silent. She'd say a word or two in such a way that you knew she didn't feel like talking, and then she'd be silent as the grave again. I could tell she was really in a bad way. She didn't sleep or eat — just stared at the corner all the time and wouldn't even stir. I tell you, it pained me to see her like that. I decided to keep an eye on her to make sure she didn't do anything to herself. But I couldn't watch her all the time."

The woman's eyes filled with tears, she broke down and wept, her body shaking.

"There's no need to cry, really. It could've been worse," Andriy tried to comfort her.

She made an effort and stopped crying. Then she wiped her eyes with her sleeve and went on in a calmer tone:

"And then, when we'd brought her round, I asked her, 'Now, daughter, why did you want to abandon me in my old age? Maybe, you've got some grudge against me?' 'No, mother,' she says, 'you've never harmed me — it would be a sin to hold anything against you. It's just that I'm tired of living...' "

She fell silent.

"How is she now?" Andriy asked. "Has she come to her senses?"

"Well, she acts like she's thought the better

of it. She's eating and talking like normal, only — oh, dear — whenever I look at her, especially at her eyes, it seems to me she hates the sight of the world. That's really so, and it makes my blood run cold with fear that she might try something again."

She started and looked up at the sun.

"Oh, I'm late already..." She turned to Andriy. "So I have to ask you for help, Andriy Markovich. She respects you and she'll listen to you. Please come and talk to the stupid girl, because I can't do anything myself and wouldn't even know how to go about it." Then she looked me in the face, attentively and with trust. "I ask you, too. Come with Andriy Markovich, maybe the three of us will find it easier to get all those silly ideas out of her head."

We promised we would help, and the woman left.

"What happened, anyway?"

"Haven't you heard?"

"No."

"She tried to drown herself in the well."

Suddenly, the room seemed darker.

XI

Dusk was falling.

Andriy was leading the way across kitchen gardens, through beets, cabbages, potatoes. Sunflowers stood in rows, marking the boundaries, hanging low their heavy heads, as though looking for something lost. Amidst twisting vines, huge pumpkins shone with their backs pink like naked children. Poppies stood like soldiers, and the hemp rose in thick forests.

Marigolds and asters of all colors made the flowerbeds look as if they had been splashed with paint.

"Look at this land. This is some land," Andriy kept muttering to himself.

Here and there, people were working on their plots. Andriy looked around, squinting.

"Look, could that be our Tetyana?" he pointed to a tall figure in a woman's coat bent over a spade, digging potatoes not far away.

We drew nearer. Andriy said in a louder voice:

"It's her all right!"

Tetyana raised her head. Seeing us, she started, and an annoyed expression flitted across her face. She stood upright, a forced smile playing on her lips.

There was something new about her face. It was not that it had become leaner; her features seemed coarser, her eyes were strange and unfamiliar, and she moved them almost unwillingly.

We greeted her.

Stepping back, Andriy looked over her attire from head to foot.

"Look what a big girl she is! It certainly didn't show as long as she wore those blouses and dresses — she seemed like a wisp of willow then. But now that she's got a frock and kerchief on, she's as tall as a tree."

With a weak smile, Tetyana glanced casually at her own figure.

We made some small talk.

Then Andriy resolutely put his hand on her shoulder and, looking her in the eyes, spoke seriously and tenderly:

"Tell me, Tetyana — why did you do it?"

She suddenly blushed and stared fixedly at the ground. Then she frowned and her fingers

worked rapidly, twisting the fringe of her kerchief.

Although Andriy spoke excitedly and incoherently, he radiated energy, and his eyes, his gestures and his voice were full of vitality. His words carried convicition that was as solid as a rock.

She was as silent as the grave.

"The first piece of bad luck that comes your way and you hit rock bottom!" Andriy was saying. "Did you think life was a joke or what? No, Tetyana! Real life tastes bitter as horse radish and stings like nettle. But never mind if it's bitter, never mind if it sometimes stings so that it drives you to tears. That only keeps you alive and awake. Well, Tetyana, I never expected anything like this from you..."

We sat down on the grass.

"How could you? How dare you? It's shameful and a sin, it's a — "

She did not speak, but acted as though his words were addressed to someone else. She was picking blue-and-red flowers from where they grew on the boundary, choosing the prettiest of them and mechanically gathering them into small bunches; then she would drop them to the ground and pick more flowers. Only her head drooped lower and lower and she pressed her lips firmer and firmer.

Andriy broke into a sweat. He took off his cap and ran his fingers through his hair; the evening sun lit up a halo around his fiery-red shaggy head. He sat for a while, thinking. Then, rising to his feet, he grinned, resolutely took her by the shoulders and shook her, asking in a voice that was both jocular and angry:

"Now, Tetyana, do you hear or not?"

He tried to lift her head.

She averted her eyes, turning them from side to side. Suddenly she broke down. Tears gushed forth and she pressed her face against his shoulder.

She took her head away, wiped off the tears, and righted her kerchief.

"Well, I'm afraid I forgot to ask you in." She smiled.

Her face brightened somewhat, as if a glimmering candle had been placed in a hitherto empty lantern.

The big, cherry-colored sun was setting beyond the fields. The autumn sky above a distant forest looked as sad as tear-veiled thoughtful eyes. We went inside.

XII

Day after day, the sun rose and set in a curling mist. Those days were short and cheerless, and as to the nights...

Tetyana had become pretty dismal: she looked timid, spoke in a quieter voice, and seemed to have withered. She seemed to fear she might disturb or bother somebody, and she avoided the streets, keeping to alleys and wrapping her face in a kerchief. Now she looked plain and colorless... She would drop in, sit for a while and run away. Once we offered to walk her home, but it only alarmed her, so that she even flushed:

"No — please don't!"

"Why?"

"It's a holiday now, there are people everywhere — I've got enough problems as it is..."

Andriy kept sighing and shaking his head. "They've killed something inside her..."

Only once, when we sat together in the schoolhouse, did she become more talkative than usual.

Then she got quite lively and even tried to sing. It was as if a bird that had been sitting sulky and silent in a cage had suddenly stirred to life and chirped out in the sun. She sang a few words, looked around timorously and grew silent. She sat down on a desk and fell to thinking.

"Now I've got nowhere to sing: Father Vasil won't let me sing in the choir, and the theater has been boarded up... It's like a jail around here now," she waved her hand with resignation.

Suddenly she shook her head, snapped her fingers, and her eyes sparkled with the former restless yearning, the proud, burning agony, unquenchable and mysterious.

"Why wait? Why live? What for?"

She leaned against the desk, weeping. Then she wiped her tears and her eyes glittered.

"You know, when I first saw that crowd from the stage, something seemed to flare up inside me, and I felt such a fiery strength that I was fearful and happy at once. It seemed I could smash the theater and lift all those people off the ground.

She talked on and on.

As I said, it happened only once, and then she faded again, becoming resigned and timorous.

The gossip died down. Having discussed the matter, the villagers decided that the girl had been brought to reason and was mending her ways. Even Father Vasil softened.

"The Lord gave her such a talent so she could glorify His sacred name in church," he was saying, "and she used it for dances and revelries to please the enemy of mankind. She ought to be banished from church altogether, but God is merciful, so if she comes and asks me, I will allow her to sing in the choir..."

There was a hope that the trouble would pass and be forgotten, that the scars would heal, and that she would live somehow. And if she really had that talent, she might still have her chance. After all, weren't there many obscure talents like her among the people that warmed human hearts and brightened their colorless existence, making no special effort and demanding no reward, not caring to know the value of this heavenly gift and never knowing all this agony or such regrets?..

So we hoped.

XIII

I can still see it before my eyes, that clumsy structure of pine boards known as the theater. It stood boarded up for a long time afterward, blackened by rains and dismal-looking. Alders and lilac bushes clung to its walls that were already covered with wild hops. The footpaths were overgrown with weeds and nettle, and owls could be heard crying at night. People kept away from the place even by day, telling horrible stories about it and wishing that some good soul would burn it down. Just going past it gave them the shivers.

But the news of what happened in the village of Yarki on the second Feast of Our Lady reverberated far and wide.

. . . . . .

The linden in the churchyard glittered like gold. It was the time when the leaves were yellowing on the trees.

I entered the crowded church. A choir of fresh voices, reinvigorated over the summer, was singing away cheerfully and loudly, if not always in

harmony. Tetyana stood with the singers, stooping and hiding behind their backs, looking stern-faced, reserved, even hostile. She seemed lost and dejected...

The service was drawing to a close. The church grew solemnly still.

The singers stirred and fidgeted, readying themselves for the closing hymn. A tuning fork sang out, then the basses started deeply:

"Heal the afflictions..."

The tenors joined in after the basses, then a soprano crept in, rose above all the rest and suddenly poured down from under the very domes in a rain of hot sparks: "...of my long-suffering soul..."

The church filled with whispers:

"Who is she? Is that the one?"

"Where's she?"

"Is it that girl in a white kerchief up there? My, but she's wasted away. Look!"

"Hush!"

The whispers died down.

The eyes of the crowd sparkled like a dense dewy garden at dawn. The church was gradually becoming lighter and clearer, as though its windows were being opened one after another. Tetyana's face was aglow, like a candle. It was remarkably alive, naive, inspired with sorrow, with those big credulous eyes that made people whisper.

"For Thou healest human afflictions and soothest suffering sinners." Up went her hands, her eyes were turned up skywards and her wailing filled the church, stinging hearts with its anguish: "...su-u-uffering sinners..."

It seemed that dust was falling everywhere from the decrepit church walls. The frozen faces of the saints had flown up in panic somewhere

high and far away and, wondering and worried, were listening from where they were to this living, irrepressible sadness of a sinful world — the first to raise its voice amidst those lifeless walls.

The doors and the windows were blurred.

It suddenly came to me as a shock that this was probably what talent was all about.

Tetyana seemed to be growing in stature. As though she had sensed her power over the people, she stepped forward, assuming a proud, independent posture. Some new strength emanated from her, a restless, burning, formidable strength that shook dried wood and made the old gilt blacken and fall as if blown off by a wind. It seemed that any moment, the dark walls would part to show the green vistas, the blue sky and the shining sun. The altar had melted away.

Something intrusive and annoying began droning and hissing, trying to attract attention. It was becoming more and more persistent. There was some commotion in the choir loft among the singers. The singing went off key and one of the choristers waved his hand frantically. The singing broke off, and an angry voice, restrained but irritated, could be heard distinctly:

"Enough! Stop that! Don't you understand? This is a holy place, this is the Lord's temple. Stop it, I said!"

Leaning through the small door that led back to the altar was Father Vasil, his face chalk-white, his eyes greenish and evil-looking. He was staring at Tetyana and hissing at her:

"What do you think you're doing? I want none of your tricks! I need no acting. This is not an opera."

The people were bewildered, exchanging glances and whispering to one another.

Tetyana stood straight as a taut string, her face as white as a sheet. Gradually, the color came back to her cheeks and then, all of a sudden they turned flaming red, the color of a blossoming rose.

She spoke softly:

"Just what have I been doing?"

"Are you trying to talk back, impertinent woman? Don't you dare to contradict me in church. You shouldn't have been allowed to set foot here."

Tetyana's eyes flashed angrily. She seemed to be thinking. Then she said evenly, for everybody to hear:

"Why so, Father? Nobody's been after my braid yet."

The crowd went dead. It had been rumored in the village that a peasant had caught the priest at his wife. He had wanted to cut off his braid with a sickle, but Father Vasil had paid him off.

The priest stamped his feet.

"Get out of my church!"

Tetyana told him rudely:

"You've no right to say such things — you don't own this church."

Father Vasil yelled:

"Hey, guard! Take this wretched woman out of here!"

The pockfaced bearded guard who had been standing near the altar coughed into his hand and resolutely began to press his way toward the choir loft.

Tetyana flung the music onto the stand and stepped down from the choir. As she pushed through the crowd, red-faced, flaming, with misty eyes, she burned faces with her breath, advancing to the door like a fury. People parted before

her, as if before a fiery wind. At the doorway she turned around:

"I'll go to complain... to the bishop... I... I..." She ran out.

The priest shouted derisively after her:

"Go ahead! Complain! Wait till I get on to you in a real way. Hanging around dens of iniquity and then coming to church to kick up a fuss! Can you imagine? An actress!.."

The crowd was stupefied... Suddenly, as though she had just woken up, a woman rushed out of the women's part of the church and ran out after Tetyana, nearly knocking people off their feet. The church echoed with voices:

"Her mother..."

. . . . . .

There was some uneasiness in the air. The people did not go home but stayed in the graveyard, buzzing with excitement.

Father Vasil went out to them looking guilty and worried but wearing an artificial stern expression on his face.

"See how you bring up your children? See what willfulness does to them?"

A constrained man's voice spoke from the crowd:

"That may be quite true, Father, but you shouldn't have done that to her all the same."

A woman chimed in:

"Imagine abusing and humiliating the girl like that, and before everybody in the church, too! Why did you have to do that? As if what she'd gone through already weren't enough."

Other voices joined in one by one, uttering sober, well-weighted words of reproach, expressed in a somewhat coarse peasant manner but burning and stinging:

"Well, even if she did do something wrong, does it mean she has to be drowned right away like a pup?"

"You see, she's only a poor girl with no father, so why should he have pity on her?" — this from another side.

"She's young and silly, too — what if she does something to herself from all that bitterness? Who'll be to blame then?"

Father Vasil fidgeted, blinking thievishly.

"Nothing will happen to her," he squirmed.

"It'll be a good thing if she turns up safe, but what if..."

Tetyana's mother came running toward the crowd. Everybody rushed to her, ignoring the priest:

"Did you find her?"

The woman was pale, breathing heavily.

"The chest is open, all her trousseau, books, papers are out on the floor, but she's not there. I ran to look at the well and then to the pond but I didn't find her."

She wrung her hands, crying and begging:

"Please help, good people, because she must have had something bad on her mind."

The crowd hushed down.

"Where should we go to look for her if she's taken one road and there are ten others besides..." somebody said.

A tall, grim-faced old man said:

"There are many of us, though — the whole community. Some may look around here, others will search outside the village and someone might find her yet. Let's go, folks! We must give it a try."

A man from the crowd shouted:

"Be quiet, all of you!"

The rest stirred: "Why? What's the matter?" But other impatient voices could now be heard: "Now quiet down — there's somebody calling!" The crowd became silent.

Across the square was the estate's back gate, and beyond the barracks-like wooden stage could be seen under the thick crown of an alder. Over there, a crowd of young people were fussing at the open door, waving their hands and shouting to the graveyard. The crowd stood stock-still. Father Vasil's face turned white, his eyes blinking. Then in the dead silence that followed, distinct words floated up from the estate... They burned like fire. All of a sudden, as if a hill had crumbled down, the whole crowd silently pressed from the graveyard through the gate, and then on through another gate, stumbling, every single person trying to overtake the rest. As they all ran to the theater, the ground seemed to groan under their feet.

XIV

The gossamer of the Indian summer was flying high in its last days, shining silver in the sun and smiling at the fleeting joys of fall. Still higher, somewhere just under the chilling sky, the tiny silver bells of children's voices stirred the air with their burning anguish:

"I'm a lost sheep, give me salvation..."

Dark-violet gonfalons were waving, and flaming-red banners were swaying... They were followed by a crowd of people, and soaring above the people was a litter with a coffin on it, heaped with flowers, hung with embroidered towels...

They had decided to bury her without delay, so they took the keys from the warden, unlocked the church, and took the litter and the gonfalons.

Then her body was laid out and carried to the graveyard.

At the priest's gate, the procession came to a halt and fell silent. A man jumped over the fence to open the gate from inside. The coffin was carried in, the crowd poured into the yard like water released from a flood-gate.

There was not a soul in the yard; the door to the priest's quarters was locked, the shutters closed.

The litter was placed under the maples.

A cold wind seemed to sweep through the crowd; hair bristled like wire and eyes flashed angrily:

"Go ahead — smash the door..."

Andriy came forward. He seemed to have grown, and his face had become leaner. His glance was razor-sharp.

"Wait," he said. "Don't do it. We'll do even better. Listen."

As the din subsided, Andriy went to the window and knocked at the pane. "We're asking you for the last time — will you bury her? Do you hear?"

A girl-servant in a pulled-up skirt ran from the kitchen, pale, frightened, her hair dishevelled.

"Father Vasil is not in," she announced.

"That's a lie!" the crowd roared. "He's hiding! He's afraid of us! Bring him here!"

She ran back inside. Everybody sat down on the lawn by the coffin, along the wall, on the railings between pickets. Their faces were knit with frowns as they waited in silence.

The girl reappeared:

"Father Vasil says he won't be coming out." She fled.

Andriy rose to his feet and solemnly walked up to the coffin. He cleared his throat, looking round the crowd.

"Silence! Silence!" people called out here and there.

He hurled words like stones into the crowd:

"Here, in our out-of-the-way village, lost and forgotten, a gift from God sparkled in the middle of the night under the humble thatched roof of a peasant hut..."

A public speech — that was something new in the village!

The people heaved and swayed like a stormy sea, tramping noisily, as they crowded around the speaker, their eyes burning; then they became still and immovable like a rock...

Somebody called out:

"Down on your knees!"

They knelt, the whole crowd, and the final parting words rang out as they said farewell to her.

"Now go away — all to a man!" Andriy trumpeted.

The crowd groaned and roared like a hailstorm, stirred and broke up, leaving the gonfalons behind. Before long there was no one left in the yard. Everything was mute and petrified.

Only the setting autumn sun entertained the abandoned girl, like a child, throwing its golden reflections onto her coffin.

XV

We built and hoped, but then lightning struck and smashed everything, scattering the pieces all over the field...

There we sat, brooding...

The books in the corner had gathered dust and

our notebooks had vanished, but we had plenty of other things on our minds.

The lamp was burning dimly, the autumn night walled in upon us, and our hearts were heavy. Our conversation did not make much headway; everything was only too clear without words...

Some officials from town had come to Father Vasil to hold an inquiry. A newly appointed teacher had also reported to him earlier in the day. All day long villagers had been running to us:

"Oh dear, what's going to happen to us? They'll haul everybody who was at the funeral in to the interrogation — young and old alike!"

We knew what was going to happen: neither of us would ever see the inside of a university as long as he lived. That much was clear.

The world had paled, becoming cheerless and unreal. One of us would pace the room for a while... We were bored.

Andriy got out a pack of greasy cards:

"Shall we play a game or what?"

The door opened and the watchman came in.

"Come and listen," he said. "There's somebody yelling beyond the gardens."

"Where?"

"I can't tell. It's either down near the marshes or, maybe, right in the middle of them. He's been screaming away, as if somebody were trying to cut his throat or wring his neck."

We went outside. The moment we stepped over the threshold, it seemed we were covered in black cloth; it was so dark that our heads swam. The voice sounded hollow, as if it were coming from an abyss. Then it broke into wailing.

"Some drunken idiot has gotten stuck in the mire," Andriy suggested angrily.

"Could it be our deacon?" the watchman offered a guess.

I also thought I'd heard that voice before.

"It sounds like him all right," I said.

Andriy did not think so. Zaporozhets had left the village quite a long time ago and was said to have entered a teachers' college.

"Why the deacon? What would he be doing here? Just some drunk who —" He did not finish. The voice in the dark suddenly turned from wailing to singing:

Why's the water muddy?
Has it been stirred by waves?..

That was Tetyana's favorite song...

"The Devil take him! It's him!" Andriy spoke softly. His voice trailed off... We shuddered, as though a taut vibrating wire ran from the marshes to our hearts. It was an eerie sensation... The image of the girl with those wonderful eyes was soaring in the night mist above the marshes, sorrowful and mysterious... We stood petrified until the song ended.

"What in the hell are you doing out there? Come over here!"

The voice responded happily from the dark:

"My dear brothers! Where am I?"

"Come here and you'll see."

"Which way? It's mire everywhere."

"Just come toward the sound of my voice."

We heard some splashing and squelching, and finally a shadow loomed before us...

"Is that the school? How come?.. Something's not right..."

Without a word, we took him by the arms and helped him up onto the porch. He walked obediently, like a child, slipping drunkenly and shooting us sideways glances. As we brought him into the room, Andriy clasped his hands: the deacon's face, clothes, boots were covered with mud, thorns and burrs... He looked more ghostly

than human... If it had not been for those young eyes of his which shone bleakly from his muddy face, one might have thought he had done it on purpose to give people a good laugh.

"What did you get into that mire for?"

"My heart was injured, my spirit was confused, and night carried me along on its wings," he recited.

We made him wash his face and change.

"Why have you come back? Didn't you get into a college?" we asked him.

He frowned. "I quit."

"What?" Andriy cried out. "You mean you got in and then quit?"

"I saw it was like a jail, so I took my papers and walked away."

Andriy's eyes sparkled with indignation which soon gave way to pity.

"Then you're lost — forever," he waved his hand hopelessly.

"Sh-h-h. Enough!" Zaporozhets ran his hand through the air as if drawing a line under something.

"There goes our learning..." Andriy said in a low voice. The room became still and gloomy, as though the sky had suddenly clouded. We sat, hanging our heads, while that cloud sailed above us. Then Zaporozhets lifted his head and his eyes filled with tender sorrow as he smiled — ever so sadly. He looked into our eyes and shook his head.

"That's how it is..." he muttered.

We wondered what he was talking about. He squinted and started again:

Why's the water muddy?

We could not sit still. Andriy stood up, snapping his fingers, and began pacing the room. I followed suit.

"Yes, that's what talent is..."

We talked for a very, very long time. We spoke of Tetyana and her fate, the fate of the flower of the people — that untended and unwatered flower, those who wait in vain at the locked gates of stone-walled schools, their faces sunburnt and sad.

We lay down to sleep. But no sooner had we grown silent than a heavy stupor rushed at us from all sides, poisoning us and playing havoc with our senses, so that the windows, the walls, the entire room seemed to be swimming and falling into a black abyss.

Although we did not speak, we could feel that none of us was asleep. Zaporozhets was lying next to me, still smelling of vodka, and I could hear his quickened heartbeat. He stirred, groaned, then said something. Neither of us spoke back. He covered himself with his sheepskin coat, but then suddenly threw it off and sat up, breaking into song at the top of his voice as if he were out in the steppes:

The night is so dark,
And I see nothing, poor me!..

"Are you crazy? Stop it! Time to sleep," we hissed at him. His head hit the pillow and he was still...

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

The rainbow-like reflections of fiery clouds were quietly fading from the wall. The forlorn garden, painted and gilded by fall, loomed under the darkening sky.

A heavy tapestry covered the sky to the west. The red trail left by the setting sun still shone

faintly through the last remaining crack between the ground and the clouds, shrinking and dimming by the minute... Presently, there was only a tiny wreath, a lone wreath of flaming-red poppies intertwined with golden threads.

The wind lay in wait for it somewhere beyond the hill; it hit the wreath with its chilly, dark breath, chased it up to the clouds — and blew it out of sight.

Darkness fell...

And then a sea of yellow leaves stirred under my windows — a moaning sea of tears... Like luckless soldiers of a defeated army, routed and hotly pursued by the enemy, they were streaming forth in disorderly flight...

Then they paused to rest by the schoolhouse, trembling, clinging to one another, and whispering their timid complaint through their tears:

"Why go on? The night is near..."

THE BOY WHO CAME TO STAY

(Tale of an Orphanage)

Bo-o-o! The wind trumpeted over the building, banging the loose sheet metal on the roof. Bo-o-o! Above the structure, fall herded its dark clouds, and the cold rain from those clouds thrashed and drenched it. All around was plenty of garbage, dried weeds rustling in the wind, and thorns.

Its windows were cracked and broken, the roof was patched all over, and everything was so sooty, dilapidated and sad...

Bo-o-o! the wind howled above it...

But then came a rustle in the weeds and a rattle of the windowpanes and a rap on the rotten door. "Open up!" called the wind. "What's the matter, noisy fellow?" asked the building. "I've brought you a little tumbleweed from the steppe. Open up!"

The dining room was dusty, dim and smoky. Crowded at the door were some children, the directress and a bespectacled stranger. By the damp, peeling wall stood two little girls with not a stitch on them, their teeth chattering with cold. The man and woman were engaged in a heated argument, waving their arms frantically and thrusting some papers before each other's eyes. The children were watching with attention and curiosity.

"Why have you taken their clothes off?" the woman shouted. "They'll catch cold."

"The clothes were borrowed. You must give them something else."

"Haven't I told you that I've no room for them! I can't admit them."

"And just what am I supposed to do with them if I may be so bold as to ask?" the man snarled. "I've been dragging them from one place to another for three days... I've no strength left."

"Take them to the department of public education!" retorted the principal.

"You take them this time! I've been there already!"

"Listen, can't you understand anything: this is a home for thirty children and I've got ninety. Some have contagious illnesses. They sleep three to a bed here; I've got no bedding and no boots... And not a crust of bread!"

"You can throw them out in the cold as far as I'm concerned!"

"So I will! I'll turn them out stark-naked, and then we'll see who'll be held responsible!"

Hearing this, the girls, who had been trading guilty, frightened glances, burst into tears. Looking at them, huddled up and blue with cold, the principal could not hold back her tears.

Seizing the opportunity, the bespectacled man tossed the papers onto the table and, mopping his sweaty brow, made his way past all the children. As he slipped through the door, the children broke into laughter.

Dressing the newcomers in some rags, the principal sobbed, swearing to whoever would listen:

"Not a single soul more! Not one, no matter what! I'd sooner run away."

The other girls laughed and clapped as they sang to tease the boys:

Ducklings walk in the yard —
Send us, Lord, more girls.
Don't send us any boys,
Because they are all rascals.

One could not hear anything for the din or see anything for the smoke. In a corner, children's heads circled the stove like beads on a string. They seemed to be mossy with cold, their lips bluish, their faces pale, as though dusted with flour, setting off the fresh cherries of their eyes. They were listening to fairy tales and their eyes were sparkling. A flaxen-haired boy of about ten was telling a tale. There was silence until one of them chuckled, then another chimed in — and suddenly they all exploded into laughter. After a while, this was followed by an even louder explosion.

More children joined the bunch.

"What's going on here?"

"I wish you could have heard what this boy here was telling us."

They eyed the boy; he was puny and ragged and his bare feet were covered with dirt.

"Who is he anyway?"

"That's right — he's not one of us."

More remarks were made and then they began questioning him:

"Are you from here?"

"No, I'm from outside."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I'm just visiting you."

"Have you got a friend or brother here?"

"No, no one."

They scrutinized him closely, taking in his shabby clothes and scratched feet. One of them asked suspiciously, "Could you be one of those 'famine-stricken'?"

The boy was startled. "No, no!" he denied hastily. "I have a father and mother. We live not far from here on Deep Street."

They seemed unconvinced.

"If you've got a father and mother, why is it you've no shoes on? Are you poor?"

"Oh yes, I've got boots, only Mother's locked them up to keep me at home. So I've slipped out without them. I also have a winter coat and a fine hat — but Mother's hidden them all."

"What's your name?"

"Mishko."

The children softened:

"All right, Mishko, will you repeat what you've been telling us so the newcomers can hear it."

Reassured, Mishko hitched up his trousers, and his eyes flashed as his voice reverberated throughout the building:

Hey, Moroz-Morozenko,
A fine Cossack you are...

Other children flew to them from all sides:

"Where did you learn to sing like that, Mishko? Isn't he a fine actor?"

"Give us more!"

Mishko gave them more: taking out a comb, he put it to his lips and played a tune that set everybody's eyes shining and gave them the urge to dance. The children's shoulders swayed and they kept glancing at one another waiting for somebody to start.

"He's some boy, that Mishko!"

He picked up a book from a table.

"Can you read, too?"

He opened the book and began, like a deacon:

"Brethren..."

He went on and on, and everybody was convulsed with laughter.

"Just where did he find that in the book?"

A boy peered over Mishko's shoulder and again doubled over with gales of laughter.

"He's holding it upside down."

"So you really can't read, can you, Mishko?"

"This winter, Father will hire a governess to teach me," Mishko said. "He'll also buy me a piano. I'll be a musician."

Suddenly serious, the children started pointing to themselves. "We too... Paraska Kalistrativna says he'll be a professor, and this one will be an engineer, and he and she will be actors."

According to Principal Paraska Kalistrativna, nearly all her pupils were to become famous personalities. Now all those pointed at stood with their hands behind their backs, nodding calmly, apparently regarding what was being said of them as generally known, irrefutable facts.

Then the children started boasting:

"Well, we've certainly got a fine home here. Why, we study French and German!"

One of the boys got a tattered textbook from under a bookcase, smacked it against his knee to beat out the dust and leafed through it:

"Look here, Mishko, this is der Stuhl, and this is — "

Somebody banged a wooden spoon against a cracked iron pot: a children's home could not be without a bell. The pupils jumped up, leaving everything, and flew to the dining room with shouts of "Lunchtime!"

Mishko remained standing at the door.

"Join us for lunch, Mishko!"

He looked confused. "No, I'm not hungry. I'm just curious."

"Why? Today we'll be getting der Suppe — no bread, no salt, no grain, but plenty of bones."

A girl on kitchen duty, her skirt hiked up,

stood at a big chipped pot, using a broken earthen mug for ladle. Sticking out of the steaming pot were plenty of big bones, as if the pot had somehow accommodated an entire cow's skeleton.

"Come along, Mishko!" they called to him.

"I've already eaten lunch," he said in a low voice.

"What did you have?" asked somebody curious.

"Borshch with meat, milk porridge, some tea with sugar and rolls, and — " Mishko swallowed and became silent.

...Then they ate and their eating sounded as if it were pouring with rain: voices droned, the broth splashed, bones crackled and plates rattled. There was no conversation; a spoon would strike a forehead, one of the younger boys would bite a neighbor on the ear, and after a brief commotion they would go back to eating.

Mishko stood leaning against a doorpost, frowning. He kept turning his head away, as though he did not want even to see the children having lunch. Only his throat was hard at work, as if he were swallowing big stones.

Outside, dusk fell. The wind whistled and wept in the cold stove, and up on the roof the sheet metal groaned. Snow drummed against the broken panes, and the children's teeth chattered.

"Let's warm up!" The boys started vaulting over one another and before long the girls followed suit.

Two boys hauled some planks from a nearby fence and got to sawing, chopping and splitting them right there on the floor. Soon a fire was blazing in the half-ruined fireplace. The children bunched up around it like gypsies around a campfire.

Mishko spent the whole day with the boys, carrying water from the well, helping mend a

broken door, sweeping the floor, talking and laughing. But as night fell, he became gloomy. He stood alone by the window, sorrowfully staring through the dark panes and fumbling his soiled cloth hat with its red star.

Bo-o-o! The wind howled outside and made his flesh crawl.

What with all the bustle, the children had forgotten about him, but then somebody noticed him there. "Look, Mishko's still here!"

"How will you walk home now, Mishko? Look at the weather! Your pa and ma must be out looking for you."

Mishko hung his head low. A boy came up and saw tears the size of peas rolling down his cheeks.

"Ehe! So the poor devil must be 'famine-stricken' after all."

Mishko covered his face with a torn sleeve and wept bitterly. "I'm homeless..."

Leaving the fire, they clustered around him and stared at him. "That was a nice story about his father and mother!"

"And that milk porridge, and that tea with sugar, rolls and all."

The older boys spoke to him sternly:

"Why didn't you tell us at once? Why did you have to lie?"

Mishko wiped his face dry with a flap of his coat, pulled his hat onto his head, sighed heavily and, without a word, walked over to the door.

Then they felt sorry for him:

"Where are you going, Mishko? You don't have to leave. Wait..."

"Now what can we do?" They started whispering among themselves.

One of the girls, Halya, protested loudly:

"We don't really know what kind of boy he is. He might rob us at night and run away, just like that tramp Volodkin."

But a boy flared up:

"What right do you have to speak of him in such a way? Can you prove it?"

"I didn't mean him, I spoke in general," the girl said apologetically.

" 'In general'... 'tramp'... What about us? Are we any better?"

"I said I mean no offense, so you don't have to tell me off."

The boy, however, had already worked himself up into a passion: " 'Tramp!'... He might be a millon times better than any of us! Maybe he'll get to be an actor or a musician! Do you realize that, Miss Smartypants? He might grow up to become a proletarian Mozart. Now then, comrades! Let's hold a council!"

The older children conferred in a dark corner of the dormitory while the juniors kept watch. The conference was amazingly quiet, brief and businesslike. They decided to hide Mishko in the building for several days until the situation improved. Then when an opportune moment arrived, they would petition Paraska Kalistrativna for Mishko's admission. It was hoped that, as on similar occasions before, she would get angry and shout at them for a while but then weep and give her consent. They knew her soft spots perfectly.

"So now, Mishko, vou'd better hide under one of the beds, because our cry-lady will probably be back from town soon."

Without much hesitation, Mishko dived where he was told. But soon he stuck out his head, blinking happily.

"Listen, pals," he said cheerfully. "Could you get me something to eat?"

"Right now we've got nothing at all. Maybe the principal will bring us something for supper, and we'll give you some of that."

"Anything to stop this giddiness," Mishko begged. "Like those two bones I saw in the pot."

The girls brought him a skirtful of bones and some rags. "Here, Mishko, take this stuff and wrap yourself in it, because it's going to be cold. Call us if you need anything, but stay under that bed."

"Now everybody get out of the dormitory. Those must be our Paraska's boots tramping!.."

She stormed in, tall, sturdy, with her stentorian voice, wearing men's high boots...

She had been on the run since early morning, besieging officials, begging and arguing until her voice was hoarse. She had hauled seventy pounds of flour and some millet on her back and still did not seem to realize that she was already at home. She was running all over the building and shouting at everybody — getting hold of that flour must have been a pretty tough job.

"Has Semen's foot been washed? Have you taken Valya's temperature? Why didn't anyone think to take out the garbage? Who's broken the window? What is that book doing under the desk? Monitor! Monitor!" She burst into the dormitory, an oil lamp in hand. "Aha, just as I expected: the beds aren't made, the room isn't aired, everything's dirty and smelly... Who's on duty?" She stood in the middle of the room, listening. "Who's on duty?" she asked again fiercely. "How many times do I have to tell you not to let the dogs inside?"

The boy on duty came running.

"Throw out that dog and make sure it's the last time I find one in here."

"What dog? There aren't any dogs in here."

"You'd better stop talking back and do as I say. 'No dogs in here' — then who's gnawing a bone under the bed?"

The boy bit his tongue and scratched his head. Then he said, trying to sound convincing: "You probably imagined it."

The "dog" was clever enough to keep still now.

One by one, other children hurried to the duty boy's assistance.

"You must've imagined it. It was surely something else..."

"It must've been a rat!" somebody guessed.

"That's it!" everybody shouted in chorus. "A rat! Yesterday Andriy killed one with his shoe, and a mighty big rat it was, too!"

The principal looked at them incredulously, her eyes showing alarm for some reason.

"Hm..." Then she said resolutely, "Now hold that lamp for me, will you."

She stooped, peering under one bed, then another. Suddenly she turned her stern face to the children:

"Shame on you! What's that lying under this bed? Take a broom and get it out at once!"

The children were silent. "Well, can't you hear?" she snapped at the duty boy.

He did not bother to take a broom. Instead he bent to the bed and said sadly: "Get out, Mishko, she's caught us..."

Mishko's unkempt flaxen hair and his face, reddened from the effort, emerged slowly from under the bed. Paraska Kalistrativna stepped back, clapping her hands.

"Who's this? Have you picked up another one?"

She immediately found herself surrounded on all sides by petitioners, counselors and philosophers:

"Paraska Kalistrativna! Paraska Kali... This isn't just another one! He's better than us! He's hard-working and well-behaved..." Then, ardently: "He'll be a Mozart!"

She stared at them: "A what?"

"An actor, a musician... You should listen to his singing. And playing, too!.. We'll find a place for him somehow — somewhere on the floor..."

Stopping her ears, she screamed:

"I won't listen! They'll haul me to court, to the Cheka! We'll turn this home into a hotbed of infection! They'll roast me alive for this!"

They tugged her skirt and pulled her by the hands:

"Just look how puny he is, and those rags he's got for clothes! Look!"

They made the boy turn around to demonstrate his tatters. The principal closed her eyes and averted her face: "I hear and see nothing!" But her sharp eyes had already caught something. "Wait!" she said abruptly. Silently, she darted to Mishko and made him unwrap his rags, overcoming the determined resistance which the boy offered her out of shyness.

Underneath he wore no shirt. His ribs showed through the skin, and his puny, starved body was all torn, bruised and bleeding.

She spun around and rushed to her room, slamming the door behind her so the broken panes rattled angrily in all the windows. Then it was quiet...

The dying fire was shimmering at the far end of the room. A bunch of children pressed around the principal's door. A boy flattened his face against the wood to peer through a chink. The

rest held their breath, waiting. As he drew his face away from the door toward them, his eyes glittered joyfully.

"Cheer up, Mishko," he whispered. "It will be all right — she's crying!"

"Is she crying?" everybody whispered in chorus.

"Oh, she's sobbing all right! Even her nose is red. First she wipes it with a handkerchief, then goes back to crying."

Silently, quietly, an irresistible joy lifted and whirled them, as on wings. Shabby coats, sleeves too long, torn lapels, improvised puttees — everything wheeled round. One moved his hand, like a bow, back and forth across his arm, another imitated a tambourine by drumming on his blown-up cheek with his fist, others pretended to dance, hands on hips and squatting. The silence remained undisturbed; only gusts of wind could be heard from outside and the golden snowflakes of their eyes flashed in the dark.

Every now and then, they froze and listened; the unmistakable distinct sounds of sobbing still came from behind the door. This would cause another eruption of joy, even more powerful and unrestrained. Then somebody signaled the alarm and they flew away from the door like dry leaves carried by the wind.

She was calm as she came out, her face washed and dry. Her voice was as firm as steel:

"Come here, what's your name..."

A pandemonium of screams and shouts broke loose:

"Come here, Mishko! The principal wants you!.."

She silenced the children, gathering them round her:

"Listen — tomorrow we are having an inspection. If any fool lets them find you, I'll show you all..." She showed them her big, strong fist.

"We'd never do a thing like that!" they ardently assured her.

"Just let any of you breathe a word!"

"No-o-o!" They waved their small fists.

"Look, girls, we've got some dry stuff in the storeroom."

The boys stuck their tongues out at the girls and teased them, singing in their adolescent voices:

The garden is fenced off,
Send us, Lord, more boys.
Don't send us any girls,
Because they are so silly...

Then they huddled together, wrapping up tightly in their rags, and slept — all of them would-be celebrities of the years to come. From the darkness, snowflakes were drifting up to the broken windows.

The panes rattled, and the wind fanned the sleeping children, stirring their torn clothes. It got into the chimney and suddenly turned into a human voice that sang:

There are many of us
In the hills and the valleys...

Then it banged the door, shook the windows and stirred the sheet metal on the roof.

Bo-o-o!

JUNIOR AVIATORS' CLUB

I Getting Down to Work

Teacher Petro Mikhailovich arrived from Kiev on the late train, and by the time he reached the schoolhouse, the village had long been asleep. When the sun rose in the morning, it found all his club members sitting on the steps outside. The schoolhouse was still closed. The youngsters did not run or fool around and spoke in hushed voices so they wouldn't wake their teacher: they knew that he had gotten home late. They balled out Petro Tkachenko for running his big mouth: they had agreed to keep their plans secret for the time being, but he hadn't been able to resist temptation and had blabbed the news all over the village.

"It is always you, Petro..."

"What a braggart! Nothing may come of it — but you've started boasting already..."

"What do you mean — nothing? It has to work!" Petro said categorically.

"Talk's cheap, but now we'll see who can work as well."

"What about work?" Petro snarled.

"If you want to know, we think you'll be the first to shirk it."

"Who? Me?" He jumped to his feet.

"Stop it, or you'll wake Petro Mikhailovich," Matviy intervened.

"Why is he lying?"

"He's not exactly lying. Don't you remember how you let us down with that play we staged?"

"Do you mean it was my fault?"

"There you go! You'll kick up a row next. We don't seem to be able to do anything without fighting, ever. Enough, I say!"

"Then what does that good-for-nothing start it for?"

Petro felt an urge to have it out, but he contained himself, spun around, spat and walked away from the rest toward the garden.

"Where are you going, Petro?" somebody called after him.

"Leave me alone..." He turned the corner of the schoolhouse.

"Isn't that just like him?"

"Don't you know Petro? You'd better get off his case."

"Do we always have to be soft on him? If he wants to be a member, let him behave himself."

"I think we should expel him if he doesn't turn up for the meeting today. We've had enough of him!"

Petro sprang out from behind the opposite end of the building. He looked excited as if he had suddenly changed completely.

"Hey, guys!" he shouted.

"What's the matter?" they asked drily.

"Imagine — Petro Mikhailovich is already sitting in the workshop and scattered all around him are drawings, books and some tools..."

"Really?" All the heads went up.

"Honestly! I peered through the window. Let's get inside."

They leaped up and, like a flock of sparrows, flew up the steps, chirping merrily.

"Petro Mikhailovich! May we come in?"

"Yes, of course," he said. They trooped inside: "Good morning!"

"And a good morning. So you've turned up

already. I wanted to have a look myself first, but now we might as well do it together."

Scattered on one side of a large table were little saws, files, a plane, pliers, pieces of wood and the other tools needed to build a model airplane. On the other side sat a tall pile of new books. A large sheet of paper was spread out in the middle. The teacher was pouring over that sheet, thoughtful and absorbed, a pencil in hand. The children pressed around the table; somebody reached for the books, another took a wooden part, others peered over the teacher's shoulder.

"What's this fish on the paper?"

"Oh, no, we can't do it like this, my friends," he protested. "You'll find out everything in due time, but for now, I call this meeting to order!"

They quieted down.

"Now put everything back in place." They complied.

"Before we begin working with these tools, we must take this apart," Petro Mikhailovich pointed to the sheet, "and put it back together. These are the instructions for the monoplane."

"So we're going to build a monoplane?"

"A monoplane! You see? Didn't I tell you?" Andriy was delighted.

"Now please take your seats and we'll discuss it properly."

Everybody sat down.

"I must tell you something before you begin: some of you may have a few erroneous ideas about the task we are going to tackle. The work will be painstaking; it will take a long time, and may even seem boring."

"No! To us it'll all be interesting!" everyone protested ardently.

"You better hear me out," Petro Mikhailovich stopped them. "I'll say it again — at times the

work might get boring. We'll have to read and understand these books, study the drawings carefully, and execute details meticulously. You still know nothing about any of this, and although I kept my eyes open in Kiev, I'm not entirely sure about it myself either, so we'd better be prepared for anything. We may have some bad luck at first, but I believe that if we are patient, persistent and attentive, we'll carry it through to the end. The pilot promised to help us; if necessary, we'll write to him or go see him in Kiev."

"How many days will it take us to build our airplane?" Andriy asked.

"How long do you think?"

"I'd say three days."

"I say two!"

"If we really get down to it, we'll make it in just a day."

Petro Mikhailovich smiled.

"Well, I think we would be lucky to finish it in a month."

"Wha-a-at?" everybody gasped. "How could that be? You just want to scare us. Surely it isn't so hard that it will take a whole month."

"We shall see, but meanwhile I warn you just the same: this is going to be a long and serious business. Those who don't feel capable of the effort or who lack confidence in themselves would do well to ask to be excused beforehand so as not to be a hindrance on the rest."

"We'll work! Everybody'll work!" the children shouted.

"Let it be all of you then. Come back after lunch and we'll begin today."

"Why after lunch? Let's start now!"

"Do you want to start immediately? All right. I wanted to look through it all myself first, but

since you're so keen on it, we may as well start."

They took seats, trying to make it convenient for everybody.

"This is going to be our first try. We'll see just how good we are at doing serious work. Well, let's get down to this fish." Petro Mikhailovich smoothed out the drawing on the table, the youngsters moved their chairs nearer and got ready. Then it began. Taking a pencil, Petro Mikhailovich started to explain the drawing.

"This is the frame or fuselage... Fu-se-lage — hear? All the other parts of a plane are fitted on to it. And these are the wings or the carrying planes. An airplane, just like a kite stays up because of the air pressure; so the wings must be as light as possible but at the same time very strong. We'll make a wing out of a whole plank or by putting together pieces called spars or longerons."

"What do you call these pieces, Mikola?" Petro Mikhailovich suddenly turned with a smile to one of the younger boys. Mikola was yawning at this precise moment. "Lo-loro-" he mumbled. Everybody laughed.

"They are called longerons, Mikola, and you'd better stay awake," the teacher said and resumed his explanations. Little Mikola blushed, glanced guiltily at the others, and made an effort to concentrate.

An old man came in and tiptoed to a corner to gather some chips of wood. On his way back to the door he paused by the table, cast a look at the drawing and listened. After a while he shook his head sadly and sighed heavily. The teacher heard him and turned to him:

"Why are you sighing so, Nazar?"

"It's a difficult business. And it won't fly."

"Why do you think so?" the teacher laughed. "It'll fly for sure, Nazar. You'll see."

"Well, I know what kind of men could make it fly," the old man pointed to the drawing. "The ones who used to wear gold buttons, eyeglasses, and piped pants. This is not for simple folks like us."

The junior aviators felt hurt:

"What do we need gold buttons for? Or glasses and piping? We don't need fancy pants to do what they did with their buttons and all."

"That's what you think..." Nazar went out, shaking his head and muttering to himself, "It'll be a hard job, oh yes..."

The teacher divided his "aviators" into groups, telling each of them to make a particular part and explaining what materials were to be used.

After the first day, all the members of the aviation club realized that their task was not as simple as it had seemed at first. And on the third and fourth days, some, especially the younger ones, lost most of their initial interest. Only three boys — Petro, Andriy and Matviy — worked in earnest and it was on these three that Petro Mikhalovich set his hopes. There was also Mariyka who was so fascinated by the idea of a small flying machine that she did not spare even her beloved necklace, donating a bead from it for a thrust bearing. Those who became involved in the project, especially the Young Pioneers, displayed a remarkable team spirit; some procured materials, some traveled to Kiev when the need arose, and others spent whole days in the workshop. Upon due consideration, the young aviators resolved that the actual building of the model should be entrusted to a few selected members, that the rest did not have to work full time but that every member should be fully in-

formed at all times about the progress. The same trio, Petro, Andriy and Matviy, were chosen to do the work. Later they were joined by a girl named Oxana. They spent quite a long time trying to make out the drawing. Even though they failed to understand it thoroughly, everyone was eager to get on with the building as soon as possible, and Petro Mikhailovich finally agreed in the hope that some of the more complex things would become clearer during the work. The workshop atmosphere immediately became livelier. On to the work! The mechanics' hearts beat faster; would their efforts succeed or would they fail disgracefully? For their project was being talked about not only at school but all over the village as well. Somebody was spreading malicious jokes, like, "Our aviators are weaving a wattle plane to fly to the Moon..." They often wondered who it was. But those of the villagers who had heard a lecture on aviation argued with the sceptics, disproving the gossip and silly rumors.

II Enemies

Facing the schoolhouse across the square stood a small store with the sign "M. P. Latka's Grocery." The owner, Mikhailo Latka, a little man with greenish eyes, often stood on the doorstep of his establishment, watching the children who buzzed in and around the schoolhouse from morning till night. Latka hated this new school like poison. He hated it for its "impiety," its new ways, its "peasant language" and, in particular, for the cooperative canteen set up at the school by a group of pupils. He abhorred cooperatives and often lay awake at night wondering what would happen to him if and when the cooperative movement gained a foothold in the village. Mean-

while, the talk about cooperatives spread from the schoolyard to the adult villagers, and some of the more active peasants were already slowly preparing the ground for the acceptance of the idea. Latka was convinced that it had all originated at the school and never missed a chance to revile it before the villagers as only he could.

He always knew what was going on in the school and discussed it with his customers daily. He soon found out about the aviation club. He did not believe that it would come to anything and saw it as his best chance to ridicule the school. Weighing out his wares, he would secretly study every buyer trying to make out what kind of person stood before him. Whenever he was satisfied he had found the right sort for his purposes — i. e. someone who was ignorant and gullible — he would start softly:

"I understand your boy goes to the school. Have you heard what's been going on there?" he asked a peasant once.

"No. Should I have?" The man became worried.

"Well, they say the children there have gotten so clever that they're building airplanes and want to fly..."

"The schoolchildren, you mean? Building airplanes?" the peasant wondered.

"That's right — building an airplane. Going to war with Chamberlain, maybe..." Latka shook his head sorrowfully. "We used to have a real school, but now," he waved his hand. The villager had already become intrigued.

"And do you think it's going to work?" he asked.

"Not on your life! Is it conceivable that those puppies could pull it off? They're just showing off to make us believe they really learn some-

thing at that school. They can do anything and know everything — what's in the sky, what's on Earth and what's underground, but in fact... Oh, dear!"

More people came in and listened. Latka did not hurry to serve them and gradually the store filled with waiting customers who also joined in the conversation:

"Isn't it the truth! What kind of school is it now? What kind of teachers do they have? My boy has been going for more than four years, but he's no good — they're only corrupted there. Once at Christmas, the priest asked him, 'Do you know the Epiphany troparion, my child?' and my boy went and rattled off:

'Girls were divining
On Epiphany night...'"

Latka added fuel to the fire:

"They get up in the morning and never say a prayer, they eat dinner and don't cross themselves even once. Airplanes, monoplanes, devil-planes, but I wonder if even one of them knows the Lord's Prayer."

Everybody shouted in chorus:

"How could they? Nobody teaches them that!"

A tall man said:

"My boy took to hanging around those airplanes as well, but I weaned him from it in no time at all. Last Sunday I told him to go to church and he says, 'I have to go to school now, because we're building that plane.' 'What?' I say. 'On Sunday?' And I grabbed a rod and gave him a good working-over. That made him so tame he clear forgot about flying."

Others chimed in:

"That's an outrage! That's against the Lord's ways, too! Fishes are made to swim and swim

they must, birds are made for flying, so let them fly. The Bible says..."

The atmosphere became heated.

"If I had my way, I'd smash that airplane to pieces against their heads. And I'd burn down that school, too. What do we need a school like that for, anyway?"

"We never had any planes before, but were we any worse off for it?"

Latka stood there, holding his hands together in front of him without speaking: he just sighed and shook his head.

III What Happened Next

The work was well underway. In the workshop, the tables, the stools and even the windowsills were littered with tools. One would be planing a plank, another would be gluing pieces together, and somebody else would be heating a kettle on an alcohol burner and bending whalebones in the steam. Petro Mikhailovich would walk from one to another, supervising, advising, instructing. Now they were making the frame. The work was in full swing, but there was no din. On the contrary, the more absorbed they became in their work, the more laconic their speech tended to be. All that could be heard was:

"Give me that one. Bring it here. What next?"

The other club members came and watched, fetching this or that and rushing to perform such minor tasks as were occasionally entrusted to them. They kept their voices low, although nobody forbade them to speak aloud. Old Nazar also came. He listened as the children freely bandied about such unfamiliar words as "truss rib," "stabilizer" and "rudder," and watched the work fly in their hands. Soon his gray mustache

no longer concealed a sceptical smile. They worked from early morning till late at night. Petro Mikhailovich actually had to force them to go to lunch, but at times he, too, forgot about it and then all of them would skip a meal. Someone would bring a loaf of bread, and the mechanics would have a bite without interrupting their work. Everyone had grown visibly thinner.

IV An Unexpected Ally

Late one afternoon, a woman walked into the workshop, politely greeted them and stood at the threshold, watching. She was holding a rod.

"Could I help you?" the teacher asked her, continuing his work.

"I've come to find out if our children are here night and day to work or just to goof off."

For some reason, young Petro's face colored as he grinned.

"As you can see, all of them here are busy, but maybe there are some who have nothing to do for the moment." The teacher laughed. "Which one is yours?"

"The fair-haired one over there." She pointed to Petro.

"Oh, no, dear woman, you'd better not touch him. He's our finest mechanic."

The woman cheered up. "Anyway, I decided that if I found him here hanging about and doing nothing, I'd let him have it. Just think — he got up this morning and ran off without eating breakfast; he didn't even take a piece of bread with him. I expected him for lunch and he didn't come. I thought he'd come for dinner — but he didn't. Is this some kind of disease or what? And it's the same every day. So I thought I'd come and chase him home with a rod, if nothing

else would work." She turned to her son: "Now don't start telling me you aren't hungry!"

"We've had a little bite to eat here."

"It must've been pretty little indeed, judging from your sunken eyes." She surveyed them all, shook her head and, without a word, went out. Soon she returned carrying a huge pot of baked sour cream, a big loaf of bread and some spoons. The boys suddenly felt hungry as wolves, and their eyes glittered. They crowded round the table and attacked the food, praising it and thanking Petro's mother.

"What have you been doing here that's made the whole village talk about you so?" she asked. "Are you really going to fly?"

Petro Mikhailovich told her about the model. She smiled as she listened to him, but her eyes remained serious.

"And all those silly people have been shooting their mouths off: what are they doing it for? a lot of good it'll do them! what if somebody does fly and breaks his neck? But frankly speaking, I myself like to hear planes droning overhead. Maybe I'd fly myself if somebody took me along." She smiled.

"Some day we'll build a real plane," Andriy mumbled, his mouth full, "and fly you all the way across the ocean."

"Better not make it too far, or we'd never find our way back home," she said, and everybody laughed.

In the end she said to the teacher:

"Please don't wear them out, Petro Mikhailovich. At least let them come home for lunch. My boy is already talking in his sleep. Once he woke all of us up shouting, 'The rudder! Don't break the rudder!' "

"All right," she told them before leaving.

"We're going to see if any good will come of this business. You might just be stirring people up for nothing." She shook a finger at her son. "And then you'd better not come home, hear?" She laughed and went, and the workshop seemed to have become merrier and lighter. The teacher said to Petro:

"You should teach your mother to read and write."

"She knows a little," the boy said.

"Aha!" said Petro Mikhailovich. "That explains it."

V It Looks Like It Works

Several more days went by. They finished the frame and manufactured the cross-pieces, but the mechanics themselves could not vouch for their work. Next they tackled the wings — a task that required attention, precision and considerable patience. The other members of the club who came to watch and help, were becoming dubious and started telling one another that the whole thing would probably come to nothing. The villagers began to mock them, asking one of the boys now and then, "Are you still going to fly?"

Once, when Petro was walking past the store, a tipsy Latka waved his hand at him:

"How's it going? Will your airplane be ready soon? I look for it every day..."

"Why do you do that?"

The storekeeper grinned slyly:

"Maybe I plan to hire musicians to play marches for you when you fly..."

He was planning something all right. On the square there were always children tending pigs, geese and ducks. Latka called them to his store

and spoke to them for quite a while, laughing and pointing at the school. After that, the children would stop playing as soon as they saw a club member and chant: "Flyers with their pants down!"

Somebody even composed a rhyme which soon spread among the villagers. Who else could it have been but Latka?

In our village
Now we've got flyers.
They flew to the sky
And fell into the mire.

Neither Petro, nor Matviy paid attention, but Andriy, a proud and hot-tempered boy, took offense, argued and shook his fists. "All right," he would say. "Just you wait!"

Soon, however, something happened to him. He had good hands, grasped everything quickly and worked willingly and well, humming, prancing and joking. Soon the others noticed that he had turned grim and lost interest in his work, preferring to criticize and find fault rather than do anything himself. Came a day when he failed to turn up at the workshop. Matviy was asked to find out the reason and came back after lunch, sad and thoughtful: Andriy had asked for his name to be struck off.

"Why?"

"He says it won't work and we'll just make fools of ourselves. Now he's out running with the little children flying kites. He's got a whole fleet of kites flying where he lives — the sky's full of them there."

Petro Mikhailovich sat down at the table and fell to thinking. The boys were gloomy. They tried to work, but their hearts were no longer in it. They missed Andriy and also knew that it

would all take much longer without him. And then again, they might still fail.

Petro Mikhailovich seemed to be reading in their thoughts.

"If you boys also think like him, this is the best time to say so."

"I think we have to finish it whether anything comes of it or not," Matviy said thoughtfully. "Once we got ourselves into it, we shouldn't back out."

"Yes, it'll work after all," Petro said with passion after a pause, barely refraining from banging his fist on the table. "It has to work! Let's keep at it."

"There's something else I'd like to tell you," the teacher said. "We wouldn't be worth much if we abandoned our work half-way through. That way we'd never get to be useful workers. We'd only show we had no character, no will, no patience. Then we'd just keep on starting things and giving them up for the rest of our lives. Instead of becoming real men, we'd turn into sissies. That's why I also think we must finish the plane, no matter how it turns out. It wouldn't matter if it took us another month or two. If it doesn't work the first time, we'll go to ask the specialists and start all over again, but we won't give up and fall apart at the seams. Kiev is close by, and in Kiev there are people who will gladly help us; we can go there to ask them about everything we can't figure out ourselves, and if we don't have the fare, we can walk. I'm sure that if we really want to do it, we'll carry it through. Tell me then — are you prepared to give up something that's already half-done?"

"We'll go on, come what may," the children assured him. They exchanged firm handshakes.

Several more days filled with work flashed by. They finished the ribs and the wing base. Having assembled the wing and the stabilizer trusses, they began to stretch fabric onto them. Everything seemed to be going all right.

They gathered early every morning and worked until dusk. Sometimes they continued working by the light of an oil lamp. Whatever was being said about them in the village no longer reached their ears. Often one of the boys would sleep in the workshop. When the rudder and the stabilizer were ready, they inspected their handiwork and cheered up: it looked all right and promised to work.

"You know what, boys?" said Petro Mikhailovich, rubbing hands with delight. "If we keep on like this, the model will be ready in two or three days."

The boys' hearts pounded. "So soon? Impossible!"

"Aha!" the teacher laughed. "So it now seems soon to you, but do you remember that you thought you could build the whole plane in just one day?"

They remembered and joined in the laughter. They talked and joked for a while and then went back to work.

VI Late At Night

That evening, Petro Mikhailovich spent some time writing letters. Nazar was going to the market in the morning, and the letters had to be finished in time for the old man to mail them in town. Having written them, the teacher went to give them to Nazar. As he was going through a classroom, he saw that the door of the workshop stood open and there was a light on inside.

Somebody was talking, his voice echoing in the empty schoolhouse. Coming nearer, he saw Nazar sitting at a table and Petro standing in front of him, barefooted and coatless, holding a piece of dry bread in one hand and gesticulating with the other, his eyes shining. The boy was saying:

"Electricity, Nazar — it won't just light our houses — it is such a great horse that, if we can only harness it, it'll do everything for us: plow, thresh and carry things. Our village will be lighted every night, and by day we'll have electric mills going and electric tractors running in the fields. That'll be some life, man..."

Petro Mikhailovich involuntarily paused, listening. Not wanting to interrupt them, he went to sit on the porch. He thought the boy was quickly growing up both physically and mentally. And not so long ago he had still been a child.

He sat on the steps. The night was dark and starry. The village slept. A wicket-gate across the square squeaked, and merry, drunken voices and discordant singing floated up. That must be from Latka's place, the teacher decided. He wondered what was going on there and then guessed. The storekeeper must have been doing some illegal trading in home-made vodka.

"Whe-e-ere I..." a man yelled drunkenly, then broke off and shouted: "Hey you, engineers, get out that devilplane of yours and fly me home..."

"Tomorrow, tomorrow, Fedir Ivanovich... Stop bawling," an obsequious voice was speaking. "And get to your feet, for God's sake."

"No! I'll show those beggars!"

"Wait till tomorrow, Fedir Ivanovich. Now don't yell!"

It was Latka all right, Petro Mikhailovich thought.

VII Ready

The work was proceeding smoothly and quickly. It was nearing completion. More and more visitors came, and the workshop buzzed like a beehive. Everybody saw that things were going well and offered help and encouragement which were no longer needed. Andriy, too, appeared, meek and meager, and asked for the permission to watch. The permission was granted, of course. As he watched them working, his eyes would often flare up with the urge to help or do something himself. But nobody asked him for help, and he restrained himself, not daring to do anything unasked. Time and again, he would turn round and resolutely walk out, but after a while he would come back as if compelled by some mysterious force. There he would stand, his arms crossed on his chest and his eyes riveted to what was being done. They could tell that he had already grasped everything, even though he had not been around for quite a long time. Sometimes, when things went wrong, he made a face and fidgeted impatiently, timidly murmuring a few words of advice.

Came the day when the work was to be finished. The entire aviation club gathered that morning. Many schoolchildren from other clubs came to admire their friends' work. The workshop was crammed full as the model was being finished.

They fitted the wings to the base and the base to the frame, fastened the stabilizer and mounted the rudder. Petro Mikhailovich glanced merrily over the pupils and spoke solemnly:

"We will now put the rubber cord onto these two hooks and our airplane will be ready."

As Petro was hurriedly giving the model the finishing touches, he was tense and even a little excited. It was so quiet in the workshop you could hear a pin drop. The boy stepped back: "Done!"

A pretty little plane stood on the table. It looked almost exactly like the real planes they had seen flying, only it was smaller.

"Hurray!" The workshop filled with din and shouts.

"Stop, wait," Petro Mikhailovich appealed to them. "It's still too early for cheers. We'll be able to say we've succeeded only if and when this plane flies."

"It will! It'll fly!" everybody shouted.

"Well, that remains to be seen. Now dusk is falling already and it's also windy, so we won't try it today."

Some, especially little children, wiggled with impatience, insisting that the model be tried immediately, but the older schoolchildren had already learned to be patient and explained that it would be better to do it early in the morning, provided there was no wind.

"We'd better not start too early," Petro Mikhailovich told them. "We'll probably fly it at noon, because there's a train arriving at our station at eleven, and guess who promised to be on it?"

"Who? You tell us!" The schoolchildren grew curious.

"Do you remember Comrade Mikola, the flyer you saw on the airfield in Kiev? I have written to him about our work and all the hostility we have met with in the village, and he has promised to come and give a lecture on aviation for our people. The Young Pioneers should make

it their responsibility to inform everybody, especially the young people, about the lecture."

"Wonderful!" The schoolchildren were so delighted that they broke into applause. "If our plane doesn't fly, he'll tell us what to do."

"That is exactly why I recommend that we delay the test flight until his arrival."

Everybody agreed, and the Pioneers and the Komsomol members undertook to spread the news of the airman's arrival and the aviation lecture.

VIII The Enemies Get Their Laugh

The next day, the weather was ideal: the sun shone brightly and there was not a single cloud in the sky which was wonderfully blue and transparent. Not a leaf stirred in the trees. Sparrows chirped and children buzzed on the square. It was Sunday, but nearly all the schoolchildren had gathered at the schoolhouse. They were waiting for their guest from Kiev, constantly running to look out for him. Finally they saw Petro and Andriy, who had gone to the station to meet the flyer, walking back slowly and gloomily. There was nobody with them.

"Didn't he come?"

"No, he didn't. We looked all over every single man who got off the train. There was nobody like him."

They felt disappointed: the man had been expected and everybody had been looking forward to his arrival. Why had he broken his promise?

Petro Mikhailovich came out. He, too, was curious:

"Something must have happened. But he'll come one day soon," he tried to reassure them.

"What do we do now?" Petro asked him. "Shall we try it out without him?"

"Of course we will. Get out the model."

Amidst din and clamor the model was brought out. The little children tending pigs and geese on the common had so far seemed to disregard the gathering. But as soon as the model was carried outdoors, one of them rushed to Latka, while the rest, as if at somebody's command, hurried to join the crowd. They stood together apart from the others and for some reason held their hands behind their backs.

Finally, Latka's wicket-gate creaked. He walked up to the crowd, his hair sleek and his shoes shining for the holiday. He wore a smile which was both wicked and ingratiating.

The schoolchildren grumbled quietly:

"Where the devil is, Latka is not far behind. What does he want here? Hasn't he been mocking at our work?"

"That's what he's coming for — to have a good laugh if it doesn't fly," others were saying. Everybody eyed Latka with distaste. He did not seem to be aware of it, holding his hands behind his back, his lips pressed together, and looking as gentle and amiable as a lamb.

Andriy said softly: "I wish I could land him a good one."

Petro Mikhailovich surveyed his club. "Well, who'll be the first?"

The boys whispered excitedly: "You go ahead, you take it..." Everybody was afraid. Finally Matviy came forward and started twisting the cord.

"Step aside!" The crowd parted.

Andriy raised the model and pushed it...

The plane chattered — and hit the ground, nose first.

"Did you see it?" Eeverybody gasped.

All of a sudden the little children got their hands from behind their backs and the next moment they were blowing pumpkin pipes, rasping combs and drumming on crocks. There was a whole orchestra of them. A group of churchgoers, who had paused to watch, doubled up with laughter. Latka turned his face away, putting a hand to his mouth. From the schoolchildren came sorrowful cries: "It won't fly, no it won't."

Old Nazar, standing nearby, shook his head sadly. "The school's dishonored, disgraced..."

"Wait, it doesn't necessarily mean something's wrong with the model," Petro's cheerful voice was heard. "It may still fly. It could be that Matviy launched it in a wrong way. I'd launch it lower." He wound the cord, lifted the model and released it. It fell down like a stone. Behind his back, villagers were roaring with laughter.

Petro Mikhailovich went to Petro. "What could it be, I wonder?" He examined the plane, checking all the parts.

Latka, too, came up to them. He also shook his head sadly, but his smallish eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

"So your plane wouldn't fly, Petro Mikhailovich," he said. "It just won't fly..."

"Eh," Nazar wailed. "I wish you hadn't tried it at all."

Petro Mikhailovich worked on the model for a while, raised it without a word and gave it a push, but it did not fly.

Nazar waved his hand hopelessly, turned away and walked toward the schoolhouse. The voices in the back rows grew bolder:

"They must've thought it would fly with no trouble at all."

"What did you expect them to learn in such a school? And from such teachers, too?"

"Just what kind of school do we have here?"

This talk went on and on...

The children were jumping, screaming and blowing their pipes, like little savages. Finally, Andriy's patience snapped: he ran to the children, snatched a pumpkin pipe from one of them and began thrashing them with it on the shoulders. The children scattered.

Standing up straight as if they had experienced some kind of relief, the villagers went home, talking and laughing. Latka, too, went away, and watching him waving his hands and doubling up with laughter, one could guess that he was telling them something funny and probably showing how the model had fallen.

One after another, the schoolchildren left the crowd, walking away languidly and gloomily. Only the mechanics and Andriy stayed with the model.

"Well, what are we going to do now?"

"Let's not lose hope, guys," the teacher began. "I think we can fix it. We'd better not try to fly it again for the moment or we might ruin it completely. We'd better wait for Comrade Mikola. I think he'll come after all — in a day or two, or at least by the end of the week... He'll fix it for us. And then there's probably nothing to fix... Maybe it's just something that has to be bent a little or adjusted... If only we had an expert to advise us..."

"Look at Andriy," Petro interrupted him.

Andriy was bent over the model, silently doing something with it so that its parts groaned.

"Stop it, Andriy! You'll break it."

"Hasn't he broken it already?"

But Andriy's eyes were burning and he did not seem to hear.

"Andriy!.."

"Take the model away from him!"

But Andriy was already rising, lifting the plane above his head. He stood erect and immediately pushed the model — and the miracle happened: the little plane buzzed and, evenly and prettily, like a big live butterfly, flew a short distance over the ground. Petro Mikhailovich counted fifteen seconds on his watch... From their throats escaped such a shout of joy that it must have been heard all over the village. The children, who had been playing in the clay quarry nearby, stuck out their heads, saw the flight and, screaming and shouting, ran back to the square, abandoning the toys in the sand and clay. The people who had gone home stopped, turned their heads and looked back, trying to see what had caused all the din.

After a brief flight, the model landed, and Andriy carefully took it into his hands, as if it were a baby. Everybody crowded round him.

"What did you do to it? How did you make it fly?"

Andriy's face was glowing with joy. He said: "I only turned up the stabilizer a little and wound the cord less tightly than you had."

"How did you know it would work?"

Andriy had no answer. He laughed: "I didn't."

They tried again. The model flew even better.

The children threw their caps into the air and turned somersaults. Those who had left the square hurried back, their faces sweating. Nazar came running and stumbling from his kitchen garden, waving his hat and laughing with joy. Latka rushed out of his house, wearing only a vest over his shirt and holding a spoon — apparently

he had just sat down to lunch... His eyes were now wide and frightened.

"Comrades!" Andriy called out, his eyes shining with enthusiasm. "Let's take our aeroplane all over the village, down every single street."

"Let's go! Come on!" they roared.

He walked forward and the crowd behind him swelled, and the din of voices kept rising, as more and more people asked one another, "What's the matter? What's happened?" All along the street, heads stuck out above wattle fences and gates, hatted and hatless, sleepy and tousled, and girls' heads in varicolored ribbons. The Pioneers marched noisily and boisterously through the village, and white shirts, embroidered blouses and bright skirts bedecked all the fences and dams along their way like colorful spring flowers. An old woman, on her way home from church, huddled up and pressed herself to the fence, crossing herself and eyeing the strange procession apprehensively. Petro Mikhailovich stood alone on the square, smiling and twisting his mustache.

Before long, the young voices were ringing from the other end of the village.

IX Long Live Aviation!

When the schoolchildren returned to the square, they brought a big crowd with them. Young people and grown men walked behind them, and even a few bent old men hobbled along at the rear, leaning on their sticks. In the middle of the crowd, by the model, there were already red flags and posters saying, "Long Live Aviation!", "Support Our Air Fleet!" and "Help Aviation Now!" The crowd filled the square which became as noisy as a fair. More and more people

came around, stared at the model, touched it and asked the youngsters to launch it again. It was flown countless times.

"Aren't our children smart? Look what they've done!" the villagers were telling one another.

Some tried to cool the general enthusiasm:

"Is it real, this thing? That's just kid stuff! A toy — that's all it is."

"If they've made this little plane, they can build a real one, too," others were saying.

"It's not so easy to make the real thing. Take my little son Kostik. Once he made a tiny wagon that looked exactly like a big one. But I'd like to see him build a real wagon."

"Well, you can build a real wagon, but could you make a bird like these kids have?" Laughter.

"Now, you see, this is one thing..."

"That's what I'm saying!"

Old Nazar gathered quite an audience around him.

"No, brothers," he was telling them. "This isn't just a small thing. To make it you need all kinds of drawings, physics, grammar... That's something only engineers — and good engineers, too — knew how to make not so long ago. Just think of all those ale... alayrons and sta-bi-lizers. They aren't toys by a long shot!"

Latka was also loitering in the crowd.

"Well, what do you think of it all?" some of the villagers asked him.

The storekeeper only rolled his eyes and spread his hands.

X Guests From the Sky

A man raised his voice:

"Whatever you say, this is still a small bird. Now you try and build me a really big crane

like that one up there..." A very tall man pointed with his stick to the sky. With all the din, nobody had noticed that a real plane was hovering high above the village. Now everybody looked up.

"That must be some bird! Load two thousand pounds on it, and it'll take it up."

"I bet it's only good for hauling feathers."

"It could carry at least two thousand pounds," somebody persisted. "It roars like a good bull, do you hear?"

"They must feed it well if it can bellow like that."

"But why is it circling round and round? Dit it drop something here, or did just lose its way?"

"Look! It looks like it's going to land here!"

The voices died down. Then a man shouted excitedly:

"So it is! It's landing! Why would it do that?"

The aeroplane circled above the village, descending lower and lower, obviously intending to land. Soon they could distinguish the faces of two men aboard it. A schoolboy shouted at the top of his voice:

"It's our flyer! Comrade Mikola!"

"Petro Mikhailovich! Look! Where's Petro Mikhailovich?"

The teacher didn't hear; he had thrown back his head and was laughing, shouting and waving his cap.

The square again filled with clamor, hats flew up into the air, and hair streamed in the wind. But the din gradually dissolved in the mighty, joyous roar of the huge bird...

Smoothly, as if sliding downhill on a sled, the airplane landed, touched the square lightly with its wheels, rolled on a little and came to a halt.

Cheerful Comrade Mikola, coming literally out of the blue sky, jumped down from the plane. They exchanged greetings.

"Where's the model?"

They showed him.

A man said: "Look at it and tell us if the boys from Kovalivka can do more than just fly paper kites."

Mikola examined the model from all sides. The other flyer, a nice-looking fellow who had somehow seemed older at a distance, also took a look.

"Pretty good workmanship," he said.

"Does it fly?" Mikola demanded.

"Oho! You'd be surprised!" they shouted merrily.

He wound the cord and launched the model. It flew.

"Wonderful!" He laughed. "Did anybody help you? Did you ask some airman for advice?"

"No, we did it ourselves."

"That's hard to believe. It is very unusual for a model built without any help to fly from the very beginning. To tell you the truth, my first model didn't."

They told him how their plane had failed to fly at first, how they had been laughed at, how Andriy had guessed what needed to be done and what had happened since.

"Good boys! Congratulations!" Mikola's eyes shone with admiration. He turned to the villagers: "Now, comrades, what do you say about aviation? Is it something worthwhile or just child's play?"

"Well, who knows?.. They say different things about it. Frankly speaking, we don't much care, since we aren't the ones who're going to be flying those planes anyway."

"Oh, no, comrades, that's no way to look at it. Planes are everyone's business. You're saying you know little or nothing at all about aviation. And I heard that some of you were even hostile to your Young Pioneers when they started learning about it. So I've come specially to talk to you about this business. I'm sure that if you listen to me attentively, you'll see that aviation is not so pointless as it may seem at first and that it concerns you more directly than you may think. Will you listen?"

"Sure, why not?" The crowd stirred. "You're welcome."

"Tell us all about it."

"It's high time somebody did."

XI Learning About Aviation

They drew closer to him. Those who had been standing apart joined the crowd. Little children sat down on the grass in front, and the adults stood behind them like a wall. The flyer got onto the plane so everybody could see and began:

"First of all, what do you think we need planes for?" he asked the peasants.

"Why, to make war, of course," they told him.

"That's true," the flyer agreed. "In wartime, aviation can serve as a mighty weapon. Bourgeois states understand that only too well, so they try to build as many warplanes as they can. This is why we, too, must have an air force of our own whether we want one or not. However, this holds true only up to a point. The real importance of aviation lies elsewhere." Aviation, which had thus far been used for military purposes, would shortly be made to serve cultural and scientific purposes as well, he told them. "Even

now," he said, "we are building airplanes and dirigibles to haul cargo and passengers and to conduct scientific research. The day will come when planes connect faraway countries divided by deserts, impenetrable forests and marshes..." He went on to tell them about the role of aviation in agriculture. In Western Europe and even in the USSR, airplanes were already being used to photograph the Earth for precise maps of farm boundaries and to spray crops against locusts. "Today," he said, "it is hard even to imagine what benefits man will derive from aviation and how much easier it will make his work."

They listened attentively, but their querulous glances told him of their disbelief. Somebody sighed:

"E-he! But when will all that come to be?.."

"Will it ever?" another said.

"There's no reason why we can't have it, if other countries have it already. In Germany, after the war they started building big passenger and cargo airships. Although such an airship is slower than an earoplane, it can lift up to thirty tons."

"Thirty tons..." his words echoed in the crowd. "It's a bit hard to believe, that one..."

"Aviation is developing extremely fast," Mikola went on. "Not so long ago, it was generally believed that the longest an aeroplane could stay in the air without landing was 25—26 hours, but now in America, they manage to fly for 37 hours at a time. Today a plane can fly up to 3,000 kilometers non-stop and make almost 400 kilometers an hour."

"Oh, no!" They shouted heatedly, waving their hands. "That's impossible! It can't be — never! He's just making fools of us! Three thou-

sand kilometers — nonsense! He's overdoing it now."

"No, comrades, I have not come here to tell you fairy tales. I'm only telling you things that have been generally known for some time. Before us, no one had ever flown to your village from Kiev — so what? Are we also a fairy tale?"

The schoolchildren backed him:

"What about steamships? And automobiles? Now, take this model here — is this a fairy tale, too?"

The crowd grew quieter. A more restrained voice was heard:

"All right, but who'll fly on those planes?"

"Do you want to know who'll fly on them? Everybody will, mind my words. When the railroads started, didn't our grandfathers march with priests and holy banners against trains, believing them to be the anti-Christ? And what do we see now? Sometimes you have to fight for a place, the trains are so crowded. Isn't that so?"

The crowd laughed, put at ease somewhat.

"We now ride on trains and sail on steamers, and soon we'll fly in planes, too. Also, in the long run flying will be far less dangerous than, say, traveling by rail. Even now fewer accidents are said to occur in the air than on railroads."

Mikola's listeners had now warmed to him and jokes began:

"Why, of course, there're no rails with missing nuts and bolts up there."

"And no bridges to get blown up either..."

"And you don't need an embankment for the rails; no maintenance work — it must be cheaper..."

"I should also tell you that there are planes which can land on water, too," the pilot continued. "Hydroaeroplanes — that's what they are called. You can fly them anywhere you like — across seas, deserts, impenetrable forests..."

A man shrugged his shoulders, grinning:

"It's just like a fairy tale. Once my boy bought a book about Ivan the Fool and it was all there: he jumped onto that magic horse and was in the capital in no time at all..."

Laughter. Somebody added: "And I read about another fellow who did it on a rug..."

More villagers joined in the laughter. Mikola also smiled.

"Now you all seem to know about those miracles," he said, "but none of you has heard about true wonders. You should know that all those tales fail to come up with anything better than the airplane. Planes, I should say, are much more comfortable to fly on than all those pokers, broomsticks, barrels and rugs that make you quake with fear and hang on for your dear life."

The entire audience broke into laughter.

"And hang on as hard as you can, too," somebody threw in.

"You talk like you've tried it." Laughter.

"Enough!" the others demanded. "Let's hear more."

"So airplanes are much better," Mikola continued. "Let me tell you what they've now got in Paris. You need to get to London, so you buy a ticket and you just walk in as if it were a railroad car. In there you find plenty of people sitting around on cushions reading newspapers. Then the plane picks you up and carries you along, and you find nothing unusual about it. Along the entire route of 380 kilometers, baloons

are tethered to show the way. Every 60 kilometers there's an aerodrome, then there're stations, lights, beacons... You don't even think of any danger. On your way, you chat over the wireless with the ground stations, and you can ask the next station ahead what the weather is going to be, and you can even listen to concerts from Paris or from London. And while all this is going on, you don't even notice you've reached London until you've landed. Give me an aeroplane over a puffer belly any day." He laughed.

They continued speaking for quite a long time after that, and although they laughed and joked every now and then, the villagers' eyes had become more serious and there was more trust in their voices. The flyer ended his lecture with the appeal:

"Long live aviation, may it grow and develop in our rich land with so many talented people!" He searched for the school-aged aviators among the crowd. "Long live the Young Pioneers who were the first in your village to display a conscious attitude toward a matter of vital importance to any country!"

Some of the villagers got carried away:

"And why not? Let everybody know how smart our children are! We aren't so ignorant in our Kovalivka after all. Well done, boys!"

"Hurrah!" They grabbed Petro, Andriy, Matviy and other club members, old and young, and tossed them gleefully into the air again and again.

XIII Fetching Salt From Kiev

"Citizens! Comrads!" The pilot waved his hand for silence. "Attention! I have something else to tell you."

Gradually, the smiling villagers quieted down.

"Who would like to fly to Kiev and back?" Mikola asked. "We can take two — one schoolchild and an adult, if we can find a volunteer. Who's brave enough? Who's got a strong head?"

The crowd buzzed excitedly and soon overjoyed Petro, elected unanimously by his comrades, stepped forward from the ranks of the club members. An adult proved more difficult. They all wanted to go, but they were all afraid to.

"Let Maxim Michka fly — he's already sailed on the high seas."

"Not Michka — he's got too many children. We'd better send Hrihir — he's a bachelor with no wife or children..."

The crowd roared with laughter.

"Could it be a woman?"

"Sure."

The women chirped in their thin voices:

"Marusya! Hrib's widow! Tetyana! Moskal's daughter!"

A man said merrily:

"Good people! I ask you humbly — take mine! I'm sick of her nagging."

"Tetyana! Take Tetyana!"

They pushed forward a tall, slender woman, the one who had brought food to the workshop. Her face was flushed and a lock came out from her kerchief, but her eyes shone boldly and merrily.

"Well, son," she said to Petro, "if we're to die, at least we'll die together. But we'll fly — come what may!"

"Did you see those two? Mother and son... That's some woman!"

In the meantime, Mikola had recruited several schoolboys and men to assist him during the take-off, hastily explaining to them what he

wanted them to do. He then addressed the mother and son:

"Climb in and sit right there..." He took out a watch. "It's a quarter to four now."

Climbing into her seat, Tetyana spoke excitedly to the villagers:

"Well, at least once in my life I'll get away from all this hell. Farewell, good people, and speak well of us!"

Voices were heard from the crowd:

"She's a born flyer! She's always been a tomboy."

"Look, is he tying them up or what?"

"That's in case they fly upside down."

The mother and son were strapped to their seats and made to put on helmets with long earflaps. The pilot told them what to do while they were in flight, then climbed into the cockpit, tried out the controls and shouted something to the mechanic. The mechanic cranked the propeller shaft several times until the motor coughed into life. Then he and his assistants seized the plane and held it, as if it were a wild winged horse trying to break loose.

"Now?"

"Wait! Wait!" An old man with a sack under his arm pushed his way through the crowd. He shouted: "You say you fly to Kiev, so buy me please twenty pounds of salt there. It's cheaper than what Latka sells us here. Will you do it? You're flying just for fun anyway."

Everybody laughed, including Mikola. He gestured to the man to throw the sack, caught it and put it in the cockpit. Then he shouted back:

"Is it twenty pounds? Done!"

He exchanged a few words with the mechanic and commanded:

"Let go!"

As they released the plane, it rolled along the field, took off and climbed.

Petro glanced down and his heart missed a beat.

The mechanic, the crowd, the square, the schoolyard, and all the rest plunged down as if falling into an abyss. It seemed to him that the roaring plane hung motionless in the air, while the rest was sinking fast and running back: the forest which now looked like a cluster of weeds, the black patch of the lake and the whole village was now as small as if it were painted on a sheet of paper.

XIII In Kiev

"Where are we?"

Around them there were people talking and laughing. The ground was covered with grass. They could see some buildings...

It had to be the Kiev aerodrome. It was as if some mighty giant had picked them up in their village and flung them all the way to the city... As they climbed down from the plane, their legs were shaking. The pilot shouted to somebody:

"Is our car free?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I'll tell you later..."

An automobile drove up, they got in and were off.

Telegraph posts, stores, people walking and riding on wagons, streetcars, and tall buildings flashed by...

The car stopped in front of a glass door with big letters printed on it:

Workers' Cooperative

The pilot took the old man's sack and went

inside. He came out a few minutes later. The sack was full. The automobile roared and sped back... Soon they were at the aerodrome. In a few minutes came a "put-put-put"...

The flying beast shuddered, and soon the gardens below again shrank to the size of weeds. Kiev was transformed into a small picture that got more and more minuscule until it vanished in their wake...

XIV Everything Will Turn Out Fine

Back on the village square, the people had not gone home yet: they were all sitting around the schoolhouse, waiting, chatting about city life, country life and the new order of things. Everybody kept glancing at the sky, listening hard. The mechanic worriedly consulted his watch:

"They've been twenty-five minutes, so it's about time..."

"So soon?" The rest were surprised.

"They should've been back already but that salt must've delayed them."

Everybody teased the old man:

"There's no salt and you'll probably never see your sack again."

Finally, one of the schoolboys cried out:

"There it comes!"

They jumped to their feet and rushed to the square, heads turned upwards. Staring hard into the sky, they searched for the plane.

"It's up there all right!" shouted a merry voice.

"Where is it? Where do you see it? Oh, yes. I see it now."

The plane flew nearer, its motor droning happily. As it landed, the passengers were assailed from all sides:

"How did it go? What was it like? Did you get terribly scared?"

Petro and his mother laughed, reeling like drunks.

"Everything looks so strange here. Is it still the same village?"

"Did you buy that salt?" somebody remembered.

"Oh, we left it on the plane. Sure we got it."

They passed the sack to its owner. Everybody rushed to have a look: "Do you see? They got it all right. Where did you buy it? How much did you pay? Just think how long it would've taken you if you had walked all the way to Kiev to fetch it."

The old man looked at the plane, then at the sack, thought a little, and said to the crowd:

"Let me tell you something, good people. I really think that this aviation business will turn out fine!"

XV The Meeting

Before flying away, the pilot went to the workshop. The entire aviation club was assembled there. Two members of the board, Petro and Matviy, had graduated from high school that spring, and now the vacancies had to be filled. Petro, the club chairman, declared the meeting open. Then he glanced around and suddenly realized there was no secretary.

"Secretary! Where's the secretary?"

Andriy stood apart from the rest, like a stranger, gloomy and thoughtful.

"But I — I left the club," he said in a low voice.

Somehow everybody seemed to have forgotten about it. Now they remembered.

"What shall we do? Should we elect a new one? Or shall we readmit him? Will you join us again, Andriy?"

"If you'll have me, I—"

"Let's have him!" voices were heard. "Let him join. Remember how much he worked on the model. He made it fly, too! I'm for readmission! Let's take a vote."

"Wait, comrades," Petro stopped them. "Andriy's resignation has never been placed before the meeting, so if he now withdraws it, we won't even have to vote, I think."

"Right!" they shouted. "Take your seat, Andriy, and never do it again."

Andriy, flushed and happy, quickly took the secretary's chair. The meeting began. Comrade Mikola was elected honorary chairman and given an ovation. Thanking them for the honor, the pilot made a short speech which was sincere and emotional. He told them that the day had been a true holiday for him and that looking at their young, determined faces he believed more firmly than ever in the successful development and the great future of the aviation in the country. He said: "If you, who are still children, have already managed to stir up your village, making the adults aware of this highly important matter, it's hard even to imagine how much you will be able to accomplish in the service of aviation when you reach maturity and acquire the necessary knowledge." He urged them to expand their activities both at school and in the village, to study, to recruit new members and to organize a chapter of the League for Assisting Aviation. He promised to keep in touch and to give them practical help. He also advised them to draw up a plan for further work without delay. Andriy responded enthusiastically:

"Next, I think, we should build a real plane."

Everybody laughed outright.

"Aren't you biting off more than you can chew?"

"I'm not so sure about a plane," the flyer said, "but a glider, I think, you could build."

"A glider!" The word echoed among the schoolchildren. "We could fly like Yakovchuk then."

"Just a minute," Matviy silenced them. "A glider is all right with me, but what will we build it with? Where will we get the money?"

The children fell silent.

"He's right," Mikola said. "That's a good question and you had better think about it."

Mikola then suggested that one of their members should write down all the work that had been done on the model and all the adventures the club had gone through and send it to the editors of the *Air Fleet* magazine published in Kharkiv by the central board of the Aviation and Aeronautics Society. Finally, he got out aviation pins and handed them out to the club members. Reaching little Marusya he stopped in surprise.

"This little girl — is she a member?"

"She sure is. In fact, she's one of the most active members. She's also our librarian."

He patted her on the head and gave her a badge. The girl flushed with happiness, her little eyes riveted to the shiny pin.

Five or so schoolboys stood at the door taking no part in the meeting.

"Are they also members?" Mikola asked.

"No, they've come to join."

"Do you always get five at a time?"

"And they're not the only ones!" The children

started to list all the others who intended to seek admission:

"Mikita was one, then Petrenko, and Koshil, and Honcharenko and then Vasil Pidhirny, and Makar Pidhirny, too..."

"Your ranks are swelling," the flyer laughed. Meanwhile Andriy whispered excitedly to his comrades, showing them his pin. He waved his hands, as if pleading for something, and kept glancing at the teacher.

"What's the matter?" Mikola asked, noticing.

"Petro Mikhailovich is also a member of our club."

"Why, of course, I simply forgot about him." Laughing, Mikola gave the teacher a pin. The teacher also laughed, as he solemnly fixed it to his lapel. Standing beside the teacher was old Nazar; the flyer looked at him and then at the schoolchildren, as if asking them if he should also give one to the old man. They understood, shouting, "Yes, give him too!" Nazar reddened shyly and made to escape; he was stopped, and a pin was stuck onto his coat. The scene was greeted with applause, cheers and laughter.

Mikola then explained that unfortunately he had to fly back and it was time to say goodbye. In a merry crowd, they poured out of the schoolhouse and accompanied the airmen to the machine. "Come back soon!" they shouted as the plane took off.

XVI Toward Unknown Worlds

Night had fallen, but the village was not asleep. Laughter and voices were heard everywhere, boys shouted here and there, and girls sang near the willows. Unspent energies, left unconsumed by the day, rang and roared in the

village, driving away silence and sleep. From above came the starshine of countless remote worlds. The whole sky seemed to be trembling, astir with some immeasurable power and the awesome unfathomable mysteries which since time immemorial had been challenging man and stimulating him to thought. The stars looked alluring, as though inviting men to fly to them. On a hill outside the village stood an old pear-tree which every villager must have climbed in his childhood. Farther ahead, the dark ribbon of the forest ran across the fields, and above the forest, Mars was burning like a red-hot coal. Two boys under the pear were engaged in a quiet conversation.

"And I've read about one scientist who came up with an idea to build a giant cannon that could throw huge balls with people inside for hundreds of miles."

"Wait, what would they breathe in there?"

"This is how he says they would breathe..."

Petro and Andriy were sitting on the bank of a ditch, binoculars in hand, the pins shining on their chests. They looked at Mars through the binoculars, saying that it was probably inhabited by some kind of living creatures, maybe even intelligent ones; that some day the human brain would find a way to communicate with the other planet and that the restless human spirit, once awakened to this goal, would never give up trying to reach it.

"There may be many failures, accidents and lives lost, but nothing will prevent men from trying again," Petro said.

"No, it won't," Petro agreed. "Just think — to go where no man has ever been before! To learn something that nobody has ever known or

had the slightest idea about ever since this world — and man — came into being!"

"I get goose pimples whenever I think of it. It seems I'd give anything to get there and would even leave all this, too..."

"Why, it's even worth dying for!"

They fell silent, thinking.

"Now I can understand that boy Icarus who didn't obey his father and flew too close to the Sun..."

"What Icarus?"

"Haven't you read about him? There's an old tale..."

And Petro started telling one of the most beautiful ancient Greek legends about the boy who donned wings of wax and plummeted into the sea when he flew too close to the Sun out of curiosity.

Mars was rising higher and higher over the forest.

СТЕПАН ВАСИЛЬЕВИЧ ВАСИЛЬЧЕНКО

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