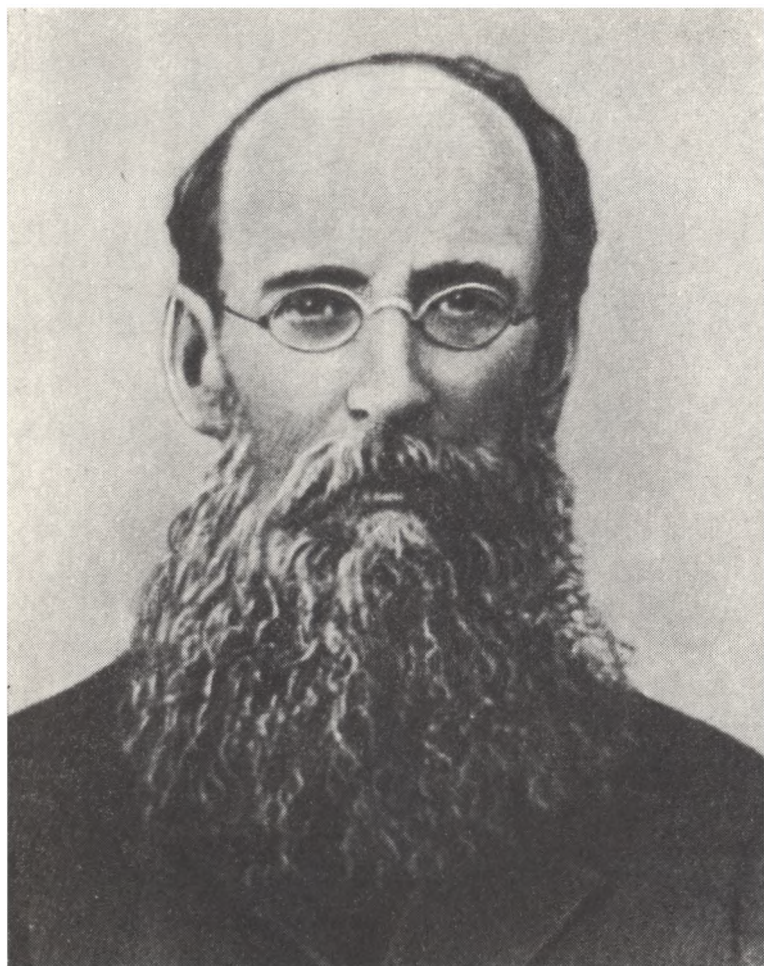


PANAS MIRNY

**DO
OXEN LOW
WHEN
MANGERS
ARE
FULL?**

NOVEL



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з народного життя

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"A Wide and Free Range of Thought..."

Toward the end of 1915 several district police headquarters in Poltava Province were ordered to mount a search for a certain Rudhan, alias Rudchan, alias Mirny. The wanted man, who had supposedly gone underground, was described as a "prominent member of the Ukrainian movement." However, these orders were never acted on—whether through sheer inefficiency on the part of the imperial bureaucratic machine, whose operation had been becoming increasingly erratic since the beginning of the First World War, or because the local officialdom was not entirely devoid of common sense. Meanwhile, the fugitive from justice, whom the police had not even managed to identify, was none other than Panas Rudchenko, who headed the provincial government's department of finance with the rank of Councillor of State (civil service equivalent of general). A mere handful of his countrymen also knew him as Panas Mirny, one of the Ukraine's most prominent writers. This in itself describes the position of Ukrainian literature, which the czarist officials had been trying to reduce to the status of something suspect at all times and second-rate at best. As a result, Mirny's novels and short stories were usually published long after they had been written, except for a few which were printed abroad.

Reviewing the history of the Ukraine's national literature, ridden with obstacles but by no means lacking in accomplishments and famous names, Ivan Franko praised the objective epic prose of Panas Mirny. He saw him as one of those artistic spirits who, outwardly impassive and seemingly uninvolved, "nevertheless are not immune to new ideas and literary forms but perceive them strictly as genuine artists" and use them "to gain a deeper insight into the spirit of society and to portray it more exactly."

But then, Panas Mirny's literary style was but a projection of his modest, thoughtful and conscientious self, shaped by the need to divide his time between the exemplary discharge of his official duties and the writer's desire to "show the tragedy of human life, and man's lofty soul and warm heart as they exist in the world."

Mirny's entire life was spent in the Poltava area: in Mirhorod (where he was born on May 13, 1849), Hadyach, Priluki and Poltava itself. Panas was just 14 when his father Yakiv Rudchenko, a district official, got him a clerical appointment and sent him to work, advising him to do his job well and to get on with his higher-ups. His son was to follow this advice and become extremely thorough and hardworking—both as a civil servant and as a writer.

At the beginning, he had an excellent example to follow—that of his own brother Ivan (1845—1905), who combined the civil service routine with other interests. In the 1860s and 70s, Ivan gathered ethnographic materials, published a collection of folk songs and contributed serious critical articles (signed Ivan Bilik) to the Lviv-based magazine *Pravda*. He was to become Panas's closest

confidant and even the co-author of the novel *Do Oxen Low when Mangers are Full?* and of the long story *Fetching Water*. Later, Ivan Rudchenko's highly successful career would gradually lead him away from literature, but all through the 1860s the two brothers shared a keen interest in the Ukrainian letters that kept up with the Ukraine's general wave of cultural revival.

This was a time when Russia's capitalist development was spurred on by the czarist reform of 1861, which abolished legal serfdom but failed to quell revolutionary sentiments. As Friedrich Engels noted, the country contained elements of all the intermediate stages of civilization, from feudalism through capitalism, generating the most fantastic and quaint ideas. In combatting liberal tendencies, czarism resorted to the forced Russification of non-Russian peoples. This is why the populist movement in the Ukraine, when many intellectuals went to the countryside to win the peasants over to the revolutionary cause, often intertwined—but did not merge—with the cultural and educational activities of the so-called *Hromadas*. These were associations of the Ukrainian intelligentsia campaigning for the unimpeded development of the national culture. While persecuting the populist revolutionaries, the authorities also cracked down on these liberal societies. Panas Mirny, who maintained close contacts both with the Poltava populist group *Uniya* (Union) and the *Hromadas'* activists in Poltava (Dmitro Pilchikov) and in Kiev (Mikhailo Drahomanov, Mikola Lisenko and others), thus possessed firsthand knowledge of the intelligentsia's aspirations and collective psychology. And when harsh reaction had set in, he did not waver but continued to deepen his understanding of the basic social issues. This self-possessed finance officer in the employ of the provincial government had extraordinary willpower and, as Mikhailo Kotsyubinsky put it, "a wide and free range of thought."

Panas Mirny's very first story *The Devil's Work* (1872) is about a village girl, seduced and abandoned by a farmhand just as miserable as herself, whom her own brother throws out of his house along with her baby when she is sick. The story points to the need to examine the conditions that make people so utterly defenseless, both socially and spiritually. The author dispenses with the condescendingly sympathetic tone in portraying the peasantry, preferring to show his heroes in direct collision with an increasingly widespread atmosphere of deception, meanness and demoralization, to which neither the lower nor the upper strata of society are immune. From then on, the problem of the "enslaved personality" would remain central to Mirny's entire literary work.

In most of Panas Mirny's writings, the author's attention is centered upon society's pariahs: a petty clerk, weak of will and ruined by drink, who briefly ceases to be a servile toady only when he plays the violin (*The Drunkard*, 1874); a peasant to whom robbery is a natural protest against arbitrary rule based on force and inequality (*Chipka*, 1871); a girl who is driven to prostitution by the atmosphere of falsity and corruption, prevalent among her "betters" (*The Harlot*, early 1900s). Panas Mirny does not resort to naturalistic descriptions of his heroes; his imagery is based on their resistance, more or less determined, to the adversities of fate.

The writer's greatest success was his novel *Do Oxen Low when Mangers are Full?* based on the real story of a robber named Hnidka, a corrupted child

of the times. Panas Mirny first mentioned him in an article, then wrote the long story *Chipka* and after that spent a long time writing the novel, which was thoroughly reviewed by his brother Ivan (Ivan Bilik). The latter also contributed several chapters and improved the composition of the novel. The earlier long story deals mostly with Chipka's robberies, whereas the novel, enlarged with numerous parallel plots and digressions, presents an epic narrative of the plight of the Ukrainian peasantry from the destruction of the Zaporozhian Sich to the aftermath of the ill-conceived 1861 reform.

The novel covers about a hundred years of Ukrainian history and takes the reader to many places, such as the village of Piski, the district town of Hetmanske, the Ukrainian South, army barracks in Russia, battlefield in Hungary, etc. It presents a broad range of characters, including Cossacks, serfs, the gentry, the upper nobility, local government officials, civil servants, soldiers and déclassé outcasts. The action is centered upon the life story of Chipka Varenichenko, a village boy who grows up without a father, suffers humiliations all through his childhood and youth and nurses some very real grievances against "the masters." His attempts to make a living as a farmer come to an abrupt end when his land is taken away from him. His hopes dashed, he gravitates toward a bunch of loafers and thieves. The fortunes of Chipka are followed against the background of another life story—that of Maxim Hudz, the descendant of a Zaporozhian Cossack and a daredevil who tries to defeat the deadening army routine with self-enrichment and carousing. The novel also presents the saga of the Polskis, a family of nobles whose widely ramified clan the emancipation reform finds firmly in control of the entire district, which is thoroughly pervaded with their debasing influence. Gradually, the authors lead the reader to the understanding of the true causes behind the rising popular discontent.

The image of Chipka cements the novel, personifying the human spirit which revolts against injustice. Although his life seems to take a turn for the better after he marries the girl he loves and sees himself elected to the *zemstvo* council, he is greatly discouraged by the commoners' inertia and the bosses' unfair practices. "This world is large and wide—but there's no place for me in it! If only I could, I would have demolished it and built up a new one instead..."—this cry from the heart sums up Chipka's disenchantment. Unable to combat injustice singlehanded, he turns to crime.

The novel presents a collective image of the common people, who waver between spontaneous outbursts of protest and timid obedience. Among them we find the wise old shepherd Ulas and the three crystal-pure female characters—Chipka's mother, his wife Halya, and the thoughtful orphan Khristya. Hritsko represents a new wave of peasantry—able and hardworking but blinded by greed. This type is examined in greater detail in the long stories *The Trouble of Long Ago and of Today* and *The Harlot*.

But the chief merit of the novel *Do Oxen Low when Mangers are Full?* lies in the far-ranging epic analysis of those causes which turned the people's strength, the flower of the Ukrainian nation, into the "wasted strength."

With much of Mirny's time and energy being consumed by office routine, many of his projects remained unrealized. His unfinished long story *The Hungry Freedom*, portraying the peasantry's wide disenchantment with the

“emancipation,” saw print only in the Soviet period. An interesting image of the “rebel spirit” may be found in the long story *Fetching Water*. Several characters from these and other works were developed in *The Trouble of Long Ago and of Today*, which assessed serfdom and the emancipation from the point of view of the common man and warned the working people against disunity, showing the moral degradation of commoners accustomed to toadying to their masters.

But Mirny's literary heritage consists not only of epic works. He left several plays, one of which, *Limerivna*, continues to be staged in Ukraine's theaters, and numerous translations, including *King Lear* by Shakespeare, *The Song of Hiawatha* by Longfellow, *The Maiden of Orleans* by Schiller and *The Lay of Igor's Host*. He also wrote many articles for the Poltava newspaper *Ridniy Kray* (Homeland).

After Soviet power had been established in Poltava, Panas Mirny continued to report to work almost until his death, which came on January 28, 1920. Today, his work remains a rich and pure source of profound thoughts about the human spirit. Even though Panas Mirny never graduated from a college or university, this man of duty and high integrity was an intellectual in the true sense of the word, who met the very high standards he set for himself and had genuine respect for the written and spoken word.

Rostislav Mishchuk, Cand. Sci. (Philology)

Part One

I The Field Princess

The spring was at its height. All around, everything had come out and burst into luxuriant bloom. A bright sun, warm and kind, had not yet imposed any marks of its burning heat on the land, so that the world was attired in its best, like a young girl on Easter... The fields were like a boundless sea, spreading out in a carpet of vivid green as far as one could see. Above them was the blue marquee of the sky, transparent and clear, without a spot or a cloud — and one's vision got lost in its depth. Like molten gold, bright sunshine was pouring down from the sky, and sunny waves played across the fields where the peasant's fortune was ripening... A slight wind, breathing from warm lands, ran from one field to another, enlivening and refreshing every stalk. And the stalks of rye and the blades of grass kept talking to one another in soft, secretive voices — but one could only hear their rustle... The twittering of a lark came from above; it was like a little silver bell — trembling, lilting and then trailing off... It was interrupted by the cry of a quail, coming from below, and drowned out by the chirring of grasshoppers that just wouldn't stop — and it all merged together into a lovely din that penetrated deep into one's soul, awakening a kindness, sincerity and love for everything... And one felt good from within, lively and cheerful! Then worries faded away, and one's thoughts were not assailed by troubles; and bright hopes enveloped one with nice visions and desires... Then one wanted to live and love and wished everybody to be happy. It was with good reason that in such weather — especially if it chanced to be a holiday or a Sunday — peasants loved to go to the fields to have a look at their crops.

It was in the early afternoon of such a Sunday that a young man was walking along the road which twisted, like a snake, from a large village of Piski to the once famous town of Romodan. "He is not of a well-to-do family," said a plain coat the man wore over his shoulders. "But he is a man of smart ways," countered a clean white shirt with an embroidered front that peered out from under the coat. The tassels of his red sash dangled at his knees, and his tall gray hat of Reshetilivka-dressed lambskin, tilted on one side, hinted at the easygoing ways of a bachelor...

The man walking along that road was really a bachelor. At first sight, he could be about twenty. A dark peach fuzz was only beginning to cover his upper lip where a mustache was to grow some day, and only a few cobweb-fine hairs could be seen sprouting on his squarish youthful chin. His nose was small, fine

and somewhat pointed, his dark brown eyes had a sharp look, and his face was elongated, of the traditional Cossack type. He was neither short nor tall, but had a broad chest and shoulders... So much about his appearance. Such lads could often be seen in our villages and hamlets. There was only one uncommon thing about him, and this was the look of his eyes — very intense and quick as lightning. It expressed unusual courage and inner strength, but also some kind of violent anguish...

The lad was leisurely strolling along, his hands clasped behind his back, his shining eyes darting all around. Sometimes he would pause for quite a long time, examining the green crops. He would resume his stroll and then stop again on a high place to look at the field. Presently, he crossed over a rickety bridge at the bottom of a gully. Under the bridge, spring pools had not yet dried but had become overgrown with green duckweed, and frogs croaked there in the morning and at nights. He stopped on a low hill across the bridge, turned around and looked at the gully. Then he shifted his gaze to the nearest field of rye. The crops looked better than those just outside the village, he decided. The last rain must have been better here. He turned again and went on.

Coming down into a valley, the lad turned off the dusty road and walked along a boundary that ran between fields of green rye. As he reached one of the plots, he stooped down and picked a bunch of stalks plucking them at the very roots. Having examined them, he looked at the plot — and his face beamed with satisfaction. "This is my work," his eyes seemed to say, "and it has not been in vain. It has made me a man and a farmer." Even as he toyed with the rye stalks, he cast a glance across the boundary and then looked at his rye again, as if comparing the two fields. He said aloud: "Of course my rye is better than Kabanets's. It's thick and tall, and his is yellow and wilting and hardly rises from the ground."

Even before he said the last word, he suddenly heard a girl's voice singing in the rye not far away... Catching his breath, he pricked up his ears and listened... The voice was sweet and sonorous, and the song floated through the air. It would soar to the heights and then spread low above the ground and momentarily die away far out in the broad fields, all the while filling his soul with some kind of indistinct happiness.

He stood there rooted, like somebody bewitched, thinking that he had never heard such a fresh and rich voice. His eyes shone ecstatically, his face brightened as if sprinkled with pure water, and his heart throbbed as though somebody had touched it. He wondered who it could be — and went toward the voice. Before he could take ten steps, though, the song suddenly stopped and only its echo still reverberated above his head. He took another step, then one more... And then the rye rustled and trembled as if something thrashed about in it — and after a while the figure of

a girl emerged from it. The lad stopped. Like a scared quail, the girl darted away. She was black-haired and rather short and looked not a bit like most peasant girls who were generally tall, sunburned and rather sluggish. Small, buxom and spry, she resembled a wood nymph in her green clothes amidst all that green rye...

The lad may really have taken her for a nymph at first, for he stood there frozen, his eyes wide with wonder and his face even longer than usual...

The girl ran off to some distance and also stopped. Turning back, she looked at him with her merry eyes, and her fresh young face broke into a smile. He could see her better now. Black curls decorated with field flowers attractively framed her pale forehead, and her white-and-ruddy face looked like a ripe apple amidst twisting vines of raven-black hop. Her eyes, velvety black, were full of latent fire. Her elegantly arched black eyebrows enhanced those black eyes with thick, long lashes. Small and spry, she looked very attractive with that jolly smile of hers. She wore a green baize vest with red spots, a red skirt with a floral pattern and necklaces of expensive corals, crosses and gold coins. Everything complemented her beauty very nicely.

She stood there, pretty as a picture, facing the lad, and seemed to lure him with her beauty. He stepped forward without taking his eyes off her. She was the first to speak:

"Why are you wandering about here?"

"And why are you trampling rye?" he retorted somewhat rudely.

"Is this your rye?"

"It sure is... What's the matter with you?"

"You did scare me..." Her voice trailed off. The lad did not speak for some time.

"Who are you?" he asked after a while, swallowing hard. "Why are you here, where do you come from?"

She sensed, as only girls know how, why his voice trembled. Her eyes sparkled.

"Why d'you want to know?" she asked playfully.

"I just want to know what you're doing in my field," he blurted out. "Who are you, what d'you want here?"

"I will not tell you!" she declaimed smilingly. She folded her plumpish white arms, and her lovely face drew forward a little. "If I'm here, that's just because I live not far away... Who are you?"

"Come over here!" he said, smiling invitingly. "We'll sit down... and have a talk... and then I'll tell you who I am..."

She sprang up as if stung by a wasp. She clapped her hands, burst into laughter and rushed back into the rye. Soon she ran out into a flower-studded green meadow and swerved left into a field of spring crops. Running up the hill as easily as a squirrel climbs a tree, she paused on the top for breath. She smiled and waved to

him, as if challenging him to pursue her. Then she started down the other side and was suddenly gone, like a ghost.

He did not budge. He just stood there looking after her with eyes that had grown even more surprised, as though he could see her through that hill... Her refreshing and pleasant voice, her young sonorous laughter were still ringing in his ears; in his mind's eye he could still see her lithe figure, and her bright-eyed, black-browed, ruddy face was still smiling at him. Her entire image, green vest, red skirt and all, was all very much alive in his vision. "What was it?" he asked himself. "Did I really see a girl or did I just have a dream?... Who is she anyway? The old soldier's daughter? But I hear his girl died... h'm... and I certainly don't remember anybody like that in the hamlets... Khomenko's daughter? But his hamlet seems a bit too far for that. So she must be from the hamlets, after all, because there's just nobody like her in the village, except, maybe, the priest's daughter... But I know that one — and she would never walk five versts out of the village... Then who?"

Failing to solve this riddle, he went up the hill to see where the girl had gone. It was getting late already. The girl was nowhere in sight. Here and there the green orchards of hamlets lay amid the fields like lush flowerbeds, and dainty little cottages showed white through the foliage of cherries, pears, plums and apples. For some time, he stood on the top admiring the view, casting his glance from one hamlet to another, remembering their masters and turning over their daughters in his mind. Then, totally confused, he set out for home.

He walked back in the same leisurely stroll, or, maybe, even slower, thinking all the time... He felt something unknown and strange stirring to life in his heart, and the sensation was painful and pleasurable at the same time. And he was sad and happy and wanted to cry and to sing. Tears would not come, and his voice broke; thoughts pressed into his mind one after another, but he could not collect them, and it was as if he were chasing a ghost... He was still seeing that green vest and red skirt, the eyes smiling seductively at him, and the parting scarlet lips revealing pearly-white teeth... He felt cold shivers run down his spine... "What's the matter with me?!" he exclaimed. "Have I gone crazy or something all of a sudden? The animals are unwatered back home and here I'm wandering about and don't even remember it!" And, raising his head, he quickened his pace.

Before long, he reached Piski. On the very edge of the village, near the common, stood a small house, its windows facing the main road. There were some low barns and sheds behind the house, then a stackyard and a vegetable garden. The entire lot was enclosed with a low wattle fence. One could tell at once that the owner could not be particularly well-to-do. The general impression was not of prosperity but of the constant need to work

hard. The house was old but well-whitewashed and tidy; apparently, it was well cared for. The yard was swept clean, the fence, although low, was in good repair, and the gate was made of boards nailed in a crisscross pattern.

Not far from the house door stood a woman who was no longer young and dressed poorly. Scattering grain from a bowl, she was loudly calling chickens. Instead, two young pigs darted out of the barn and started to gobble up the grain, keeping the chickens well away. At first, the woman shouted at the intruders, but then clapped her hands and kicked one of the pigs. Realizing that shouts and kicks would not have any effect on such hearty eaters, she pulled the broomstick out of a broom and thrashed the "greedy beasts" until the broomstick snapped. "Damn the scoundrels — I've ruined a good broomstick because of them!" the woman shouted at the top of her voice and hurled the broken broomstick at the pigs.

It was at this very moment that the lad entered the yard. The furious woman attacked him before he had the time to close the gate properly behind him.

"Just where have you been traipsing, Chipka?" she scolded him. "D'you have any idea of how late it is? The cow and the mare are unwatered — and you out taking a stroll..."

"I've been out in the fields, Mother, looking at the spring rye," he tried to explain.

The woman cast a sharp look at him, as if to check whether this was true. But he had already turned away and gone toward the cowshed. She picked up an empty slop pail and went inside the house.

"Just don't loaf anymore!" she called to him reprovingly from the passage doorway. "Take the cow out to water, because we'll still have to milk her."

But her son did not hear. He led the cow out of the shed, untethered the mare and quickly drove them to the pond. Soon he returned. Driving the animals back inside, he picked an armful of grass. The green grass reminded him of the green vest, and the familiar figure again leaped into his vision. Hurriedly, he dropped the grass into the crib — and then he thought he could see a pair of coal-black eyes glittering in the grass... "Stop haunting me!" he cried out, snatching his hands out of the crib. "Leave me in peace!"

He hastily closed the shed and went inside. They ate supper in silence and then went to bed.

"Do you know, Mother, if the old soldier has a daughter?" he asked.

"What old soldier, son?"

"The one who lives at the hamlet near our field."

"I don't really know. He had one, but I hear she died. Why do you ask?"

"Well... never mind."

There the conversation ended. The mother fell asleep on the wooden bed. The son lay on his bench, unable to sleep. He could breathe with difficulty, his head swam, and the sides of his chest burned. He was also unable to get the girl out of his mind. "Go away, you foolish thing," he muttered. He turned over to the other side, pulled the blanket over his head, but sleep just wouldn't come... Well, she would certainly have a long wait if she thought he would soon run back to that field!

II

The Bigamist

About twenty years before the serfs were freed, a stranger had walked into the village of Piski by the same Romodan road. One could see that the man had come a long way. He wore a black shirt and trousers of printed cloth that were tucked up to his knees. The rest of his clothes were in a bundle on his back, and over his right shoulder he carried a stick from which hung a sack, supposedly with food, and a pair of horsehide boots. Judging from his appearance, the man was approaching middle age. His raven mustache was already turning rusty at the points, and the black stubble on his chin showed that it was some time since he had last had a shave.

The traveler walked measuredly, looking about him to all sides. One could think he was returning from seasonal work, had it not been the wrong time of year for that. For spring had come not too long ago. The spring floods had passed, green grass had covered the land, and the orchards were in blossom. The sun was not yet scorching hot as it is in summer, but pleasantly warm.

Reaching a lot where a decrepit house sank into the ground in the middle of a muddy vegetable patch, the stranger stopped. "So this must be Okun's place," he told himself.

At that moment, a young lad came out of the low house door.

"Hello there!" the man called to him.

"Hello."

"Does Okun live here?"

"Who's that?"

"Karpo Okun, an old man."

"No, this is Limar's house."

"Where's Okun then?"

"Who is Okun anyway?"

"He's an old, old man with a beard."

Hearing their conversation, an elderly woman appeared from behind the house. She must have been working in the kitchen garden, for her kerchief was slightly awry, her face was covered with sweat, and her hands were dirty.

"Who are you looking for, good man?" she asked.

"Karlo Okun."

"Oh, he's been dead for quite a long time now. I knew that Okun, I sure did... It's been close on ten years since he died... Why d'you ask for him?"

"Well, I just needed him... So he died, you say?"

"I'm afraid he did."

"Has he left any kin here?"

"Let me see," the woman fell to thinking. "There was poor Hanna who married Solomenko. She, too, has since died. We bought this place from her. Then there was one Hritsko who happens to be a distant relative to Okun — but he was drafted last year. There doesn't seem to be anybody else."

"I see... Is your *volost** office far from here?"

"The office?" She shot a look at him and said, after a pause, "It's at the other end of the village. You just go along this street, and it'll lead you straight to it."

"Well, good-bye and thank you."

"Good luck."

The stranger went down the road as the woman had told him. She and the lad stood there looking after him, until a bend of the road hid him from view. Then she said:

"Did you ask him, Hritsko, who he was and why he needed Okun?"

"No, I didn't."

"What if he is a relative or something?... They say Okun had plenty of folks down on the Don. His brother, too, used to live there. What if this fellow has turned up to claim the heritage?"

"God knows."

"We'd better find out, Hritsko. Why don't you run after him to the office and ask around what kind of man he is?"

"All right, Mother," the lad agreed. Then both of them went into the house.

The woman guessed correctly why the stranger needed the late Karlo Okun. At the *volost* office he declared that he was Okun's nephew, Ostap Khrushch, who had left for the Don some fifteen years ago. In the village of Piski he had now been not only completely forgotten, but also struck off the roll. Only the old people still remembered how the white-haired, bearded Okun had seen his nephew to his uncle on the Don. Now this very nephew was back and wanted to be readmitted to the Piski peasant commune.

"Why have you returned?" the *volost* chief asked him. "Or has life become harder down there?"

"It's hard enough all right," Ostap said, bowing. "Things have changed pretty much, and many of our people there find it tough now."

* *Volost* (Rus.) — a small rural administrative unit

"Why d'you think it should be any better here?" asked the clerk.

"Well, after all this is my homeland."

"But how can we admit you if you've got no papers, nothing at all?" asked the chief.

"I got my old passport here." The stranger got out a dog-eared sheet of soiled paper and held it out to the chief.

The chief looked at the paper, unfolded it, read it — and folded it again.

"This just won't do," he said. "Why didn't you at least turn up for the census?"

"God knows why — I just didn't know I guess..."

"You also haven't exchanged your passport for such a long time!" marveled the chief, still holding the paper.

"But down there this one was good enough for everybody."

"H'm... So what shall we do, Vasil Vasilyovich?" the chief asked the clerk.

"Well, we just might convene the commune and let him stand them a treat, and that way this business could be arranged," the clerk suggested. "Otherwise he may end up behind bars as a tramp or something."

"Be so kind, try to get it done for me," Ostap pleaded, with a bow. "I haven't got much to offer you but I can always work it out."

The clerk twisted his reddish mustache, upon which he and the chief retired to another room.

Three weeks later Ostap started mowing the clerk's grass for hay. And a fine haymaker he was — fast, hard-working and tireless. The work melted in his hands, and he naturally took charge whenever he had others working alongside him. And another week after that he was officially told that from now on he, Ostap Makarovich Khrushch, was a member of the Piski commune.

Ostap crossed himself when he heard the good news. In the fall he set out for town. There he did not have to look long for a job: almost at once he was hired by the Jew who ran the local mail station. Khrushch had it really fine. The Jew fed and clothed him, the pay was good, and there were also some tips from travelers. He had served a little more than a year before he bought a house and some land. Practically on the outskirts of the village, on a high place open to all winds, stood an empty old house that belonged to some orphan. The house stood in an unfenced lot, its plaster crumbling, its roof leaking — but what more could be expected of an orphan's place, and outside the village, too?

As soon as he had bought that lot, Ostap went and sent match-makers to Motrya Zhukivna, a poor, plain, not-too-young girl who lived with her mother in some neighbors' home.

"Go ahead, Motrya!" her mother told her. "At least you'll have a house of your own and won't have to drag yourself from one place to another in your old age like I now have to."

"Then I think I should," her daughter replied. "We've been suffering long enough as it is."

Ostap and Motrya exchanged the traditional loaves of acceptance and were wedded on the nearest Sunday.

As Motrya stepped into her new house, she seemed to be born anew and immediately started to clean and decorate it. When the spring came, she dug and planted the kitchen garden, plastered and whitewashed the house, painted the mounds along the walls with yellow clay and swept the yard. Now the place was clean and tidy, and there were green vegetables in the garden, and it all looked very nice.

Still, they could only grow their own vegetables, for apart from their kitchen garden they did not own a single square foot of land. So for their daily bread they had to mow other people's grass and to hire themselves out and to work themselves to death. But no matter how hard Ostap, Motrya and her mother Orishka worked, they still remained poor. Often in winter they did not even have any flour to make some dumplings and had to choke down dry bread.

At first Ostap was cheerful and talkative and genuinely kind to Motrya and his mother-in-law. But as time went on, he became moodier and gloomier. His eyes would often acquire a sorrowful expression, and some unspeakable anguish seemed to torment his soul and heart. Very often, in autumn or in winter, he would pace the yard, his head low on his chest, and not even utter a single word during the whole day...

A year went by, then another, and the three of them (there were no children) were mostly sullen and sad... No luck, no joy!

Winter set in. Fine snow fell, as it usually snows on frosty days. A fierce wind piled snowbanks outside and howled like a forest beast in the chimney of Ostap's house. Night had fallen already. Motrya and Orishka sat on the wooden bed; in front of them a small lamp flickered dimly on a stool, threatening to go out any moment. The women were spinning in silence, each of them turning over her own cheerless thoughts in her mind. Ostap lay on the stove... It was so quiet that they could hear the hum of the spindles...

"Oh!" Ostap sighed heavily. "I've had enough of sticking it out in these parts." He seemed to be talking to himself. "I'll wait until spring and then go out and try to earn some money. If I find a good place I may then get you over there too."

"What if you don't find it?" Motrya objected. "You'll lose a summer, and what can I earn here with my own two hands?" She made a wry face.

"You and your mother will somehow get together enough for

the winter. As to me, I might stay there for the winter if I have to. This place makes me really sick now!"

They waited until spring. Ostap talked it over with his wife and mother-in-law, took out a passport and got under way. Motrya stayed with her old mother to mind the house.

* * *

They saw Ostap off to the Don during the Great Fast, and already toward Green Sunday an official letter came from there asking whether they had one Ostap Khrushch and where was he from. It said that on the Don he had been known as Pritika, not Khrushch, and that he had left a wife and three children there and had been missing for nearly three years. Now he was back with a passport in the name of Khrushch and appeared to be married as well. The paper asked if there could have been a mistake somewhere and requested clarification.

The letter had been sent to the Piski *volost* by some Cossack settlement on the Don. At the volost office, this unusual request caused quite a panic!

When the volost officials read it through, they hung their heads low.

"Oh, damn him!" the chief and the clerk cried in one voice. "Now the district chief will make it hot for us... How could we believe the rogue?! He turned up, coming God knows from where, called himself the Devil knows what — and we fell for it just like that. Okun's nephew, none other than Okun's nephew, of course... Welcome, sir... Now you see whose nephew he is!"

"You see... Didn't I tell you we ought to write down there and wait till we get a reply?" the clerk lied. "But you just wouldn't listen!"

"What shall we do now?" the chief asked, ignoring the clerk's protests.

The clerk remained silent, his gaze riveted to a spot on the floor. He seemed to be trying to remember something.

"Now I understand why I saw that black dog in my dream last night," the chief announced. "My wife told me it meant trouble... It surely did!"

"Me, I dreamed of a red pig," the clerk threw in.

They talked it over some more, and then sent for Motrya.

"Did your husband tell you anything about the Don?" they attacked her as soon as she came.

"No, he didn't," she answered, apparently surprised by such a question. "Why? Have you gotten some news from there?" she asked in a frightened voice.

So they told her what it was all about.

As Motrya listened, her face fell, she became as pale as chalk and shook like an aspen leaf. She tried to say something but

could not utter a single word and only gasped every now and then staring at them in a very strange way.

"Why are you moaning?" the chief thundered at her. "Did your husband teach you that? He, too, kept rolling his eyes when he first got here... Coddamn both of you! I might yet get sent to Siberia because of you two..."

But Motrya only stared painfully at them and did not say anything. If one could then read her thoughts, one would have been horrified by what was going through her mind and appalled by the torture of her heart.

"Get out!" the chief yelled, realizing that she had lost the power of speech.

She turned around and went out. As she walked along the street, she hardly realized where she was going. When she got home, she looked as if she were crazy or drunk.

"What's the matter, daughter?" her mother asked her. "Why did they want to see you?"

Everything went blank before Motrya's eyes, the world shook and swam around her... She threw herself onto the bench, without taking off her coat and boots. Copious tears poured from her eyes.

"But what's happened, daughter? Oh, God forbid —" Orishka did not finish. The thought that Ostap may have died flashed through her mind.

Motrya did not speak and continued crying. Orishka did not take her eyes off her. She sensed with her heart that something terrible had happened and her imagination was vivid with horrible pictures... Orishka's jaws trembled, and her face was distorted with a cramp.

"Say something!... Why are you crying?" she shouted.

Motrya wiped her tears with her sleeve and groaned... Then she made an effort and, sobbing and swallowing her words, spoke:

"Oh, Lord!... so this is why he was so moody... didn't talk, brooded... and shouted something about the Don in his sleep all the time... about Khivrya and Hritsko... now it all fits in!... Now my poor head is lost forever!..."

"What does it all mean? Come on, tell me — stop speaking in riddles! Who's this Khivrya you're talking about?"

"That must be the wife of that son of a bitch, damn him!"

"Of whom?"

"Of Ostap."

"Are you in your right senses, daughter?"

"With all this happening to me I might as well be crazy."

"Motrya, don't you fuddle my brain! Tell it to me properly."

"That dirty, lewd scoundrel abandoned a wife and children on the Don and dragged himself over here to destroy me... Oh, Lord, why do you have to punish me so terribly already in this life?" Motrya cried out and again burst into tears.

Only now did Orishka fully grasp the dimensions of their

misfortune. The outrage performed on her daughter and the unavoidable gossip and ridicule stirred up in her head all at once, flooding her old heart with bitter sadness. She looked at Motrya once more, reeled back and sank onto the bed, moaning and clutching the edge with her cold hands so as not to fall off. Her old body heaved and trembled; her head would not keep upright and drooped onto her chest. Orishka groaned painfully as she tried to lift it... Motrya would not stop weeping. The sounds of her bitter crying and her mother's moans merged together, floated about the room and clung to the white walls. Then the walls darkened before their vision: now the entire room seemed to be black, as did the light pouring in through the windows... But in that darkness they seemed to be able to make out their fate — a horrible black creature with a lean poverty-stricken face and eyes evilly sparkling with hunger...

The misfortune struck before lunchtime. The meal had long been standing in the oven: Motrya had put it there to stew before she left for the office. Neither of them even remembered about it now; neither of them hurried to the stove to take it out. Their troubles had fed them without food.

The day ended as it had begun. Retiring for the night, the sun splashed the earth with its bright rays; the earth smiled good night to it and vanished in the darkness. Night fell and lighted the stars to cheer things up a little. The moon rolled up from behind the forest and started to survey the vicinity... Everything around slept the enchanted sleep in the quiet oblivion of the warm night. Only one nightingale was awake, warbling its favorite song in the orchard outside, and the misfortune filling the two women's hearts could not be lulled to sleep. It now started a song of its own — bitter and cheerless... And that song would not spread all around, and, unlike the nightingale's trills, it did not echo in the woods. Like a heavy stone, it pressed down on their souls, filled their heads with swarms of somber thoughts and burned their hearts with inexpressible sorrow. Motrya and Orishka did not sleep and did not weep. They only groaned — now one, now the other... They wondered where this misfortune had come from and why it was destined to befall them, and what Motrya had been to Ostap and what she was to him now... They sat there racking their brains. A second wife of a man who had married before? A seduced girl? Neither, they decided. She was rather a married widow... This must be a sin — how could they pray to God for forgiveness? This was a shame — how could they wash it away?... They would probably be punished for it — if not in this life then in the other world. Ostap was a sinister, wicked creature... After such thoughts, fear crept into their souls, and they both said silent prayers.

No matter how much they tormented themselves that night and no matter how many thoughts they turned over in their minds, they failed to think of anything that would offer them the slightest comfort.

Neither did the *volost* officials find a satisfactory solution. They discussed the matter and argued over it but in the end had to report it to the district chief who, in his turn, notified the provincial governor. Then everybody got busy writing replies and explanations...

Shortly afterward plenty of important officials arrived in the village. They asked a lot of questions and wrote down all the answers. Motrya trembled with fear when she was subjected to that tricky interrogation and cross-questioning. Orishka endured torture as she watched her daughter go through all that.

The affair dominated all conversation in the village. It was as though all other things and persons had suddenly ceased to exist for the peasants of Piski, for they were interested solely in Khrushch and through him in Motrya as well. Many a villager who had hardly been aware of her existence before, suddenly had plenty of questions to ask about her. Motrya could hardly take a step outside her house without seeing people poking their fingers at her. Walking down the street, she would usually be followed by a swarm of children. Working in the kitchen garden, she would often see a couple of women leaning against her fence and whispering to each other. Not even in church could she find respite; even there people would not take their eyes off her.

"Over there... that one! That short woman, black hair... head tied with a black kerchief..." whispers from behind her back reached her ears.

"Is she the one who's crossing herself?"

"That's right... That's she who married a married fellow."

Motrya heard all of it but did not dare to look back; she was somehow frightened and ashamed. Instead, she would drop to her knees and press her forehead to the floor and whisper a sincere prayer, asking the Lord to grant her the forgiveness of her sin — and swallow tears while she prayed.

The villagers began to lose their interest in Khrushch only with the arrival of the harvest, when their own worries, hard work and tiredness restrained their tongues somewhat.

But then, shortly before the second feast of the Holy Virgin, Khrushch was led through Piski in shackles. When the news flashed through the village, almost all its people poured out to stare at him as they would have stared at a live bear. "Khrushch... Khrushch is coming... They're leading him in chains!" shouts came from all sides. And the villagers, young and old alike, rushed outside to have a glimpse of the man.

Khrushch was taken to the town of Hetmanske and locked up behind bars. Then they started interrogating him. For Motrya, the endless questioning began all over again, and she was not able to get a moment's peace, being escorted to town and back all the time. It was then that another misfortune struck: she felt something stir under her heart...

As soon as the villagers noticed it, the gossiping flared up again:

"Did you hear?" a woman would greet another on the street. "She's expecting!"

"Oh, yes, my dear, I know... Fancy getting pregnant by such a monster!"

"Don't you think it's a bad omen?... I'd say the end of the world is not far away! Just think: last year there was that star with a tail, and now this..."

"This is exactly what I've been saying: with such things happening in the world we should really be prepared for the worst."

And they would wag their tongues on and on.

Some men would gather somewhere on a Sunday or another holiday. Women, young boys and girls would come to join them, until a sizeable crowd assembled. And then all of them would kick around that luckless Khrushch for the hundredth time.

Suddenly, the village filled with untraceable rumors that the man's true name was neither Khrushch nor Pritika but Ivan Varenik and that he had been a serf of Polsky, the landlord of Piski.

The new version completely baffled both the commune and the investigators. What were they to do with him now? Would they be within their rights to put him on trial? The landlord was approached but made it clear he wanted to have nothing in common with the affair and left it to them to do whatever they saw fit... Finally the peasant commune decided the matter. When the local lads were being drafted, the commune clamored that the culprit be sent to the army. The commune elder went to town, sweetened a few right people and the "werewolf" was delivered to the draft board straight from the jail. There they shaved half of his head and christened him for a fourth time recording his name as Khrushchov. Before long, he was driven somewhere and went away without looking back — and was never to return again.

* * *

Ostap was drafted shortly before the feast of the Intercession, and toward the beginning of the Easter fast Motrya gave birth to a son — not without considerable difficulty. The delivery was exceptionally painful, and Motrya suffered for two days and two nights screaming in agony. The midwife did what she could, but it

just did not work, and the woman survived by sheer miracle. Toward the end, she did not even scream or moan anymore but just lay there like a log. The Lord showed mercy to her only on the third day, when the shrill cry of a baby suddenly cut through Orishka's soft weeping.

"He'll get to be a general with such a voice!" the midwife exclaimed, relieved.

Slowly, Orishka lifted her hand and crossed herself. Motrya heaved a deep sigh — and opened her eyes. A feeling of quiet release spread through the room.

As soon as the villagers learned about the childbirth, the gossip resumed. Piski again filled with whispers, ridicule and mysterious fears... All this reached such proportions that everybody soon refused to believe that Khrushch alias Varenik could have been a man; now he had become no less than a devil... Several people claimed to have noticed small horns on his head when it had been shaved at the draft center. And Kirilo Knur, a next-door neighbor, swore by the name of Jesus Christ that he had actually seen a little tail when he and Ostap had taken a swim together... Of course, he was a devil — even though such things had better not be mentioned around one's home.

Now a baby had been born to him — and in such a way, too!

"No, it just doesn't seem right to me!" village wives chattered, shaking their heads. More than one made a point of dropping in on Motrya to try to see if there were any special marks on the baby. Finally, one discovered a small birthmark on its left knee. That must be it, she thought and hurried out of the house.

"Found anything?" her child's godmother demanded impatiently.

"Just as I had thought, dear!" the woman blurted out, making the sign of the cross.

Before long, the entire village was heatedly discussing the discovery. Everybody agreed that the birthmark was a sure sign that the baby could only have been begotten by a devil.

Now godparents were needed for the baptizing, but everybody refused. Motrya and Orishka were desperate. The baby had already lived for three days unbaptized. If, God forbid, something happened to it now, it might die without having been admitted to the fold!

Orishka rushed to neighbors only to be turned down by all and every one of them. Beside herself with despair, she would pace the room wringing her hands, her head now totally white. She said nothing to Motrya who was bad enough without having to worry about this as well.

Fortunately, some soldiers happened to pass through the village. Orishka ran to them and implored them to help. She also bought them a quart of vodka. Finally, one agreed. He was to be the godfather with Orishka herself as godmother.

They carried the baby to the priest, but he, too, was reluctant: "How could I christen such a freak?"

"Oh, Lord, what am I to do?!" cried Orishka. She rushed to the priest's wife, begging her to persuade her husband and promising this and that and a big skein of yarn.

The woman took pity on her. The priest baptized the little boy Nechipor.

III

The Childhood Years

Motrya had not been born to be happy. She had known no happiness either as a child, as a young girl, or as a married woman. She certainly did not expect to be happy as a married widow.

Now her fellow villagers avoided not only her, but also her old mother. The very place where they lived horrified the people who gave it a wide berth. Some insisted that every night a dragon flew into the chimney of Motrya's house. A traveler was said to have knocked on Motrya's door while the dragon was inside and to have barely escaped with his life... A very dangerous place indeed! Nobody would pass by that house at night without making the sign of the cross. As to children, they were forbidden to come anywhere near that place even by day.

Their plot now began to look more and more like a haunted place. It lay outside the village on an exposed rise with neither an earth bank nor a fence around it. There was only a narrow shallow ditch, and that was all. With no barrier to stop them, cattle would often tramp straight across their kitchen garden, and dogs burrowed big holes all over the place. Signs of neglect were everywhere. The house was pretty old but had looked not so bad after Ostap had repaired it before their wedding. Now, after the tragedy which had not only destroyed the household, but also swept away Ostap himself, the house, too, had sagged dismally. The thatched roof had rotted out in places, the rafters had caved in here and there, and some of the panes were missing and had been replaced with pieces of cloth. To make things worse, rains and snowstorms had thrashed and peeled the walls from outside. One would think this was a deserted place! Inside, things were not much better. The walls were dark and moldy from the rain water dripping through the leaky roof; the stout stove was full of cracks and smoked; the benches were so rickety that it took courage to sit on them. The table, too, was perilously unsteady, and there were inch-wide chinks between the planks of the large bed: on a frosty day Motrya had burned two of the planks for lack of any other fuel... It was all utter poverty and hopeless misery!

Motrya led a dreary life. Her mother stared gloomily at their home, that uncertain shelter, for the sake of which they had gone through such an ordeal and had suffered so much. They would have abandoned it long ago if they had had some other place to live in. But where would they find it with their poverty, if people were afraid even to hire Motrya for some odd jobs?

At harvest, Motrya hired herself out as a reaper. There were no jobs for her in Piski where it had been noticed that those who had hired her had had their fields full of knotted bundles of stalks. She had to work in a neighboring village of Bairaki.

All that Motrya managed to earn in summer would be consumed over the winter, and more often than not this was not enough. At times they had not even a pinch of salt, not a grain of flour. And getting some new clothes was something they could only dream about. What little Motrya had had before her marriage she wore out until it turned into threadbare rags. Now she was lucky if she could get some hemp for her work. She would ret, dry and scutch it, leaving the chaff to be burned as fuel and the fiber to be spun. It would take her two years to spin enough yarn to make a blouse. For skirts she had to print the hemp cloth. The same skirts served as her Sunday best. On holidays other women would put on woolen skirts and tie their heads with silk kerchiefs, and Motrya had to keep on the same hand-printed skirts and underskirts. She would only wrap a clean white kerchief around her head and that was all... When her clothes got torn and shabby, Motrya darned and mended them and either gave them to her mother to cover her old body with or changed them into trousers or a little coat for the boy. It could not be worse! In winter the two women had to share their only outer coat. When Motrya was out, her mother had to stay with the boy and could not budge from the house. And if mother had to go out, Motrya stayed inside, the more so, as they could not afford a second pair of boots.

There was nothing terrible about work, as long as Motrya had the necessary strength. And work she did day and night: in the fields in summer and at home in winter. Orishka, however, was too old to work. Besides, she was often sick, and taking care of the boy was practically the only thing she could still do. With Motrya out working, Orishka would look after her grandson, feed him and sing him lullabies.

He was a fine little boy, too — black-haired, good-looking and quite clever... But at the same time he was somewhat cheerless, quiet and a bit of a loner. Other children were mostly lively and restless like a whipping top. When asked to fetch something, they flew like lightnings... Not Chipka (that is what they called him for short). Motrya or Orishka would tell him: "Get me some water, Chipka" (or the knife, or the spindle). Then he would start asking questions: "Where is it?" or "Where can I get it?" He would ask about everything, taking his time about it, and then, just as

unhurriedly, he would rise and go to fetch it. This was one thing Motrya did not like about Chipka. "I guess he'll become a big loafer," she used to complain to Orishka. "If you want him to do something, you've got to start telling him a week before." Sometimes she would even cuff him in the back to get him moving. Then Chipka would drop his hands and wail at the top of his voice. More work for Granny! Orishka doted on the boy, because she loved him very much indeed. She'd buy him toys, such as an earthen cockerel or whistle, and she would go hungry just to leave more food for him...

When Chipka had grown up a little, he started running around. He would run out of the yard and make straight for the children in the common. But the children did not let him play with them. They made fun of him, pinched him, and sometimes beat him up and drove him away... It was not for nothing that the gentry took pride in their lineage. Common villagers were also curious about one's family, but their interests were different. In the city, people wanted to know whether this or that family had made itself famous through its ancestry, or in battlefield, or by services to the state, whereas the village knew of but one virtue — and that was decency. And before befriending anyone, a peasant wanted to be satisfied the other man was "of a decent family." Chipka, however, was "a freak..." Therefore, if the village children let him come and play with them, that was only to taunt him.

"There's the freak coming!" a puny white-haired boy would shout, spotting Chipka from afar.

"The bastard!" another boy would take up. "Let's go get him!"

The children would run to Chipka and gather round him. Then one of them would twitch at his black hair from behind. Chipka would spin around, knit his brows and glower at them... Then his stare would be as evil as the children who had driven him to it. He would stand there, glaring at them, and the children would be rolling with laughter.

"Just where did you come from, Chipka?" one of the boys would demand, tugging at the skirt of his coat. But he would only breathe heavily, without saying anything.

"Did you hatch out of an egg?" another boy would laugh.

Everybody would join in the laughter. Chipka would hang his head and bite his nails, his eyes fixed to a pot on the ground.

"No!..." he would finally say, still biting his nails. "Granny caught me in the kitchen garden... in the weeds..."

The echo of their laughter would spread far and wide.

"So you came from the weeds, you say?..."

"No, I didn't."

"But if you didn't where's your father?"

"I... don't know..."

"That's because you're a bastard!"

"It's a lie!" his eyes would sparkle wolfishly.

"What are you then?"

"I'm... Chipka."

"You're Chepiha * — not Chipka!" one of them would shout, twitching at his hair.

"Why are you doing that?" Chipka would blurt out through his tears. "Just wait — I'll tell my grandmother and she'll show you!"

"Your grandmother scares me something terrible!" the boy would shout back, twitching Chipka again.

Others would join suit, one after another. Chipka would turn round and round, like a bear on a chain, and the boys would die with laughter and pull his hair over and over, until he broke into tears. Then they would simply drive him away.

Chipka walked back home, sobbing.

"Why are you crying, Chipka?" Orishka asked him.

He told her all about it, and his grandmother took him by the hand and led him inside, saying:

"Don't go there, grandson. Just don't go there at all. Look what those bad boys do to you — hurting and offending you... Stop going over to them!"

Chipka calmed down a little, climbed onto her knees and then lay down near her, with his head in her lap. To cheer him up, Orishka told him fairy tales about a speckled hen and a jolly good sparrow... Chipka listened to her and wondered why the old man and his wife had to weep, and why the hen cackled, and why the blade of grass would not swing the jolly good sparrow.

Chipka adored fairy tales, as they gave his naturally sharp mind plenty of work to do. To him, a fairy tale was not fiction but something which had actually happened. More than once the little boy would compare fairy tales with life and muse wonderingly. In a tale, animals and birds spoke exactly like people. In actual life, however, birds twittered, oxen bellowed, dogs barked... And no one could understand what they wanted to say. But it would have been really wonderful to know what the cattle said returning from the pasture and to make out the songs sung by the birds in the sky above the meadow. Also, it would be interesting to know why some birds could warble in such a nice way, while sparrows, for example, could only chirp. And what did plants speak about when they rustled their leaves?

"Do oxen speak, Granny?" Chipka asked Orishka.

"God knows, grandson... Some people say that they, too, can speak."

"What about birds?"

"And birds too..."

"How do they speak then? And what do they talk about?..." he insisted.

And Orishka tried to explain it to him as best she could. The cattle, she said, never bellowed without a reason. If cows moored

* Chepiga (Ukr.) — plough-handle

returning from the pastures, that meant they were glad they would soon be home and would be able to have some rest... They also moaned when they were hungry... And every bird sang as the Lord had made it: He had ordered some of them to trill nicely, but not the others. Take the nightingale for one. It had used to be a man but had turned into a bird... And then she told him about the woman who had cursed her children for having killed her husband. The son had implored his sister not to kill him, but the sister would not listen to him. So mother bewitched both of them. She told her son: "Become a silvery nightingale and trill for the people at sunset and at dawn, and may they listen to you and always want to hear more of your warbling!" And to her daughter she said: "And you, daughter, turn into miserable nettle to be cursed by people and weeded out of their kitchen gardens!" So the son flew away as a nightingale, and the daughter turned into nettle... And when a nightingale sang, everybody admired its trills. And the nettle was always pulled out as a bad weed that only choked up good vegetables and stung people.

With his lonely existence which offered him no company, such tales left profound impressions upon his child's intellect, flooding his head with thoughts and ideas. They penetrated deep into his ardent heart and stirred his soul deeply. Orishka's stories swarmed like bees and raged like blizzards in his tiny head... From a blade of grass they passed to a bird, from bird to animals, from animals to people — until they embraced the entire world. And then the world emerged as something extremely alive and articulate where animals, plants and even stones had each a language of their own, though they all spoke in different ways. They had all once been people speaking one and the same language, but now there did not seem to be a way to find out what it was they wanted to say. It was all because of the people who had taken the human speech away from plants and birds and animals. It was as though they had turned their brothers into those things... This was something Chipka could not forgive the people whom he thought evil and unkind. Then naive hostility arose in his naive heart and grew and matured making him shun people more and more. Not that the people treated him any better.

"Granny!" he once asked Orishka. "Did I have a father?"

"You did, grandson."

"Where is he now then?"

"He has joined the army."

"Now I see, and the boys have been saying that I had no father... A bastard — that's what they call me."

"They're just silly!"

"Why? Is there something wrong with it?"

"You'll get old too fast if you know everything. Don't think about it — it's a bad word! Put it out of your head... Only bad boys say it..."

"I won't be bad, Granny!..." Chipka told her, becoming lost in thought.

Some time later he spoke again:

"And why did my father go to the army? Why did he leave Mother?"

"He was sent there."

"What was he sent for?"

"He had to go... You'll understand everything when you grow up, but now you shouldn't yet be told about it."

"Why, Granny?"

"Because. You're still too small..."

It was not seldom that they had similar conversations. Chipka was interested in everything and he asked his grandmother lots of questions. Orishka willingly answered them. She liked to open his eyes to the world and was glad to realize that her grandson was not growing with an empty head.

Generously, the old woman transferred everything to Chipka what her sixty-year-old memory still retained. The boy did not merely accept it — he avidly absorbed it all!

Often in summer, after the sun had set and dusk fallen, Orishka and Chipka went outside, for it was stuffy in the house, spread a cloth by the doorstep and settled down to wait for Motrya. Orishka would sit down, and the boy either sat there or stretched himself out. Then they would talk. Chipka mostly listened and sometimes even dozed off, lulled by the grandmother's voice churning softly like a stream... At times, however, he, too, chirped animatedly...

Night fell, and stars sparkled and flickered in the sky. They fascinated Chipka, and he could not take his eyes off them.

"What is that up there?" He pointed to the stars.

"Those are stars."

"What are they?"

"Those are angels looking down at us. Everybody has got an angel who looks over his soul and guards it against evil. If a star falls, it means a soul has passed away..."

"Do I have a star up there, Granny? And you too, and Mother?"

"We all have them."

"Where's mine, Granny?" Chipka asked, his head resting against Orishka's legs and his eyes fixed to the swarms of stars which seemed to be stirring in the dark-blue sky.

"God knows, grandson. None of us can tell... This is God's business, and He alone knows it all..."

"Is God up there, too?"

"He is..."

"Who is God, Granny?"

"God?... God is our Lord. He minds everything in the world: every bug, every animal and every man... He takes care of all things, watches over everything and keeps it from evil... And

when He sees that Satan interferes with His holy business and makes trouble in the world, He sends Saint Elijah on a fiery chariot to kill Satan... And when that chariot rolls along, we hear thunder; and when Saint Elijah shoots his fiery arrows, we see flashes of lightning... That's the kind of God He is! He's terrible for the evil and kind for the good. He is our Lord and Father who keeps us alive and feeds us..."

Chipka let himself be carried away by his imagination. He visualized wrathful God, enveloped in black clouds... ordering Elijah to go and punish the evil. Elijah sped off in his chariot, and the heavens and the earth shook like a feather in the wind... Then came a flash — and an arrow of fire sliced open the sky... Suddenly, Chipka was gripped by fear. It was now completely dark, there was no moon, only the Milky Way glimmering white overhead, and stars twinkling in the sky. Pressing against his grandmother, the boy whispered softly:

"I'll be good, Granny... I won't do any bad things, and God will not punish me... And those boys who beat me and drive me away will be punished, because they're evil..."

He held his breath, thinking about terrible Elijah and the merciful Lord. After a while, he asked Orishka again:

"Did you say that God fed us?"

"He sure does."

"Then why does Mother have to earn bread for us? Just look how late it is — and she hasn't come home from work yet. She says we wouldn't have anything to eat if she didn't work."

"That just shows how silly you are," she said. "Man is born to work and not to lie around. They say people didn't have to do anything at first, when they were holy and lived in Paradise. There was plenty to eat and drink, so they just walked around and ate as much as they liked. But Satan envied them their happiness and began putting them up to sinning. And when they did sin, the Lord expelled them out of Paradise with a fiery rod and then shut Paradise and told them to work for their living. And everybody has been working ever since then. We wouldn't have to, if we'd stayed holy."

"Why did those people have to sin, Granny? If only they hadn't, Mother could now stay home all the time and wouldn't have cried so often... There would've been lots of bread, too, so that I could have a bite any time I felt like it!"

"This is God's will, my child..."

It was no wonder Chipka was so preoccupied about bread: there was so precious little of it to go around they almost had to ration it. Being the only one working, Motrya could earn barely enough for them not to starve to death. It was just plain poverty. A funny episode happened once because of that bread.

Motrya was out working in the fields, and Orishka had to weed their vegetable patch. All of a sudden, Chipka began pestering his

grandmother for something to eat. The old woman took a hunk of bread, broke off a piece and gave it to him. The rest she put on the table.

"Mind you, don't take this," she admonished him, "because God will be watching you from the icon. When Mother comes, she will ask who has eaten the bread. Then God will point to you, and Mother'll punish you. So don't even touch it!"

Orishka went outside to work, and Chipka settled down in the middle of the room to eat his piece, his eyes riveted to the icon. When he finished his bread, he found he was still hungry. The rest of the hunk lay there on the table teasing him. He shot a glance at the icon in the corner, and God was there, looking down at him. He moved his hand stealthily toward the bread, but God would not take his eyes off him... Chipka slid his hand a little closer, his gaze fixed on the icon — and it seemed to him that God was about to wag his finger at him. He hastily withdrew his hand. Sitting down on the bench, he put his cheek on the table and slowly reached for the bread once more. Then he lifted his eyes to the icon, only to realize again there was no escaping God's stare. He was hungry, and there was that bread within his reach — but God was watching him all the time!

Chipka did some hard thinking. Suddenly, he rushed away from the table, breathing hard, his eyes burning. Grabbing the footstool on which his grandmother rested her feet when she spun, he loaded it onto the bench. Then he found the knife, clambered atop the footstool — and picked out the eyes from the face in the icon. Then he ate up the bread and ran out to Orishka.

"Granny! Gra-a-anny!" he shouted.

"Come over here, Chipka. What's happened?" she called to him from the weeds.

"Well, I've eaten all the bread," he boasted.

"Why have you done that? When Mother comes, God will tell her..."

"Oh, no, Granny, God didn't see me do it, because I picked out his eyes."

Orishka, however, paid no attention, and the episode was soon forgotten. Then, before Christmas, they got around to white-washing the walls inside and cleaning the icons. Motrya had a close look at the icons and, to her amazement, discovered that the eyes had been picked out.

"Any idea who may have done it?" Motrya asked her mother.

"Have done what?" Orishka looked there and now she, too, saw that the eyes were missing. "Was it you who did it?" she turned to Chipka.

"Yes, I did it," he laughed. "That's because I didn't want him to see me eat that bread."

Only then did Orishka remember what Chipka had told her. There was nothing to be done about it, though, since Chipka was

just a silly little child, after all. Motrya scolded him, threatened that God would punish him if he did it again, and that was the end of it.

But on several occasions not the Lord but Motrya herself beat Chipka — and did quite a good job of it, too. Sometimes he had bruises for weeks on end. To say that she did not love him would not be true. She did care for him as every mother cared for her child. Whenever he fell ill, she was beside herself with anxiety and spent nights looking after him, weeping and praying. After all, he represented the only joy and hope she had. He was her son who would grow up and support her in her old age. Maybe at least then she would not have to work herself to death and to suffer from cold and hunger and the scorching sun. This was what Motrya hoped for. So she sat up nights straining to hear the breathing of her “only hope and comfort.”

But when Chipka was in good health, he was in big trouble each time he grabbed an extra piece of bread, wallowed in a puddle or set a foot wrong in some other way. Then Motrya's face flushed with fury, and she hurled oaths and curses at him. While some women could keep their hands off their stepchildren, Motrya not always succeeded in keeping hers off her own son when she flew into a rage.

Her son, however, was not the kind of boy to be deterred by beating. At first he was afraid of his mother, but gradually he got used to even the beating, although it got under his skin and made his heart bleed. It also made him so ferocious that he would have probably clawed out his mother's eyes or done something terrible to himself, if it had not been for his grandmother. Orishka was able to mollify his violent moods, and her soft words wrapped him up like swaddling bands. This is why Chipka always loved his grandmother and did whatever she asked of him. But he cared less for his mother and was much less inclined to obey her. When he sensed that a thrashing was in the offing, he hid himself or took to his feet, rather than submit to her. Quite often Motrya wept bitterly because of that.

IV

The Growing Up

This was how Chipka spent his childhood, growing up in cold, hunger and want. His was a very solitary existence. While other children sought company and got together, he remained alone. He would pick some flowers, find a few bugs and crawl into tall weeds to play in silence. The company of either children or adults had little attraction for him. With his good memory he had never forgotten being called a freak. He also remembered his grand-

mother's advice. Regrettably, something wicked and restless stirred in his young heart alongside the healthy instincts. Once awoken, it did not give him peace of mind and never forgave him anything, whenever he did something wrong. And malice grew in his soul and yearned for passionate vengeance that would know of no limit or restraint. Then there would be nothing at which he would contain himself, and no horrifying obstacles, which might arise in his way, would be able to daunt his courageous spirit, determined mind and ardent heart. Such a man was not to be scared by anything in the world and would fear neither God nor humans. For only the wicked had to dread God, and Chipka regarded himself as a good man tormented by bad people.

Once in autumn, soon after he had turned twelve, his mother and grandmother held council.

"Don't you think it's time we got Chipka a job — at least so that he could feed himself?" Motrya asked.

"I've been thinking about it myself," Orishka said. "Only he doesn't seem fit for any work. He's so surly and close-mouthed and bearish. He also can't get along with other boys, so he sticks at home all the time."

"What can we do?" Motrya said sorrowfully. "Everybody knows how hard I work. But it's just no use... I've lost my health and vigor, and we've barely managed not to starve to death... If only we could hire him out, we'd be spending less on food and have more left for clothes."

Motrya went to ask around and soon found Chipka a job. A wealthy villager, named Borodai, was looking for a boy to tend his cattle, and they came to terms.

"Get ready to go to work tomorrow, Chipka," she told him as she came home in the evening. "You've been hanging around long enough at home wasting food. It's high time you started earning your bread."

Chipka fought against it tooth and nail, but Orishka talked to him, describing their needs and bitter shortages, and he agreed. Borodai hired him for the winter for food and clothes. Motrya returned home in a happy frame of mind.

"How did it go off?" Orishka asked.

"I left him there... I wish he'd behave!"

"He may yet get used to it," the older woman tried to encourage her daughter. "It's now all in the hands of God."

Chipka stayed with Borodai. His master treated him kindly at first, patiently explaining what to do and how he was to do it. But the boy just did not listen to him. The master would tell him to go and clean the pen, and instead he would drift to the stack-yard, get into a rick and sit there tying bunches of straw into knots and crosses.

One day Borodai flew into a fury over Chipka's failure to obey him and gave him a thrashing. This so enraged the boy that he

nearly burned down his master's place. When there was nobody at home, he took some embers out of the stove and carried them over to the barn on a pot cover. Luckily, neighbors noticed it in time and put out the fire with water.

Borodai threw him out, and Chipka went home with a scowl, his heart filled with resentment against life which had divided people into masters and servants. Motrya just wept and did not even try to beat him. She was afraid of Borodai suing them. Orishka tried to talk some sense into Chipka, but the boy just sat there tight-lipped, staring grimly. He stayed at home for the whole winter.

In the spring, Motrya and Orishka again discussed it.

"Shall we get Chipka to work?"

"Why not."

Motrya went to look for a job once more — and again quickly found it. Ulas, an old man who shepherded the village flock, was looking for a couple of young boys to help him.

Old Ulas was a serf of landlord Polsky and used to tend his cattle. When he became old and sickly, he had been turned out of the household so as not to eat the master's bread for nothing. Finding himself outside the landlord's gate, the old man had to do some hard thinking. Where should he go? He had no family, and his distant relatives were all serfs anyway. In this situation he might just as well go and jump in the pond. The free peasants' commune, however, took pity on him. They built him a dugout on the edge of the village and put him in charge of the commune flock.

Now the old man hired Chipka as a herdsman. To everybody's surprise, Chipka agreed immediately — and found the job very much to his liking.

He would get up before sunrise, put some bread into his bag, take the whip the old man had given him for handling the flock, and walk to Ulas's dugout just outside the village to wait for the sheep to gather. When he came, the dugout door was still shut. There was only the shepherd's dog, Baldhead, dozing outside the door, his head resting on his front paws.

"Baldhead!" Chipka called out to him.

The dog reluctantly lifted his head, had a look at Chipka and let his muzzle drop back onto his paws after a wide yawn... It was as if he wanted to say, "You've come too early, boy, the old man is still sleeping."

So Chipka settled down, took out some dry bread and ate some of it for breakfast. Before long, villagers began bringing their sheep. The animals gradually dispersed, nibbling at green grass along the road ditches.

Then Hritsko Chuprun, the other herdsboy, came along. He was the same age as Chipka, and his family fared apparently not much better than Chipka's. His shirt was so soiled it was almost black,

and what passed as his trousers, rolled up above his knees, were all rags.

Hritsko was an orphan and came from the family of free peasants. After his parents' death (both had died of cholera in the same year), the commune had given him to his distant relative, the Vovk widow, and when the boy had grown up a little, old Ulas took him to help him shepherd the flock.

Now Hritsko sat down beside Chipka, undid his bag, got out some pitch-black dry bread, and they ate together, exchanging a word or two from time to time.

Then the door squeaked — and the old man stood in the doorway.

“Already here, boys?”

“That's right.”

“There're still too few sheep, I see.”

“They're going to bring the rest now.”

“Having your breakfast?”

“Yes, we are.”

“All right, you go on eating till we have all the sheep. Meanwhile I'll wash and get my things and then we'll start.”

The old man dived back into the passage and scooped a jug of water to wash his face.

It was now almost broad daylight, only the sun seemed to be late. Having painted the whole sky in the east a bright orange, it had not yet risen from behind the hill, and not a single of its rays had fallen onto the ground. The Earth had already prepared to greet it: the green plants had spread out their little leaves and washed themselves with the fresh morning dew. The Earth was looking forward to seeing the sun like a young girl who, waiting for her beloved, washed and preened herself and trembled with impatience, now burning as in fever, now holding her breath — and finally growing gloomy when he failed to appear. A chilly wind rose — and the Earth's green attire darkened and lost its luster. But then the wind died down, and the Earth brightened up again...

Presently, all the sheep were in, and old Ulas was ready. He emerged from his dugout wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat, his lunch bag and his coat (for bad weather) on a crook over his shoulder, his whip in his hand.

“Shall we go, boys?” he called to them.

Chipka and Hritsko sprang to their feet, put away the remains of their black-bread breakfast and hurried to gather the sheep which had spread throughout the common, regaling themselves on the dewy grass. Soon they were all herded together.

The shepherd shouted, the whip cracked, one of the boys opened the gate of the fenced common, and the sheep slowly trailed toward the fields, their heads low, just above the ground. Chipka and Hritsko walked on either side of the flock, old Ulas followed

behind, and Baldhead, his head and tail lifted high, stalked at the shepherd's feet, like a faithful squire at his knight's side.

Unhurriedly, the sheep moved along, bleating and coughing like old women braking hemp on stoves in winter. A cloud of dust hung above the road.

"Come on!" the old shepherd nudged them on, snapping his whip.

"Hey, where d'you think you're going?" Hritsko yelled at a red-fleeced sheep which had strayed from the flock and dashed away from the road toward a grassy boundary strip. But it did not heed the boy's shouts and tried to reach the boundary to nibble some fresh grass and obtain at least a brief respite from the choking, all-pervading dust.

Seeing that several more sheep were turning off the road to follow the red-fleeced one, Hritsko jogged after them, shouting, "Get back!" and snapping his whip. Reluctantly, the fugitives turned back.

Playfully and smilingly, the sun began to emerge from behind the hill. Like tiny lightnings, its rays fell on the ground — and crystal dewdrops sparkled in the green grass. With the appearance of the sun, all creatures came to life. Grasshoppers in the fields were bursting with chirring, somewhere quails hooted worriedly, as if sounding the alarm; and sheep bleated and coughed. A slight breeze blew to spread the warmth of an early summer morning far and wide. The world became cheery and pleasant.

Chipka strolled on one side of the flock, his head hung low. What was he thinking about? What was on his mind? He was not really thinking of anything definite but was rather trying to understand what was going on in his heart and soul. Then he forgot — and put everything out of his mind... Now he felt good. He felt happy and free. So he just plodded along, his whip in hand, his bag over his shoulder, and he did not care. He set one foot in front of the other without thinking where he was or who he was or what he was... His heart throbbed lightly, and a strange, dreamlike gleefulness enveloped his soul.

Presently they reached the pasture. Old Ulas snapped his whip, and the sheep scattered over the green field.

"Now, boys, we can get some rest," he declared.

All three settled down under a tree. The old man got out some bread and a pinch of salt and began to eat.

Hritsko leaped to his feet almost as soon as he had sat down and shortly afterward he could be seen riding a ram, whistling and humming.

Chipka lay on his back staring into the sky. The sky was deep, wide and clear, without a cloud or a spot. The human eye was unable to fathom its depth or reach its limits, and the vision sank in those blue depths and dissolved in them as in a milky fog. Only the thought grew and broadened...

What was up there, Chipka wondered. It must be really nice there. The skies were so blue, and the sun shone so brightly.

"Uncle Ulas?"

"What is it, sonny?"

"What's there?"

"Where?"

"In the sky?"

"God."

Chipka fell to thinking. It was so nice lying there and looking up.

"Are there any people there, too?"

"Where?"

"In the sky."

"No, sonny, there aren't. There's just God, his angels and virtuous souls."

"Has anybody been there to see them?"

"No, but they say so. Our priest also says so in his sermons in church."

"It must be wonderful there... Just look how blue and beautiful the heavens are!"

Having eaten his breakfast, the old shepherd was saying a prayer. When he finished, he said:

"Of course it's wonderful, sonny! Nothing like here on earth... Up there everything is good and holy. Down here all is evil and sinful..."

Ulas's voice trailed off. A short time later, he cleared his throat and started again:

"Only the merciful Lord keeps us alive in this world, because we should've been weeded out as bad grass long ago. Look at these sheep here. Do they harm anybody or anything? No they don't. They just wander around nibbling the green grass — and that's all they do. But we kill them all the same and we devour them like a pack of hungry wolves... But then we eat just about everything — you name it. But it's a sin, and we'll have to pay for it in the other world... We're sinful, damned souls. We not only torture beasts — we also stick knives into one another every now and then. We sure do. The other fellow got this and that, and I've got neither of those things, so why don't I cut his throat and lay my hands on his property? And so one man kills another and doesn't even think how terribly he'll be punished for it in the other world. The devil tempts him, and he grabs a knife and goes ahead... Condemned, sinful souls — that's what we are!"

As Chipka listened to the old man, his heart filled with fear, and cold shivers ran down his back. "Condemned, sinful souls..." he whispered after Ulas. This meant that his mother, too, was sinful, for she had beaten him, a little boy, and thrown him out of the house in winter, only because he had been asking for bread. On the other hand, his grandmother was not sinful, since she had

never raised her hand to him and had always indulged and comforted him, just like old Ulas. Then he was probably not sinful either... What about Hritsko? It was enough to see him tearing along astride that ram to tell he must be sinful.

"Hritsko!" Chipka shouted, leaping to his feet. "Don't do that, because it's a sin!"

Hritsko, however, kept on geeing and whoaing at the top of his voice.

"Is he riding the ram again?" the old man asked. "Now I see. I couldn't understand at first why he was shouting so all the time... Wait, I'll show you!" Ulas shook his crook at the boy from afar.

Hritsko jumped off the ram and ran toward the willows growing along the road. Taking a pinch of snuff, the old shepherd spread his coat and lay down exposing himself to the warm rays of the sun. Chipka sat beside him.

Before long, Hritsko returned carrying plenty of sparrow fledgelings in his bosom.

"Look how many chicks I've gotten out of sparrows' nests," he boasted.

"What have you done it for?" the old man asked without lifting his head from the ground.

"That's to keep this plague from breeding!"

"But they haven't harmed anybody! It's a sin!" Chipka exclaimed, stressing the last word.

"Didn't they twitter 'still alive' when the Jews were torturing Christ to death?" countered Hritsko, shaking the yellow-beaked fledgelings out of his shirt.

Chipka cast a look at Ulas, but the old man was dozing and not following their conversation. The fledgelings began to crawl away, and Hritsko seized his crook.

"Oh no, you won't get far!" he shouted, thrashing the little birds so hard that he beat their entrails out of them.

"I'll teach you how to twitter 'still alive!'" the boy yelled as he pounded away with his crook again and again.

Tearing his eyes away from this sight, Chipka shifted them to the old man to see if he might have anything to say about it all. But Ulas just lay there and did not speak. Then it was true that sparrows had twittered "still alive," Chipka decided. Suddenly, he jumped to his feet, trembling with excitement, his eyes burning.

"Wait, Hritsko! Wait, don't beat them. Let's better wring their necks!..."

Picking up a fledgeling, he gave a sharp twist to its head. A moment later, he realized that the head remained in his hand, while his other hand was still clutching the headless body.

"This is 'still alive' to you!" Chipka shouted. "How d'you like that?"

"This is 'still alive' to you!" Hritsko echoed him.

Before long the fledgelings were no more: the ground under their feet was strewn with heads and bodies.

"Now we can do some beating," declared Chipka, reaching for his crook. Hritsko followed suit. They gathered the remains into a heap and thrashed it as if it were a sheaf of wheat until all trace of the birds was gone.

"Let's go get more of them," Hritsko proposed. "There're still plenty of these."

"All right," Chipka agreed.

They raced toward the willows.

"Where are you going?" old Ulas called after them, lifting his head from the ground. "Better go and drive the sheep back here. Look how far they've gone. We don't want them to be attacked by wolves, do we?"

The old man lay back on his coat and quickly dozed off again.

"Did Jews really torture Christ to death?" Chipka asked as they ran to the sheep.

"Sure they did. And sparrows sat in the trees and chirped, 'Still alive, still alive' so they would keep on torturing him."

"I surely wish some Jew would fall into my hands!" Chipka boasted, his eyes sparkling viciously, like those of a wolf cub.

"Eh, you couldn't really handle big Jews," Hritsko said. "But we could surely lick some Jewish kids. Yesterday I beat the hell out of one and pulled out his whiskers, too..."

"Oh did you?"

"I did, by God."

"If only I could catch one, I'd wring his neck like I did to those sparrows!"

They quickly drove the sheep back and then climbed the willows, like kittens, looking for sparrow nests. Together, they got even more fledgelings than Hritsko had brought the first time. Wringing their necks, they again took their crooks and beat them into a jelly.

The sun climbed higher and higher. Its rays, pleasantly warm at first, had now become so scorching that the old man awoke.

"Too hot," he declared, shifting his coat into the shade of the willow. "All right, let's take some snuff and play some music. The boys are probably climbing those trees..."

He breathed the tobacco into his nostril.

"Very good!" he praised the snuff. He sneezed and reached into the bag for his flute. Wetting the mouthpiece with saliva, he blew it several times. Then he started "The Herdsboy." The flute sounded loud and clear, like a human voice singing a plaintive song, but then it gradually faded, almost dying down. Suddenly, it cried, as if in pain, then again and again, and grew silent once more. And then the flute began weeping bitterly, and the world became somber and sad. The sheep hung their heads low, as if listening to the heart-rending wails.

Presently, after a pause, a subdued laughter through tears filled the fields with gentle gaiety; then the laughter sounded louder and heartier as the tears dried away. Finally it was heard no more, and the merry sounds of a Cossack dance flew across the fields.

"It's the old man playing," Chipka said. "Let's go over to him."
"Come on."

And they broke into a run.

"It must be time, boys, to water the sheep," Ulas told them when he saw them.

Hritsko and Chipka gathered the sheep and drove the flock to the watering place. On their way there they got into bad trouble. As they crossed the meadow, a gray wolf appeared out of the blue. Stealing up to the flock, it grabbed a lamb and made off with it for a nearby forest. The sheep panicked and rushed aside, nearly swamping Hritsko. Baldhead raced after the wolf, and Chipka ran after the dog. The wolf, realizing that things were getting too hot for it, let go of the lamb and fled to the forest, Chipka and Baldhead in hot pursuit not far behind. Hearing Baldhead's barking, the old man hurried to help. But looking for a wolf in a forest was a hopeless undertaking. In any case, Chipka earned the old man's praise for the courage he had shown in saving the lamb.

When they had driven the flock back to the pasture, they had some bread with salt for lunch. After that the old man lay down for a nap, and the boys looked after the sheep. Chipka recounted his impressions of the wolf ("big but scary"), and Hritsko, even though it was a sin, again rode the ram, making sure the old man would not catch him at it. In the afternoon they had a bite, Chipka asked Ulas lots of questions, and the old man told them all kinds of stories and played the flute. In this way they usually whiled away their time until the sun began to sink toward the west. Then the old man would say, "Time to go home, boys."

Chipka and Hritsko would round up the flock and drive it to the village. In the common, the owners waited for them to take their sheep home. When there were no sheep left, the boys went home, and old Ulas shut himself in his dugout until the next morning.

V

The Revelation

Chipka really loved herding sheep for old Ulas. This was just the right kind of job for his age, and the work was not hard. Nor was it without benefits. For every summer the old man charged five copecks a sheep. Of these, Hritsko and Chipka received half a copeck each. Besides, they also got five sacks of

grain and two or three lambs apiece each year. There was nothing left to be desired. Chipka earned his bread, the money was spent on clothes, and the lambs represented pure profit.

"Thank Thee for taking pity on our misery!" Motrya praised the Lord. "Frankly, I gave up all hope of bringing my son to reason!"

"He's finally come to his senses," Orishka said. "He has understood himself that he must work. I, too, have eaten some of his bread, thank God!"

Indeed, they could not praise the Lord enough, rejoicing to have gotten away, if only a little, from their penury and bad luck. Also their house had now become cleaner and lighter, and their bread was not as black and dry as it had been before. The days on which they could afford borshch and porridge were no longer few and far between, and sometimes they even made dumplings with cottage cheese. Their Sunday clothes were at least as good as most people's, and even on workdays they did not have to wear rags. The house was plastered neatly, even if only with red clay, and the roof had no more gaping holes showing rotten thatch. Behind the house there were a cellar and a barn. They kept a pig with a suckling and about a dozen sheep. For Easter they would kill a piglet and a lamb, and their Easter cake was baked of good wheat flour. They had more of everything, and life was better in every way.

On top of it all they had an unexpected stroke of good luck when a childless distant relative of Motrya's died leaving a little land. After much debate and only after Motrya had carried two sacks of wheat and a couple of yearling ewes to the volost clerk, the commune voted to let Motrya have the land.

"Cheer up, Chipka," said overjoyed Motrya. "Now we can have our own rye and wheat and millet and barley and buckwheat. I am also going to choose a good place and plant potatoes for the winter! For Christmas we can feed a pig. We'll sell the fat, salt the meat and stuff some sausages... We'll have enough to eat! I don't care if our enemies keep on laughing and avoiding us!"

Motrya grew more cheerful and even seemed to have become younger.

Those happy, untroubled days did not lull Chipka to complacency, though. Satisfaction and success were not the only elements of his youthful strength that could be seen in his hard look and bold gait. Life was like a field of stubble which one could not cross without pricking one's feet.

The death of his grandmother was the first painful reminder of this. At the time Chipka had just turned fifteen. Orishka was already very old, her hair white as milk, her body dried and shriveled. She did not leave the house even in summer, except that on an exceptionally hot day she would hobble outside and sit

under the wall to bask in the sunshine, her blue hands on her knees. But in the fall she would constantly complain to her daughter:

"Somehow I feel really sick, Motrya... I'm in a very bad way! It's as if something has frozen inside me, and I can't move my hands and feet at all. I'm not even sure they're still there. Most likely, my death is not far away already..."

Thus she spoke one evening, and before daybreak she gave up the ghost.

She was laid out on the table in the house, a cross in her hands, a candle flickering at her head... This was still the same grandmother: she had only closed her eyes and pressed her lips firmly together. Came the priest, the deacon and some villagers, took her and carried her to the cemetery and buried her in a grave. Motrya wept, but not Chipka. He was frightened and mourned his grandmother. She was no more, he thought, she had died and she would never again be alive. The merciless death had taken Granny away from them. What was death? Did anybody know?

Before his vision arose a horrible apparition, a grim, cold monster... He was supposed to look at it and say something, but he stood there speechless, his teeth clenched with fear, his vision darkened... Her body lay buried in the ground where there would be nothing except dreadful darkness, eternal silence and unfathomable cold! There was a worm creeping along... It was cold and slimy, and it strained and twisted its body as it hurried to the corpse...

Presently, the worm reached the dead body and put its tiny red mouth to it... Then it bored a small hole and clung to it... Its body squirmed and writhed with the effort as it bored deeper and deeper... Another worm hurried along, then a third, a fourth... The corpse was now full of holes. There was a dull thud. That was a part of the corpse, weakened by countless holes, falling away. The worms writhed, lifting their tiny reddish tails...

Ouch, how frightful! Chipka shuddered. Why had there to be death? They said it was all God's will. Death through the will of God? Mute darkness, worms — was all that due to God? Oh, Lord, did it really have to be?... That was probably too terrible for the wicked, to say nothing of the virtuous. And Granny had been so good and kind for everybody. Why then did she have to suffer so horribly? Or maybe it was not the same for all? What was the truth? Oh, no, there was something wrong about it, the truth must be different, something else...

Chipka became obsessed with such thoughts... He looked grim and ghastly and had a strangely wild stare. He would shift his eyes to somebody's face but he would not see it. Also, he did not hear people calling him by name and sometimes acted as if he did not have his wits about him. He would jerk awake at night and start to dress...

"Chipka! What's the matter?" his mother would ask him in astonishment.

"What?"

"Where are you going?"

"Granny's calling me... I'm going to her..."

"Stop that, for God's sake! Granny is no more — she died."

"Then what's that?... Listen!" He would turn his ear toward one side, listening. "There it is! 'Chipka!... Chipka!...' Can't you hear?... Wait a minute, Granny, I'm coming!..."

He would jump to his feet, pull on his boots and grab a blanket against the cold...

"May God have mercy on you, where are you going?" Motrya crossed him and rushed to stop him.

Then she would beg him to stay home and undress him and pull off his boots... He would calm down a little and sink down on the bench.

"Lie down, son."

Chipka would stir and move a little but would remain sitting... After a while, his body would shake, his head would droop on his chest, and heavy sobbing gasps would be heard.

"Why are you crying, son?"

But he would say nothing, weeping on and on.

Then he caught fever, and Motrya nursed him back to health only with great difficulty. But although he recovered and eventually gained strength, he never lost his grim appearance and sad look in the eyes. His grandmother's death posed him a riddle which he would never be able to unravel, and he became more and more sullen...

* * *

Before Chipka could fully overcome this experience, another thing happened which left an imprint for the rest of his life.

He was seventeen. That year the centuries-old shackles of serfdom were shattered. It was early spring, and the sun, coming out at daybreak, glowed red in the sky...

"Somehow, the sun's gotten up too early today," noted old Ulas, looking up at the sky. "We're probably going to get some rain today."

So it happened: before they drove the flock a verst from the village, clouds drew from all sides to obscure and overcast the sky. Soon afterward, the skies began to weep... A fine drizzle set in. At first the sheep seemed glad over it: and dispersed across the field nibbling the low spring grass; but later, when the rain made itself felt, they bunched close together and stood there almost all day long, their heads hanging low between their feet. It would have been pointless driving them back anyway, for they

would not have known what to do with them in the village. And the rain fell on and on... The three shepherds got wet to the skin, but the rain just would not stop.

The three of them sat down under a willow to wait. Baldhead, too, curled up at their feet. All of them felt gloomy.

"Will you, too, be free now, Uncle Ulas?" asked Chipka to while away the time in conversation.

"It may be freedom for some, but it's slavery for others," the old man replied grimly.

"What d'you mean?"

"Never mind. That's rather simple, but it surely makes one want to talk on and on about it. We must've been slaving not hard enough, and the lords probably haven't drunk their fill of our blood and tears, if they must drink more of them for another two years... Oh, Lord, when is Thy just judgement coming at last?..."

"Isn't it all the same for you, Uncle Ulas?" Hritsko spoke. "You have been free for quite a long time anyway."

"Free?... Sure, I was free while there was no freedom around. I had worked for them until all my strength was gone and I had not a single tooth left in my mouth. Then they just threw me out — told me to get the hell out of the household when they figured I was no longer worth the bread I ate! Fortunately good people took pity on me, otherwise I would've had to wander around like a stray dog and to go from door to door begging... Now suddenly they've remembered me. Pay ten rubles a year, they say... For what? Where would I get the money?... Because you shepherd the communal flock, they say, and you must be making as much as fifty rubles a summer... But that's ridiculous! I'm a poor man, I live on charity... The good villagers have been kind to me... But no! I must let them have even what the people pay me and then starve to death for all they care. Oh, damn them all! There are no laws against them, no justice!" the old man concluded bitterly.

Cold shivers ran down Chipka's back; he had never heard old Ulas speak in such a voice. His thoughts blurred and whirled round, and blood rushed to his head. He remained silent, afraid of disturbing the old man's grief with words. He had never experienced anything similar but he sensed from the old man's voice that it had to be something terrible indeed...

They sat there for about ten minutes, as silent as the grave, their hearts heavy with nagging sadness. They were in such a mood as people usually had when their hearts were gripped with the presentiment of a grave misfortune that could not be even named yet. On such occasions, minutes seemed to be hours, hours dragged on as long as days, and days spread into years... A worm crept along faster than time in such moments... One would be impatient to have a glimpse of the future to see how it would end,

but one would be seized by fear that made one's hair stand on end and froze one's blood.

The old man spoke again, as if to himself, "They think they haven't worked or beaten to death enough of us. Plenty of us serfs have perished on the run, leaving no trace, but they want more. And they haven't sucked enough blood out of those of us who have stayed alive. Now they've fallen upon a beggar... Well, they aren't going to get much out of me. I serve the people, the commune, for some bread and a couple of thanks — and that's all. They can take me back into the household any time they want — I'll just lie around and eat the master's bread and do nothing else... Come on, take me! That's easy to say, of course... And what about the steppes and the sheep? I've gotten used to it all and it's now so dear to me... Now I'll have to leave it... May their strength leave them!... A sheep is like a human being to me: it also eats and drinks and gets sick... Only it can't say a word!... Don't I see, don't I know how this rain annoys them? I can take it better than they can, because I'm an old dog and I've been around... But look at that lamb. It's bent and shivering with cold... And I see it, sure... I would've warmed that lamb on my chest like it were my own child... But I won't do that! Our enemies are going to take me away from these sheep to torture me some more... Because they always want more, and more, and more..."

The old man could speak no more. Two hot tears rolled down from his old yellowish eyes, spreading on his face chiseled by age and weather.

Hritsko sat with his mouth agape, not knowing what to say.

Chipka did not take his eyes off old Ulas. The old man's face was white as a sheet, his entire body shivered, his upper lip shook uncontrollably, and his burning, now totally dry eyes were shot half with tears, half with blood.

"Who... who..." he shouted, stammering, "who can take old Ulas away from us?... No! No, we won't let them — not as long as we are alive!"

The old shepherd looked up — and his stare met Chipka's burning eyes.

"The lord will take me back, Chipka! He'll do it, too, son! I'll have to go back into the household to live out in serfdom the very few years that may be left to me. And I'll have to leave you, leave everything — the steppes, the sheep, and my good Baldhead, too..."

"He won't dare — oh no!" Chipka said threateningly. "Let him try! I'll fix a nice, big fire for him if he does!"

The old man became alarmed.

"Don't you say such things, son! Are you in your right senses and d'you believe in God at all? Try to think! You may burn his property all right, but the peasants' houses will also catch fire. Anyway, he'll build a new house in no time at all, and the poor

who only got roofs above their heads will lose everything they have. May God help you to come to your senses!"

Now their gloom deepened even more. The skies erupted into a downpour. They fidgeted uneasily, pulling their cloaks down to their eyes. Baldhead crawled closer to the old man, huddling next to his feet. Ulas shook his head wonderingly. "He's exactly like his father," he said aloud. "They're as similar as two peas."

"Who?" asked Hritsko.

"That one!" Ulas pointed to Chipka.

"Do you mean you knew my father?" Chipka asked grimly.

"Why not, if we were in the household together?"

"Was he also a serf?" Chipka asked in a surprised voice. "Wasn't he a soldier?"

"What if he was? Men aren't born soldiers, are they? I see no one has told you about him yet..."

"No."

"It figures. The people must still remember..."

"What do you mean?" Chipka pricked up his ears, his eyes riveted to the old man.

"Hm, I see!" Ulas got out a bast snuffbox and inhaled some tobacco.

"You tell me, Uncle Ulas," Chipka insisted.

"All right. If nobody's told you, then I will... It was so long ago," he began. "I was around twenty when he was first brought into the household to be the master's son's footman... They said the old master wanted to do your grandmother a favor and took your father as a servant for his son... He was puny, sickly and nasty like a thievish cat. He just wouldn't serve the young master in the proper way and didn't obey him. The young master once pinched him or pulled his hair... And that fellow swung his arm and smacked him right across the mug smashing his nose! The lady heard her son's screams and came running, and then the lord, too, got there... 'Take him to the stable!' he ordered. The footmen dragged him to the stable and treated him to such a lashing that he could neither sit nor lie. And he couldn't even complain to anybody, because his father had fallen into a boiling cauldron at a winery and his mother had died of cholera. Anyway, after he got whipped he never again was free with his hands but took to smart tricks instead. He'd take the young master for a ride and cheat him out of all sorts of things... until he got lashed for that, too. After that he tried to drown himself, but people didn't let him. Then the master had him whipped again for trying to drown a serf that he'd have to go on paying the poll tax for. Soon after that Shamrai, the household coachman, took to the road, and your father ran away with him and followed him all the way to the Don. He grew up down there, married and settled down. But the devil wanted that he'd learn about Khrushch, a free peasant's son who at about the same age had tramped to the Don to his

uncle and then died there... It was not so much this Khrushch as the homeland, though. Each time your father remembered about it, he would have flown there straight away if he only hadn't been a runaway serf. But then he heard about Khrushch. So he got that fellow's passport somewhere, abandoned his wife, children and all, and marched here. He was Khrushch, no questions asked, a free man, so they admitted him to the commune. Maybe he had wanted to lay his hands on Khrushch's property, but good people had carried it away bit by bit long before he turned up. Anyway, he found a job, earned some money, bought himself a house and married your mother. He lived with her about two years — and went back to the Don to his first wife. That's where he got caught! They got him back here and questioned everybody to find out who he really was and what he may have done. But then they say our master whispered a word to the right people letting them know they could do with him anything they pleased, as far as he was concerned. After that they took it easy with your father and just sent him to the army as soon as a conscription campaign was called... Now you see how he came to be a soldier. Now you'll know!"

Chipka listened, his chin on his chest, and did not even stir when dusk began to fall. Ulas and Hritsko gathered the flock without him.

"Hey, come on, time to go home!" the old man called to him from the road.

Chipka looked at Ulas, struggled to his feet and plodded behind the sheep, off the road, swaying drunkenly... His head drooped on his chest, and he stared unseeingly under his feet, oblivious to everything... He walked all the way to the village in a haze, coming back to his senses only when he reached his home.

"Was my father really like that, Mother?"

"Like what?"

He told her.

"That's true."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Would you have felt better if I had?"

He fell to thinking.

"I guess not..." he replied after a long pause and grew silent once more.

The room became gloomy as a cellar. Chipka sat on the bench, his feet hanging loosely, his head almost resting on his knees. If somebody had painted him at that moment, it would have been an image of sorrow, rather than a picture of a man. Looking at him and remembering the past, Motrya wept softly.

"No, that's not what Father should have done," Chipka said in a hollow drawl. "No, he did it wrong! Why didn't he kill them, burn them down?.."

"Kill whom, son?"

"The masters!" he said firmly.

"Don't you say such things. It's up to the Lord, not people, to punish them."

Chipka kept silent. Motrya crossed herself and again started crying. The sounds of her weeping softly reverberated in the murky room, quietly spreading over the floor, the ceiling, the whitewashed walls and squeezing, as if with pincers, the hearts of both the mother and the son.

He sat there gloomily, as silent as the grave. His father, like a black raven, hovered before his vision.

Poor, poor Father, he thought. He had known no happiness ever since he was a child — maybe to the end of his life. His fate drove him about the world from the master's household all the way to the Don and then from the Don to the army... Where was he now? What had happened to him? Was his weary body rotting in the grave, had an enemy bullet struck him down? Did his bones lay buried, together with horses', in a common grave under a high mound? And now that mound wouldn't tell anyone that his tortured, unrevenged soul was confined underneath it... Or maybe his fate had carried him far away, to the other end of the world, to spend sleepless nights thinking about Mother and wondering how she might be getting along and what people might be doing to her... "Oh, Lord my God! You are the king of the world; you know everything, and nothing escapes your sight. You alone look after earth and have power over it... Why then don't you punish the evil, so that they wouldn't torture the good? Why don't Thou strike the wrongdoer with Thy just wrath? But no — you're silent, mute like the dead night... You can't see our tears, and the sound of our sobs doesn't reach you... Our enemies stand between you and us. Will you never punish them?"

Chipka was completely exhausted. He lay on the bench like a log, groaning heavily. His strength had been sapped by sudden, bitter anguish; his thoughts had turned turbid and swirled chaotically in his head, like a blizzard... He was hardly aware of his thoughts and did not hear his own moans.

"Why are you groaning, son?" Motrya asked sadly.

He was silent.

"Are you sick?"

Silence.

"Are you asleep, son?"

Silence.

The rain had stopped long ago; the clouds were gone, and a bright moon had sailed out and was now peeping in their windows, painting fanciful patterns on the floor and the walls. Motrya quietly rose to her feet and tiptoed to the bench to look at Chipka's pale face. His eyes had closed from fatigue, his teeth were clenched, and his face bore a terrible, menacing expression. That horrible sight made her heart bleed.

"May the Mother of God guard you from all evils," she whispered. "Sleep, son, maybe you'll sleep it off."

Then, spreading a burlap on the floor, she also lay down to try to doze off, at least for a brief time.

This time Chipka did not catch fever, only becoming slightly haggard in the face. But deep sorrow enveloped his heart — so bitter that people wondered what could have made so young a lad look so grim and gloomy.

Somehow, Chipka stuck it out with the flock until the end of summer. In the fall they demanded that the old shepherd pay them. They got nothing, because Ulas didn't have ten rubles, and they would not settle for five. The old man was dragged to the lord's household like an ox to slaughter. This embittered Chipka still more, and he plunged even deeper in gloom. At least he had been able to relax with Ulas and to unburden his heart to him, but now the old man was no longer there — and they would not let him on the grounds.

VI

Learning the Truth

Winter came around. Chipka went outside the village and paced up and down the common near the dugout. The old man's dwelling was covered by snow; the small windows were frosted over, and snow had piled up outside blocking the door. Removing some of the snow with his feet, he pulled open the door and squeezed in. Inside it was empty and cold. Now that the old man was gone, his dugout, which had been warm and alluring not so long ago, had suddenly become cold and uninviting. This was what the strong could do to the helpless, he thought. This was what masters did to their serfs. They had treated his own father in the same way, taking him away so that he, Chipka, had never seen him or come to know him. And they had also disgraced his son, may they be cursed!

He turned back to the village. As he passed the tavern, he kept his eyes and ears open. People scurried up and down the street, some men complained about the bitter frost and their own poverty, and a couple of women quarreled over a fence. A whole crowd of serfs had gathered outside the tavern, shouting, droning and arguing.

Voices could be heard:

"They're just trying to cheat us! They're abusing us! Now they've come up with those two years — just trying to drag it out!"

"That's right," others were saying. "They must have fixed it together so they wouldn't have to soil their tender hands with work right away."

“To hell with them, hands and all!” somebody shouted. “They are used to having other people dirtying their hands for them.”

“That’s true... Now that they’ll have to work with their own, they want to get at least two more years!”

“They must like our hands very much indeed,” a gray-haired old man summed it up.

“You just wait!” one of the hotheads raised his voice. “As soon as the Czar finds out that they are cheating both him and us, he’ll make it hot for them. He’ll make them serfs in no time at all, and he’ll make us masters...”

“Not before we grow hair on our palms,” someone more sober dampened him.

“We won’t have to grow any hair,” the other man persisted. “The Czar will only have to tell us to be masters — and that’s all it’ll take!”

“Just imagine what we’ll do then!” the pessimist jeered.

“Of course, it’ll be nothing like now!”

“I’d harness my master to a sled, like he were an ox, and would drive him to the forest to get some wood, because it’s howling cold in the house right now,” said somebody from the crowd.

“The frost is terrible!” buzzed the crowd. “This winter it’s never been so cold...”

“Why don’t we go inside the tavern to warm ourselves?”

“Come on! Let’s go!” several voices were heard at the same time.

The crowd pressed toward the tavern door. Chipka went home, his head drooping, thinking over what he had just heard... Curses welled up in his throat, burning and tormenting him.

* * *

In the spring Chipka spoke with his mother:

“What am I to do? The old man is in serfdom... Shall I find somebody to shepherd the flock with?”

“Here’s my advice to you,” she said. “You just leave your sheep — you can’t tend them forever. Better get down to work the land. It’s about time we started working it ourselves. Maybe we’ll get together some money for oxen to grow our own grain. You’ll be your own master then. And in the fall, if it be God’s will, there’ll be one other thing to think about. I’ve already become old and weak — but who’s going to keep the house in order? Thank the Lord, you’re already old enough... Others at your age have children...”

But Chipka did not heed his mother’s advice. He dreamed about the freedom of the steppes. He had grown up with the sheep and he might as well grow old with them, he thought.

The next day he went to speak to the commune.

The commune rejected his offer. "You're still too young and unreliable. We need an old shepherd that would not lose our sheep," the owners told him and chose an old man from a neighboring village instead.

This was unfair and hurt Chipka very much. Hadn't he served them well? Had he lost a single sheep? Was there any justice at all if even the commune could be so unjust? It was the same everywhere...

He almost wept when he came home. Like it or not, he had to take to the plow now.

The work melted in Chipka's hands. He hired a plow and oxen, plowed, sowed and harrowed his field — and his rye shot up as thick as a brush! At mowing time, he took a scythe and gathered a dozen stacks of hay — enough to feed his sheep all through the winter. When harvest came around, he reaped his rye even on moonlit nights. Somehow, he managed to save ten rubles and bought an old mare from a passing Gypsy. Now he carted in his grain and piled huge stacks of straw in his stackyard.

The villagers wondered that Chipka was so good at farming. Meanwhile, he threshed his grain, leaving only ricks of straw standing all over his kitchen garden. Still, he had no cattle. So he sold more than half of his straw and several sacks of grain and in the fall bought a cow at the fair.

Was Motrya glad! She tended that cow as if it were a small child. Then a calf came along, too. Now they had their own milk, and cheese, and butter. What else could they desire? They had enough and to spare. Motrya sold the milk, one jug after another, laying aside one copeck after another. Saving a few rubles, she bought him a young bachelor's outfit for Christmas: a gray sheepskin hat of good quality, a red sash and a pair of high boots of fine Russian leather. She thanked God, seeing her son stand on his own feet.

Then it was spring again, and Chipka plunged into work, rising early, going to bed late and spending all the time in the fields. Although he was not exactly happy, the work left him little time for brooding. He set all his hopes on himself and his work. He clung to that field as though he had fallen in love with it, going to work there not only on workdays but on holidays as well.

"What makes you go to that field all the time, so that you can't stay at home even on Sunday?" Motrya asked. "Have you found something special there?"

"So I have," Chipka laughed. "There's a beautiful she-quail down there!"

"You'd better find yourself a wife that would help me around the house..."

Without a word, Chipka took his hat and went out.

It was Sunday. The weather was rather dismal. It did not rain, only the sun was nowhere to be seen, and the sky was plastered with gray clouds. The church bells rang. Chipka dressed and went to mass with his mother. They came back from church and ate their lunch. Chipka watered the mare and the cow. It was still early. Pacing up and down the yard, he felt bored. Should he go? Even if he did not see her, he could admire the fields.

He went — just like that. He crossed over the bridge and reached the meadow. Then he heard that voice again. His whole body trembled, and his heart throbbed heavily!

“You just wait... It’s going to be different now!” he whispered. “Now I’ll get you before you know what’s happened...” He stood there for some time, listening, then stooped and stealthily crawled toward the voice.

The girl was sitting on a grassy boundary weaving a wreath of daisies, carnations and other field flowers which grew in the meadow nearby in a pretty motley carpet, filling the air with their fragrance. She was facing away from Chipka as he crawled up to her from behind. Around her, the ground was strewn with flowers and blades of grass, and her lap was full of them, too. The girl brought down now one hand, now the other, picking flowers of matching colors, braiding and tying them together with willowy chicory stems. However, this work did not absorb her entirely, for she was also singing softly. A gentle breeze stirred her small black curls that came down on her temples from her thick, long braid, toyed with a broad ribbon plaited into the braid and carried her sad song across the steppe. Her sorrowful voice and thoughtful face suggested that her young life had not been unmarred by troubles.

“Hullo!” Chipka shouted almost into her ear, stealing up behind her back.

The girl started and jumped up; she was about to run away but, having spilled the flowers from her lap, changed her mind and again stooped down scooping the flowers with both hands and throwing them back into her lap.

“You aren’t going to run far this time,” Chipka told her.

“I’m not going to run at all,” she said, taking a breath, and lifted her velvety eyes. “Did you scare me, you...”

Her sparkling eyes and fresh, ringing voice made Chipka squirm. “She’s really good!... and nice and beautiful!” the thought flashed through his mind. He stood before her in silence, admiring her unusual beauty. She also kept silent, continuing to select flowers. Then he dared to sit down beside her.

“What is it going to be?” he asked, pointing to the unfinished wreath.

“Don’t you see? — a wreath!” she exclaimed.

They again lapsed into silence. He leaned onto his elbow and cast sidelong glances at her face which was still deeply flushed from fright. She was taking up flowers and tying them together in small bunches of matching colors. Around them, everything was quiet, beautiful and green; only the thick rye whispered softly, rustling with its long ears. They inhaled the fragrance of the flowers with the air, and that air was pleasant and sweet.

"Is this your field?" she asked after a while, without taking her eyes off the wreath. Her voice sounded somewhat frightened.

"Sure."

"The rye too?"

"Yes."

"And that land over by the forest?"

"That's also mine."

"I love that place most of all. There are such pretty flowers there."

Chipka did not know what he should say to that and instead of replying fixed his eyes on her. The conversation broke off. There was a lengthy pause. His eyes did not leave her face.

"Why are you looking at me?" she demanded, shooting a glance at him. "What's the idea of ogling me like you were going to eat me up?"

But Chipka did not remove his gaze. Just looking at her gave him pleasure.

"Stop staring at me!" she cried out, covering his eyes with her hand.

Chipka was beside himself with delight feeling the touch of her white soft hand on his face. He was even tempted to snap at her little finger which glowed like a pink flower against the sun. But she hastily took her hand away. He grinned, his eyes again on her.

"Don't do that or I'll turn away — do you hear?" Then she did turn her back to him. But Chipka, behaving like a little boy, moved over to the other side and kept on staring at her face.

"Oh, what a nasty harassing type! Don't look at me, I tell you!" And she started whipping him on the face and the head with the wreath.

"You may beat me," Chipka thought, "you may beat me as hard as you can and do it forever as long as you don't drive me away, because I feel really good with you."

She kept on thrashing him with the wreath, but he was just smiling. The wreath quickly fell apart and the flower heads broke away. She threw the headless stems into the grass and talked excitedly:

"Just look what you've done! D'you see? D'you see?" Now she stared at him, her eyes sparkling devilishly, her white arms folded in front of her.

The temptation now was too strong for him. Like a cat springing

at a mouse, he fell upon her hugging her firmly with his strong arms and smacking such a loud kiss on her cheek that it sounded like a slap.

"Let me go!" the girl screamed, resisting. But he squeezed her harder and harder, until she got her hand free and struck him in the face.

Then he released her.

"Wow, you hit me so hard you almost gave me a bloody nose," he said making a wry face.

"You ought to be ashamed of jumping me in this way," she complained. "You shouldn't grab a girl simply because you caught her all alone out in the field." But even as she spoke, her eyes sparkled merrily.

"Are you silly?"

"I'm not. And you've wet my whole cheek with your mouth — ugh!" She started rubbing her face with her sleeve.

"At least I didn't bite it," Chipka laughed.

"I almost wish you had. Then I would've scratched your eyes out."

"If I'd let you."

"We would've seen."

The conversation died down once more. She stared somewhere into the distance while he looked at her. A light wind blew and dispersed the hazy cloud which had covered the sun. Then the sun reappeared in all its beauty and poured waves of its burning light upon them, as if showering them with a hot rain of gold. The rye rustled, picking up its drooping ears.

The girl looked him in the face, met his eyes and, lowering her long, thick lashes, asked:

"Where have you been all this time? Why weren't you coming here?"

"I've been busy," Chipka lied, wondering why he had not met her here before.

"Busy with what?"

"Just working about the house."

"Have you got more land someplace else?"

"No."

"But you do have a house?"

"Yes."

"What about your parents? Any brothers or sisters?"

"There's just my mother."

"Where d'you live?"

"In Piski. And you?"

"Why d'you want to know?"

"Didn't you ask me?"

"You didn't have to answer."

"At least tell me your name."

"Never mind."

"Whose daughter are you?"

"My father's and my mother's."

"You're a strange girl."

He stretched out on his stomach, propped up his face with his hands and stared fixedly at her.

"Are you really going to eat me? Why are you goggling at me?"

"Because you look very nice."

She smiled, shifted her black eyes onto him and looked at him seducingly.

"You'd better go home now. Why have you come anyway — to devour me? I even ruined my wreath because of you."

"You didn't have to beat me with it."

"I did that because you pawed me, shameless creature. Get away!" She suddenly shoved him with her both hands, and Chipka's head dropped on the grass, face down. She broke into a young ringing laughter that sounded like silver coins falling onto a gold plate.

Before he could lift his head, he heard somebody calling, "Halya! Halya!"

The girl started and sprang to her feet. Chipka looked now at her, now in the direction where the voice came from.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. Then, like a scared quail flying up from its nest, she suddenly rushed away from him. Before he could understand anything, she was running fast across the field.

Chipka rose to his feet and straightened up, following her with his eyes. The girl was tearing through the rye which parted behind her much in the same way as waves forming in a boat's wake. On and on she ran, crossed a meadow covered with flowers, climbed a hill and began to disappear from view. Chipka hurried after her at a trot. Then he could see her no more. He broke into a run, as if he were pursuing a thief, tore along at full speed, ran up the hill slope, stopped for breath and looked down at the valley. Something there caught his eye. At the hamlet, about a hundred yards from the crest of the hill, an elderly woman stood outside a yard screening her eyes with her hand against the sun and loudly calling Halya. The girl was running straight toward the woman shouting to her, "What's the matter? Here I am! I'm coming — wait!" Presently she reached the woman and both of them went into the yard.

"Now I'll know whose daughter you are!" Chipka said aloud and walked back in excellent spirits.

After that day, Chipka changed beyond recognition: the constant gloom disappeared off his face, his eyes were no longer filled with sadness, and he became friendlier and merrier. Sometimes he could even be heard humming a song. Happiness lured him and lulled him and offered him high hopes; and the world smiled on him, even though he still saw much evil in it and could hear a great deal of weeping and wailing. Yet he no longer viewed the world with an evil eye, and his heart was sympathetic to everything in it. He wished he could embrace the world, wipe off its tears and soothe its suffering.

Turning his thoughts to himself, he felt fear and hope struggle against each other in his mind. Now it was the one, now the other — but hope was always there. Maybe... after all, anything was possible. Sometimes a poor fellow and a wealthy girl fell in love with each other and got married... But then fear would scare away hope. What if the old soldier was rearing his daughter for the court clerk? God forbid! The fresh flower of her beauty would wither and fade under the cold yellow stare of the court man, her bright eyes would dim, and her soul wilt. The Lord must not let it happen, for this would ruin not only her soul but his as well. But hope did not give up — happiness was like a fever. His eyes would shine with joy, and his heart would throb easier in his chest...

Since that day the fields seemed to have bewitched him. He went there at least once in every three or even two days. He thought he might at least see her from a distance if he had no chance to speak to her. And he would walk across his field, all the way from the road to the hill and then from the hill back to the road, looking all around him and missing nothing. Here he had seen her for the first time... there she was weaving her wreath... over there they had sat together... that way she had run away from him... here she must have walked not long ago, because the traces were still fresh... Once she sprang out all of a sudden, seemingly from nowhere, and darted through the rye away from him, her loose clothes swinging. Chipka realized she must have been on her guard.

"So she's run away," he said aloud. "She's over the hill already — too far. Well, that's some girl!"

He went back to Piski, glad to have seen her at least in this way.

VII

The Breadwinner

Now what about Hritsko?

Hritsko was no fool. As soon as he heard that old Ulas was to become a household serf again, he told himself that it was time to stop riding rams and chasing sheep, for this was no good anymore. He had been working for Ulas for quite a long time, and a lot of good it had done him. He had better look around for some other way to earn his bread. So he decided and left the old shepherd the same spring. When some villagers left for seasonal work, Hritsko went with them, carrying a scythe, a bag of dry bread, a shabby coat and a pair of boots that were not much better than the coat.

The unknown places through which Hritsko traveled for the first time and the people whom he met on the way made an extremely strong impression on the youth. He gaped at all of it open-mouthed.

"It's something unbelievable the way those people live! What houses they've built! And those doors... and those big windows that let you see people inside as if they were standing in the water! I wonder how much it all could cost. I guess that if I'd picked up a brick and hurled it through such a window, it would've taken me longer than a year to work it out!... What wealth, what luxury!" Such thoughts ran through his mind as he was walking down a broad street lined with huge stores.

The street was really impressive. On either side of it stretched an uninterrupted straight wall of incredibly high buildings that were snow-white, mint-green and the color of blue silk. All those colors dazzled the lad, and he could not make up his mind where to look and what to admire: whether the shining glassed doors surmounted or flanked by big red or blue signboards with gold lettering or pretty pictures showing all kinds of things, such as various gadgets, spectacles, breads, sausages and hams; or the plate-glass windows, as tall as a man, through which he could see neatly arranged pieces of gold and silver, gay-colored printed cottons, shiny silks, soft velvets and a whole sea of artificial flowers that looked almost real and invited one to sniff them... Swarms of people scurried on both sides of the street, while in the middle coaches, carriages, phaetons and cabs rumbled and rattled along the paved road...

Presently they passed a store selling children's toys.

"Uncle Ostap!" said Hritsko, turning to one of the men. "What's that?"

"Those are dolls."

"What are they for?"

"That's for the gentry to play with."

"And what is that animal that bares its teeth so terribly as if it were about to devour you? Just look at that red mouth. And those teeth, too! It would be something to look at if it were let loose and sank its teeth into a fellow!"

"You don't think it's a live beast, do you? It's made of something."

"No, it is not! It can't be — look how its eyes glisten."

"So what if they glisten? They've just fixed eyes of glass..."

"But it's so frightful! Why should anybody want to make such a terrible thing?" Hritsko insisted, gaping at the toy through the glass.

"To hell with it! Better let's move on, or we might get into trouble sticking here like this."

They went on, but Hritsko was unable to get the terrible toy off his mind. What animal could that be? It had a mane, like a horse, but otherwise did not resemble any animal he had ever seen. Surely, it must be a ferocious beast — probably even worse than a wolf! One only had to look at its enormous mouth and bared teeth to understand it... Could any man hunt down such a beast? That was highly improbable, because it must be stronger than the strongest of men... Would he be able to overcome it? Probably not. Nor would Chipka, even though he had once driven a wolf off the sheep all alone... Now, such an animal could hardly be scared away... Where did such beasts live anyway? Oh, Lord!

"Uncle Ostap!"

"What is it?"

"What was that animal?" Hritsko asked. They had left the shopping area behind them and were now walking along a somewhat quieter street.

"I used to know its name but now I've forgotten."

"Whose name?" a third man joined in.

"That animal's. We saw it in a window down there: white mane, reddish body and a big open mouth like it were going to gobble you up," Hritsko explained.

"Did it have a long tail with a brush at the end?"

"That's right."

"It was a lion."

"A lion?" Hritsko repeated with wonder. "Just what kind of animal is it, that lion?"

"It's just a big beast. The king of animals..."

"The king?! So that's what it is! Why, it surely looked like one. I bet whatever he says gets done in no time at all. How would anyone dare not to obey such an awful animal?"

"Sure," the man said. "That's why he's the king."

"I bet he's terribly big and strong too."

"That he is. He's stronger than any other beast."

"Then how do they go about catching them?" Hritsko asked.

"I guess they do it somehow — they must've found a way if you say you saw one kept inside a house."

"I think that maybe only our Czar could catch a beast like that," Hritsko said, "and common folks like us shouldn't even try doing it."

"Oh, come on!" Uncle Ostap broke in. "Why would the Czar do such a thing? He'd send out some fellows like you and tell them to bring him one."

"But such an animal could bite a fellow badly or even kill him."

"It wouldn't matter at all."

"What if they refused to hunt him?"

"They'd just have their heads cut off..."

"But how can anyone hunt a beast that's too terrible even to look at? The wolf is not nearly as bad — and he makes us pretty much afraid of him. Then what about such a horrible creature, God forbid?"

"The Czar just wouldn't care. He'd order you to hunt it and hunt it you would..."

"How come I've never heard of any lions being hunted around here?"

"That's just because none live here."

"Where do they live then?"

"Somewhere beyond the sea."

"Is there land beyond the sea, too?"

"God knows. There must be if that's where this animal comes from..."

"Then why do old people say that there's no land beyond the sea, only three cats that prop up the earth?"

"Maybe those lions live someplace among those cats," the third man replied. The conversation died.

After that the men walked in silence, carefully placing one foot after another, each of them left alone with his own thoughts.

Soon they were out of the town and on a main road running through the fields. Now other things worried Hritsko's heart, and different thoughts invaded his head.

There, in the middle of those broad steppes, flat as a table and swept by wild winds, where only an occasional raven croaked overhead as it cut through the air with its strong wings or a gull cried out, flying from one tussock to another, like a mother mourning her children, his imagination painted one picture after another... Before his eyes arose images of town life, noisy hectic and bustling. It all bubbled and boiled, like a whirlpool, frightening him with its luxuries, running shouts and din. Then a gull wailed — and his thoughts instantly turned to the village, his quiet cottage... and his wife and children. He could see them very well now. His wife was a little dainty woman and she was very orderly about her housekeeping and other chores. Work melted

in her hands, and everything got done swiftly and smoothly... He would watch her work and wish she did not do so much... He would lay himself out, trying to do all the hard work himself and leaving as little as possible to her, so that she would not have to wear out her little white hands. Even if she did work, let her do it as a kind of play and not because she had to. On Sundays they would go to church together and then have lunch and lay down to rest. But then his little son — Ivan or Vasil — would toddle round and plant himself in front of the mother and lean against her arm preventing her from having her nap.

“Go to play, Ivan, and let Father sleep,” she would tell him.

“Slee-eep,” the child would babble.

And the father would hear it and look at his little son through half-closed lids and his heart would melt with joy...

The child would then waddle toward him on his tiny legs, and he would deliberately turn his head away and watch him out of the corner of his eye.

“Just look what you’ve done,” his wife would speak. “You’ve woken up Father — and you haven’t let him have his nap...”

“Wo-kin... nap,” the boy would murmur.

“Now he’s going to take a rod and show you: swish-swish!”

The boy would stand there, staring now at his father, now at his mother.

“Swish-swish!” he would repeat, waving his tiny hand at his father’s face.

“Hey you, little rogue!” his father would exclaim. “Why are you beating your father? Just wait: now I’ll throw you far away.” He would spring up, grab the boy and rock him. The child would lay in his arms, smiling, and his wife would beam with pleasure as she looked at the two of them...

“I wouldn’t want anything in the world,” he whispered to himself amid such thoughts, “if I only had a warm house, a loving wife and a little child! Then I’d have all I need. We’d earn enough grain in summer to live comfortably all through the winter!”

Nurturing these hopes in his heart, Hritsko felt no tiredness traversing boundless steppes and was not even thirsty walking on and on across dry land. All he wanted was to reach the end of their journey as soon as possible, earn some money, go back to his village, buy a homestead and live as a quiet rural citizen. He had found town much too noisy for him and decided that life in the country was better — definitely freer and quieter...

Hritsko did not leave his fellow villagers when they reached the place. Their whole party got hired to mow hay and later wheat.

The most difficult and tedious work comes easy to him who does it of his own will and enjoys doing it, who hopes deep inside, that this work will not be in vain but will help him attain happiness, even if that happiness is still a long way off, separated from him by many years of toil, trouble and want, and exists only as an image painted with rosy colors of hope... Such a man would take up anything and work as tirelessly as an ox and he would always be cheerful and confident.

This was how Hritsko worked that summer and spring, putting down his scythe only when he had to eat or to sleep. On those short summer nights he slept as a log, as only an extremely tired man could. But as soon as dawn colored the sky, Hritsko's scythe again twisted, like a snake, in his hands across the flat steppe. The employer noted his good work, praised him and raised his pay a little.

"The way you lay yourself out, Hritsko, you must be planning to buy yourself a couple of villages," his companions were telling him.

"What if I am?" Hritsko would say, grinning. "There's nothing to gape at, really. Just grab a scythe and go on and on!"

"You'd better go easy or your pants might snap," someone would tease him.

"Never fear, I'm not like you!" Hritsko would retort and put his scythe back to work.

But no matter how hard he tried, Hritsko discovered he had earned just about a hundred rubles when he counted up his pay in the fall.

He could have done worse, he decided. Now he at least had some money. But what could he do with a hundred? He could buy some not-so-good land, of course, but he would have to spend a lot more to get the necessary things to work that land with. No, that was still far from enough. Should he stay to work over the winter?

He did stay after all. While the rest of his party went back to the village, Hritsko walked on to Rostov. On the road he came across a bunch of fellows like him.

"Where are you going?" they asked him.

"Down to Rostov."

"Don't do that, better let's go all the way to Kherson," one of the men advised him.

"Why?"

"The pay is low, and on ships in Kherson a fellow can make good money."

"But that's farther on."

"It's just half a week's walking more. That's no difference! Come on!"

"All right, let's go," he agreed, after thinking the matter over. And he went with them.

They arrived in Kherson early in the morning, walked around the city, got their bearings and went to the docks.

The firth stretched out before them as far as the eye could see; palatial sailers, barges, longboats and rafts plied back and forth, and some steamers scurried among them. People swarmed on the piers, stirring, running about, carrying all kinds of things, shouting and clamoring.

"Unloading boards at fifty copecks per hundred!" a man shouted from a raft. The dock laborers ran to him.

"Sixty copecks!" — this from another raft. The human wave rushed there, receding from the first raft.

"A ruble a day!" a voice came from a ship.

"A ruble and a quarter!... One and a half!"

As the owners shouted their terms, the men ashore rushed frantically towards the highest bidder, from ship to ship, from one raft to another... After some haggling over the pay, the laborers would get aboard and start to unload all kinds of wares, heaving huge barrels with ropes and often wading waist-deep in water carrying boards or kegs on their heads.

Hritsko, too, found a job on a raft. That day he earned almost three rubles.

Well, he thought, a month of such work would almost make him a rich man.

But it was not that simple. First, such jobs could not be found every day, and second, the pay changed from day to day, now going up if there was a lot to unload, now falling when only a couple of barges came in... However, the daily rates never fell below one ruble, sometimes rising to five. In any case, that was much better than haymaking!

Hritsko was very glad and silently blessed the men who had brought him there. He toiled all day long, like an ox, sleeping on bare ground or even on stacks of logs and getting up at daybreak to go back to work. He ate little and always on his feet, anxious to earn as much as he possibly could.

Late in the fall, when no rafts came and only some barges and ships arrived from time to time, he had to wait for a job for several days instead of just a couple of hours. Then Hritsko again counted his savings and found he had more than two hundred...

He was as happy as a little child. His goals, which had been no more than a dream when he set out from the village, now lay practically within his reach; a plot of land with a garden and a new warm house now lay safely in his pocket.

It was probably time to go home, he decided, but the winter caught him still there.

"Are there any jobs here in winter?" he asked some local men he knew.

"There's just cutting rushes," they told him. So he got hired to cut rushes.

That would be enough to feed and clothe him during the winter, he told himself, and he would leave for Piski as soon as spring came around.

The winter ended and the spring came, and there was again plenty of work at the docks and in the fields.

Hritsko abandoned his idea of leaving for home in the spring. He made up his mind to wait till the fall. Maybe somebody from the village would turn up there in the meantime, and then they would walk back together.

Indeed, some men from Piski did come to Kherson that spring. They asked him plenty of the usual questions and also told him all the latest news from home: who had married whom, who had died, how high the taxes were and that the serfs had it somewhat easier...

"Chipka is getting along real fine," one of the men informed him.

"Has he married yet?"

"No, and he'll be a fool if he doesn't... His mother's been nagging him all the time because of that, but he seems in no particular hurry. He says he hasn't found himself a girl yet."

Hritsko was pleased to hear that.

"We used to tend sheep together," he said. "He's a fine fellow, only a little strange. Do you say he's been doing well? That's good!"

Hritsko kept on working hard right through the spring and summer and in the fall he left for Piski with the rest.

* * *

He started looking around for a plot as soon as he came back. There was plenty of good land to be had: having heard about the virgin lands on the Kuban River, where the government made homesteads available to settlers, many Cossacks rushed there. Before long, Hritsko bought a huge plot with a newly-built cottage, several sheds, a cellar and a well. For all that he had to pay just about a hundred and fifty.

Now that he owned land, Hritsko immediately felt a different man. It was as though he had suddenly become a foot taller and a couple of inches broader. Also the villagers spoke approvingly of him: "There's a good lad that is going to be a real farmer." Fathers and mothers, especially the poorer ones, talked of him endlessly, regarding him as a highly satisfactory match for their daughters. But now Hritsko viewed people with different eyes, clinging to the wealthy and looking down on the poor.

The village lads he treated rather condescendingly. Whenever he met them on the street or at a night gathering, he tried to

impress them, giving them to understand they had not traveled anywhere, had seen little of the world and therefore knew little or nothing. Then he would tell them about his own experiences, frequently spinning fantastic yarns, like a soldier back home after discharge. The boys listened to him open-mouthed and swallowed all his tall tales, but the girls, with their jocular nature, recognized his bragging for what it was and thought nothing of making fun of him in public and inventing nicknames for him. Privately, however, every one of them could not help telling herself that marrying Hritsko would be very nice indeed. The fellow had a house, some land and, supposedly, money as well. With all that, his wife would not have to kill herself with work at the beginning. Oh, yes, that would be wonderful!

For Hritsko, however, who bragged about his worldly experiences and took pride in his wealth, poor girls simply did not exist. Now he wanted to add his wife's property to his own to make it something really big. Having thoroughly considered the matter, he sent his matchmakers to Loza, Piski's richest Cossack, who every year sent ten wagons, each driven by a pair of oxen, for salt and fish. But Loza was no different than Hritsko. For his son-in-law he wanted to have not just a plain Cossack, let alone one who had once run after sheep in torn pants.

"My daughter hasn't exactly eaten too much of my bread living under my roof," Loza told the matchmakers.

This somewhat cut Hritsko down to size. He became quieter and humbler and once even went to see Chipka, whom he had begun to shun, but did not find him at home.

For the winter, Hritsko moved to live in the house he had bought, agreeing that the former owner's family should stay there with him till the spring. Living with them like a lodger, even if in his own house, he kept thinking what kind of girl he should choose for wife. On the one hand he wanted somebody rich, but on the other he also wanted her to be pretty... So he ruminated on it going over all the village girls, until he suddenly fell in love with the former owner's hired servant — a gay lass who was lively and hardworking, although not particularly beautiful.

Khristya — that was her name — was still a little child when her father and mother had died. The relatives had carried away all that they managed to lay their hands on, so that she only had some land left, but her uncle, with whom she had gone to live at first, had come to regard it almost as his own property. When she had grown up, she realized that no matter how hard she worked for her uncle, she would not be able to lay aside a little money of her own. Therefore she left him and went to work as a house servant. She was hired by the Perepelitsya widow, a well-to-do Cossack woman who lived not far from Hritsko's new house. There Khristya lived as she would in her own home. The widow was an elderly woman, kind and sympathetic. Hers was a large

family, for with her lived her widowed daughters with their little children who needed to be fed and properly taken care of. Khristya was young, merry and friendly. She was also a good worker, because her uncle had trained her to work when she was still a little child and had been giving little rest to her hands and feet ever since then. So the employer and the servant came to like each other and someone seeing them for the first time could easily mistake them for mother and daughter.

Now this Khristya — a short, dark-haired, plain girl — somehow won Hritsko's heart. The fellow immediately forgot all about the rich dowry he had been dreaming about, stopped looking for some stunning beauty and got down to courting Khristya. Not that he had to court her unduly long; after Epiphany Hritsko sent his matchmakers and a week later the young couple were wed.

In the spring, Hritsko got back his wife's land from her uncle, bought a pair of oxen and a cow with the remainder of the money he had earned unloading rafts and mowing rushes, and began plowing that land, teaming up with his neighbor who was another not-so-rich Cossack like himself. Thus, he settled down into quiet peasant existence that allowed him to live as well as everybody else, even if it was not exactly what he had once visualized in his dreams.

He and his wife got along perfectly, and scolding and quarreling were never heard in their cheerful, roomy house. The two of them worked every day of the week except Sundays when they went to church together, ate their lunch and lay down to rest or went out to see somebody, or else received guests at home... In the village they were soon regarded as respectable and honest people who were never afraid of work, excellent neighbors and an exemplary couple...

"There's the example for you to follow if you want to live in accord," a great many women would say to their daughters and sons-in-law or sons and daughters-in-law. "Take Hritsko and Khristya... Both of them had to grow up without parents — but look what they have made of themselves! With nothing but honest work they've put together quite a bit of wealth. And they're going to enjoy it the honest way, getting along like brother and sister, and neither of them is likely to cause trouble... That's because they think as one and act as one... And this is how everybody should try to live in this world!"

Part Two

VIII

The Cossack

Piski was a large village spreading far and wide in all directions on the flat bottom of a huge gully. Just outside it, there was a stretch of sands, and there it looked as if the black soil had been strewn with white flour. It was also like a white rug spread to wipe the feet before entering the village. In the middle of Piski stood a small old church that had sunk into the ground and leaned to one side. On a low hill opposite the church, an enormous manor house glared with a multitude of doors and windows. It, too, looked old and neglected. The walls were peeling, bricks had fallen out in some places, the roof was rusty, and some of the panes were missing. Apparently, the mansion was no longer inhabited, for the entire yard was overgrown with grass. Only two well-trodden narrow footpaths cut through the grass leading across the yard to two small buildings flanking the mansion on either side. Everything was sagging and crumbling. This was what Piski looked like shortly before the serfs were freed.

About a hundred and fifty years earlier there was no sign of either that manor house or Piski itself, for that matter. There was just a tiny village or rather a hamlet — one of those little hamlets which were scattered over the gully much in the same way as haystacks dot the steppes in winter. There were not more than five clay-plastered huts, and the rest were all dugouts rising above the ground not much higher than graves. Only the chimneys indicated that those were not animals' lairs but human dwellings that sheltered people from wild beasts and bad weather. Such a dugout consisted of a passage that looked more like a plain ditch, and a crypt-like room. Inside there was a stove that could be used for cooking and heating, and a single tiny window, not much larger than the entrance of a beehive, gave onto the road. Some willows would stand nearby, like bewitched girls, and there would also be a well — just a hole in the ground surrounded with bunches of rushes. There was no fence. Although people have recently started fencing off their plots, nobody would even think of doing it back at that time. Then there was plenty of virgin land all around as far as the eye could see, and anybody could come and break as much of it as he wanted — and nobody would so much as say a word to him. Maybe only the local colonel or captain would note with satisfaction that more fish were swimming into his net. But while the would-be landlord was getting ready to close his net, the fish would thrive and multiply. Lively villages, hamlets and settlements, as pretty as flower beds, sprang

up amid the desert steppes; here and there a church shone already with its whitewashed walls in the middle of a village, its gilded cross glittering in the sun and visible for miles around....

In this way many villages and hamlets around Hetmanske came into being. Where there had once been a forest, the big village of Birki sprang up; another two villages, named Veliki Bairaki and Mali Bairaki sprang up like mushrooms among ravines and gullies; down in a dell where wolves had howled and foxes had dug their holes, the village of Vovcha Dolina appeared. Piski was also founded at about the same time.

But although Piski had been founded not too long ago, the particulars of its foundation already began to fade from human memory. Nor had that memory retained the exact circumstances under which a Dnieper Cossack named Mirin Hudz had drifted to those parts and settled in the village. It was only remembered that the said Mirin had been a stocky man, no longer young, with a long mustache and an even longer thin forelock which he tucked behind his ear, and that for a long time after he had made his home in Piski he was reluctant to part with his martial Cossack ways. "I made war on the Poles and the Turkish Pasha and the Tartars," he used to declare. "Now I'm going to fight the beasts." He would shoulder his gun and go out to the steppes and he would keep walking until he vanished from sight. He would be gone for a couple of days, sometimes three. But then he would be back carrying five or six wolves' skins.

Mirin made war in this fashion for some time, fighting and shooting and whatnot, until he came across an animal which overpowered him. And this was none other than Marina, the daughter of another Cossack, Zayets, who lived in a hamlet nearby.

Once he was returning home from a hunt. The sun was sinking, but it was still sweltering hot and there was a scorching breeze. "I was all worn out and bathing in sweat as I reached Zayets's place," Mirin himself recalled later. "And I was so thirsty it seemed I was burning inside. Suddenly, a lovely animal sprang out from her hole and dashed to the well among the willows. She carried a pail, too, and my blood boiled when I saw it. I hurried there to drink some good cool water... The girl leaned over the well drawing water and was singing softly. Her singing sounded so sweet that it went right to my heart... So I went to her and said: 'Let me drink some of your water, good girl.' She looked at me most kindly — and stopped singing... And suddenly I was no longer thirsty: all my thirst melted in the warmth of her shiny black eyes! She gave me her pail and I put my face down to it... 'That's some water,' I said, 'all dirty and muddy.' But I was about to drink it anyway. Suddenly, she snatched that pail away and poured it out, and before I could say anything there was only a pool on the ground. 'You just wait,' she chirped, 'I'll get you another.' She dashed back to the well and filled it up again,

and this time the water was cool and as pure as dew... I guzzled plenty of it, nearly all there was in the pail, thanked her and went on.... Then I got home... My goodness! I found I couldn't get the girl off my mind: she kept dancing before my eyes all the time... Just what kind of devilry could that be, I wondered? It must've been some mighty strange water after all. Next day it was no different. Another day passed — and I still couldn't forget her. I'd go out to hunt — and there, too, I'd imagine seeing her in the bushes. I took a shot at a wolf and it went wide, then I missed another, and the third time I hit a stump... Ouch! I was certainly not all there...

“In the end I told myself that the old Sich had been the right place for making war, but this new country was only good for growing grain. So I waited until Sunday and went to talk to Zayets at his hamlet. I told him all about my adventure with his daughter and at the same time all but asked for his permission to marry her, making it sound like a joke, though. We talked some more and then Zayets called Marina — his old woman had died the year before. ‘I've got news for you,’ he told her. ‘Mirin here is asking to marry you. Will you marry him?’ She was pretty young and shy, so she just said: ‘I don't know.’ ‘Who knows then?’ her father asked her. But she wouldn't say anything. So Zayets and I had a couple of good drinks and shook hands on it. He gave us his blessing, and next Sunday we went to the priest and he wed us...”

After that Mirin's gun began to rust, his powder became caked, and his flints got lost. Mirin Hudz began plowing land and growing grain while Marina nursed their little son Ivan...

* * *

Ivan nurtured his young strength amid the wide expanse of free steppes. From early childhood he felt his father's Cossack blood in his veins. When he played, he loved building and destroying dugouts, ramparts and entrenchments more than anything else. Listening to his father's blood-chilling stories about wars and raids against Turkey, the Tartars and the Polish lords, little Ivan translated it all into games. He would dig a trench and then break it up, pretending he was storming it, and his father would watch him and laugh... Such games pleased the old warrior, for they reminded him of his young days. He often encouraged Ivan: “Come on, son! You must learn this thing while you're young — it may come in handy later on!”

On the other hand, Marina did not relish such games at all. Ivan was her only child. She was terrified and haunted by the visions of her dear little boy growing up and getting involved in some campaign against the Turks or the Tartars that would take

him to the end of the world, after which she might never see him again. In a bloody battle somewhere in a foreign land, his young life would be snuffed out, and she would not even be there to close his eyes; they would be pecked out by rooks and ferocious eagles, and his sun-yellowed bones would then be carried to all sides by hungry wolves... Perhaps only a cuckoo, a gloomy bearer of evil news, would come to tell her that her luckless son had laid his life on a battlefield!... Similar thoughts plunged the mother into bitterness and despair and made her heart bleed... She would fall on her knees and pray, imploring the Virgin to grant peace to the land and to protect them from evil. Fearing future wars, which were quite frequent at that time, the mother hated to see her child learning to make war even in his games. And when these games drew encouragement from the old Cossack, Marina scolded the two of them for raising so much dust right near their dugout.

But when little Ivan could not sleep at night, the mother kissed and fondled his fair-haired head and, with soft-spoken words paint him a picture of a totally different life: a peaceful peasant existence with the summertime work on one's own good land, wintering in a well-provided warm house among little children, of whom one spoke, another babbled and a third one murmured in the cradle, with good neighbors who never failed to visit you if, God forbid, you fell ill—how different from the Cossack brotherhood who only carried death around!

This seemed to convince him. On the following day, he would not build or storm any entrenchments. Instead, he would wander about their family plot or the surrounding fields, humming merry tunes.

Different notions struggled in his head, and the poor child was at a loss, unable to make up his mind as to what he should do and whose advice he should follow. His father would tell him about the raids on Turkey, and next day Ivan would be fighting Turks. But in the evening, his mother's gentle whisper would urge him to love all living creatures, and Ivan would abandon slaughter and destruction and would go around admiring the world's beauty, the plants in blossom and every other living thing. Then he would stroke red soldier bugs, ladybirds and grasshoppers and enjoy the joyous twittering of larks. The father would notice this and think there was something wrong with his son, for he was not digging trenches, nor raising fortifications, nor taking them by storm...

"Why aren't you attacking your trenches, Ivan?" Mirin would ask.

"I just don't want to."

"Why?"

"Mother tells me not to do it."

"Why?"

"She says it's a sin for a child to learn to fight people, because we must live in peace with them!"

"That's just not true... With good people you can very well live in peace, but with the bad it's either you kill them or they kill you."

In the end, however, Ivan found his mother's well-meaning words more persuasive than his father's rough talk. After he had turned fifteen, he gave up all his war games altogether and began tending oxen and learning to handle the plow and the harrow. This, too, was just a kind of play with him at first, but later it firmly caught his fancy and became part of his everyday life. Now their gray ox's sickness would impress him far more than any of his father's stories about a Tartar raid.

The mother was delighted. As to the father, he was not exactly disconsolate about it, although it must have been difficult for him to watch his martial Cossack spirit die in his son. All around, the old Cossack knighthood was already dissolving. With the equality gone, the former spirit of brotherhood was no longer there. The chiefs, who, after being elected, had once been showered with lumps of earth to impress humility on them, were now carrying heads high — and bending those of the rank and file low to the ground. Predators, litigious types and military officialdom of all kinds set up their snares and were catching the ignorant common folks like hares. There was not even a hetman anymore — and who needed one anyway? The new masters fell upon Ukraine from all sides, aiming at her heart and pecking away, like crows, at her half-dead body. The Cossacks lost heart — but it was already too late! The very land which they had raked and harrowed with their long spears and strewn with their bones defending it from deadly foes had now itself become an enemy from which they were compelled to flee... A great turmoil began and plenty of people got on the road. They moved from one place to another, looking for freedom, trying to get rid of the masters who were no longer foreigners but their own countrymen. Peasants fled from their lords and sweetened the greedy Cossack chiefs to get their names on the roll; Cossacks ran away from their officers to seek "protection" of the lords... Actually, the landed lord and the Cossack chief were like two brothers. Dog does not eat dog. Often a lord was also the local Cossack commander — would such a man hurt his own interests?

The peasants of Piski were still free, though. Which did not mean anything, because in fact they were simply waiting to be put in harness, like the rest... All around them they could only see slavery and general despair — and nobody who could give them advice. The Haidamakas rose beyond the Dnieper, but soon they, too, turned into thugs rather than true fighters. The Cossack brotherhood dispersed, and it was now every man for himself. Some died, others crossed into the Turkish territories, and the rest

went to work the land in Ukraine. Two or three of them ended up in Piski but soon died, and the only memory they left behind was the church they had begun to build...

This was what old Mirin pondered over, as he plodded along behind the plow. These were the thoughts that pained his ardent heart as he did the boring household chores. Now he was left all alone. Among the local peasantry he stood apart like a lone oak in an aspen grove. There was just no one else like him. Even his own son scorned his father's spirit! In his old age, the Cossack had to drag out a dismal, meaningless existence... Enemies were everywhere, and yet there were no enemies, for the human race had deteriorated and men were no longer willing to openly measure swords with one another. Deadly quiet it was, everywhere. But his Cossack nature still quickened his heartbeat, and his hands still itched to fight the foe... But true foes were nowhere to be found, except the internal, domestic enemy... He felt hollow and sad.

"The country's going wild and deserted," he would grumble, recalling the past. "With so much mud all around, it'll soon start to rot, too.

"Just look at the way things have turned! Is that life? Dragging their own folks into slavery! The chiefs have ruined the brotherhood — grabbed all the lands, too. Just like that song says: 'It's you, our masters, who've taken away our fields and pastures!' Now they have them worked with the poor folks' hands... That's not the way things used to be in our Sich — in our Cossack country! We were all equal, all free... Today you may be my chief, but I might command you tomorrow! There was plenty of land for all, too. Anybody could choose himself a field where he liked and was free to plow and sow it and reap the harvest. That was freedom! And now? What have we got now? Just tell me where all this is going to get us! That's no good, and I don't like it — and I guess I never will!" he added with finality and grew silent.

The people listened gloomily, some scratching the backs of their heads.

Recovering his breath, Mirin soon started again:

"We fought the Polish lords and rose against them as one man. Did we do it just to be beaten by our own chiefs and turned into slaves? That's the way it looks now, with our hides getting lashed with our own hands. Well, wear your precious hides till they skin you alive. Why is it so? That's because everybody looks out just for himself. My brother's troubles are none of my business! If there's no unity, then freedom goes to the devil, too. But what if we all together grabbed our scythes to cut down the nettle? Just like that! Why are you gaping at me? Go get your scythes, I tell you. Do it before it's too late!"

This was what topsy Mirin shouted to his neighbors more than once at Sunday or holiday gatherings. The villagers listened and

tried to figure it all out for themselves. Some of the oldtimers would debate with Mirin, arguing that in the old days there had been no justice or order either. There had been just turmoil, trouble and lawlessness, they would say.

"Did those Poles and Tartars ever abuse us!" they shouted. "Just remember how we had to suffer because of the Turks and Muscovites! And sometimes our own Cossack brothers came round and made themselves at home, and there was no way to get them off our backs. That was the ruin of us!"

"And what do we have now?" Mirin would shout back.

"So what about now? Now, at least, it's quiet, thank God. We can grow grain and raise cattle and we've got protection. We live like decent people!"

"You call it life!" Mirin roared. "You don't live — you wither and rot! But wait just a little. You'll get the same as those folks in Vedmedivka. You'll get whipped like the people of Podilyal. Then you'll find out what kind of life it is. You'll see... Anybody can see right now which way the wind blows..."

"That's just talk — and it may turn out either way!"

"Fools, blockheads, ninnies!" Mirin would shout in the end and say no more.

Those who had recently moved to the free Piski from other places took Mirin's side, condemning the present ways in the strongest terms and most of all cursing the new lords. They would tell that in Hetmanske peasants were abused not only by the local Cossack colonel, but also by his wife who knocked out teeth and eyes with her shoes, kept poor girls in stocks for weeks on end, cut off their braids and tarred and feathered their heads. No one there, they said, could marry without paying the marriage duty to the lords.

"Uncle Mirin talks sense," one of them would say through clenched teeth. "That nettle ought to be scythed — but who'd do it."

Mirin would sit there, his brows knitted, his wrinkled face flaming red. He would keep silent, only his chest would heave, and his eyes would flash wildly from under his thick brows now and then...

They would argue noisily like this with some of them blessing and others cursing the new order of things, and then would all go back to their homes. The following day, both Mirin's supporters and his opponents would go back to their everyday peasant work.

"Who wants us?" some would say. "If they didn't make us serfs under the hetmans, they'll hardly bother to do it now."

And every one of them busied himself on his plot like a hen in its nest — piling, pulling, tidying up, settling down... Piski grew bigger and richer... Every now and then, another man, attracted by the freedom of the steppes, would come round from

the New Sich* in the Turkish territory (for that was a strange land with a pagan faith) or else from across the Dnieper where the Poles ruled. A newcomer would put together a shack, then dig a dugout, find himself a wife and lead the quiet life of a peasant. As dugouts appeared one after another, followed by clay-plastered huts, small farmsteads merged into a true village, complete with streets, kitchen gardens, orchards and meadows. Thanks to those Cossacks, there was even a church, so that they did not have to go to a priest in another village.

* * *

Mirin's son Ivan was over twenty already — old enough to marry. Yet his father would not hear of a daughter-in-law. "He's too young yet," he would say. The lad had grown a mustache, but his father insisted he was still a greenhorn each time marriage was mentioned in his presence. It was as if the old man was waiting for something. It was only after he had learned that Ochakiv had been destroyed that he spoke to Marina (he was shy of bringing up the subject with his son):

"There's nothing left to wait for... That's the end! It's not just time — it's the peasant laziness that has killed everything... We won't be Cossacks again — neither us, nor our children... Nobody needs us anymore! The Cossack realm is gone, and the peasant life has begun. It's time our son, too, got on his own feet. Now he must find a wife and make his own nest."

The mother, however, had long had the right kind of girl in mind. Kabanets, a wealthy Cossack, had a daughter called Motrya — an only child. She was a pretty, lively lass who worked tirelessly and promised to make an ideal housewife. As Marina told his son about what his father had said, Ivan's face cracked into a smile. Then she suggested Motrya to him. But for some time his heartbeat had quickened each time he met the girl.

Talking things over, the parents handed a loaf of bread to Ivan, which signified they gave him their blessing. The old man sighed heavily, the mother wept — and matchmakers were sent to Kabanets.

Kabanets knew old Mirin well enough. He also knew Marina and her family. Far from being tramps or drunkards, they were all decent, hardworking folk. What else could one desire?

"It's all up to you," he told Motrya.

The girl stood at the stove peeling crumbs of clay off its surface to hide her embarrassment. Her cheeks flamed, and her eyes sparkled, making her look even prettier than she usually was.

"I'll do as Mother decides..." she replied.

* The Zaporozhian Sich was destroyed in 1775 on the order of Catherine II. The expelled Cossacks moved to the Danube estuary and established their settlement there, calling it The New Sich (1775—1828)

“So what about it?” Kabanets turned to his wife. “What do you say?”

“What can I say? Marina is a nice woman... Mirin is a bit stern. But then she isn’t marrying Mirin. And Ivan is a fine fellow — no doubt about it!”

“All right, we accept,” Kabanets told the matchmakers.

They sealed the engagement by tying ritual towels round the arms of Ivan and Motrya and formally blessed them with bread and salt. Ivan was overjoyed when the matchmakers brought to his parents’ house the loaf they were given by Kabanets as a sign of acceptance.

Two weeks later they were wed.

Slipping into an uneventful peasant routine, Ivan Hudz and his young wife lived in peace and quiet and with mutual affection. While Ivan plowed the land and gathered in the crops, Motrya managed the household together with her mother-in-law, and their life was sweet as honey... Nor did they have to wait long for children. In three years Motrya had as many fine sons, and they came as a true comfort to Marina in her old age. The boys turned out really wonderful — healthy, robust and ruddy-cheeked. One was named Maxim, the second Vasil, and the third, Onisim. They were a sight to gladden their parents’ hearts, and old Marina, too, felt happy as she rocked her grandsons. Only Mirin did not seem to be particularly impressed. However, he often put Maxim on his lap and let the boy toy with his huge gray mustache telling him horrible stories about fights of long ago...

Those stories awakened the Cossack blood in the veins of the little boy. Maxim came to love his grandfather more than his father or mother. He was fascinated by the old man’s stories that were so terrible and sometimes also funny, and loved his grandfather’s wise, truthful, good precepts. The old man, too, warmed up to his curious lively grandson. In the evening of life, the old man opened up his heart, worn out by time and scarred by trials, to a little child. This was old age embracing youth — and youth attaching itself to old age. They were inseparable, sharing their joys and sorrows... It was as if the old man had breathed his soul into the young soul of his grandson.

IX

Piski in Serfdom

Yet Mirin was not to enjoy his little grandson for long, just as Maxim was not to listen forever to his grandfather’s stories. The heavy wheel of life took a sharp turn — and dragged Piski into serfdom!

The misfortune which struck the Poles also hurt the village. The rumor that the villagers had been given in ownership to some

general flashed like a lightning. This was the time when the Poles rose up. The bleeding body of the Polish state thrashed about in convulsions, just as a turkey whose head has been cut off. No matter how hard the fiery Kościuszko exerted himself rushing from one place to another to arouse human souls in noblemen's bodies, he failed to accomplish anything... He then cursed the noble lords who had caused their Motherland's death. Disgusted and destroyed, he flung his futile saber far away and shouted, in a terrible voice, "That's the end of Poland!" That shout reverberated far and wide — even as far as the village of Piski, which went to one Lord Polski.

Who was that lord anyway? Where had he come from?

It was said that he was an impoverished nobleman, one of those "penniless gentry" who, in a Poland ruled by the magnates, had swarmed in their households, drunk their meads, wines and vodka, eaten the bread produced by the "menial" peasantry, danced to the music provided by the magnates, elected their patrons to the Government and the Diet, escorted them to provincial diets to roar "Ayel" at the nod of their heads — always ready to unsheathe their sharp sabers and engage in fratricidal bloodshed for their masters... Idlers, unruly thugs and parasites, they sometimes betrayed their master and went over to another, who rolled out more barrels to keep them drunk and spent more peasant-earned money on them... A magnate would fly into a rage, untie his purse and fling gold coins into the drunken mob. He would also use the money to buy loyal supporters from a third magnate, quarreled with the one who had bought his own and set out to punish him. Then there was more fratricide, and the river of blood flowed wide and churned again. Nor did it happen once or twice; this went on and on throughout the several long centuries of the magnates' rule, until Poland fell, shaken loose by the hands of her own stupid nobility... The magnates could not care less, though. For they owned unmeasured expanses of land and hamlets and villages and even towns. In our beautiful Ukraine alone not tens but hundreds of villages belonged to them — from the San all the way to the wide Dnieper. Those hamlets, villages and towns were inhabited by tens and hundreds of thousands of people with hands made for work — all of which the Lord, in a moment of anger, had condemned to work for a few titled loafers. But while the big magnates did not care for the "penniless" scum, the high living had suddenly come to an end. Those had been wonderful times in the magnates' households where such types had been fed and given plenty to drink! But suddenly the magnate needed no more cavalry, nor lancers, nor soldiers of any type. He now enjoyed life in Paris, Rome or Baden. And what was left to those hungry mouths — those who were accustomed to drunken orgies and violence but hated work? What was there to clothe and feed them? The "penniless" dispersed all over the land, turning into managers,

overseers and leaseholders of small estates. Some went to serve the Russian czar. Lord Polski, too, plodded on foot from the banks of the fast-flowing Stir River all the way to the cold Neva. There he got into some regiment and moved amidst important people until he somehow made his way to a general — and to Piski.

Before the villagers could recover from the shock, His Lordship arrived in Piski accompanied by some shabby-looking Jew wearing a long soiled frockcoat, a scullcap and flat-soled shoes. Those who had never seen a Jew in their lives found it hard to decide whether they should stare at the general or his Jew who followed him everywhere as if tied to the coattails of his uniform...

The general was the one who broke the news to the people of Piski.

"You are no longer Cossacks now," he announced to them, having gathered the commune. "No more breeding the outlaws for you! Now you belong to me... The Czarina herself granted Piski to me for my distinguished services..."

"What's that? How? For what reason?" The assembled villagers stirred like a sea before a storm.

Mirin stepped forward and walked over to the general.

"So that's the way things have turned!" he said. "So now you reach out your hands for us as well? Time for you to make your way into the free steppes, eh? May God help you. But have they up there forgotten about the agreement we made?"

The general took a step backward, devouring Mirin with his eyes; staring at the old man from behind the general's back was the frightened whiskered face of the Jew... The villagers froze... A hush fell on the crowd, and not a whisper could be heard... The general seemed to hear Mirin's heart hammering in his chest...

Mirin spoke, addressing both the general and the crowd:

"So what do you say now, good people? Didn't I tell you? Isn't this the way I told you it was going to be? Come on, speak up!"

The crowd buzzed:

"He won't get us! Never in his life! He won't have us working for him... serving him... You try and make us, damn Pole!"

The general lost his patience.

"Silence!" he shouted, stomping his foot.

The shouts died down as the crowd shrank back... Mirin had disappeared in the general turmoil and was nowhere to be seen.

The general went on, as if barking orders:

"This is my land!... and you're mine, too... everything here belongs to me!"

"It's all a pack of dirty lies!" a voice shouted from the thick of the crowd.

The words seemed to sting His Lordship like a wasp. Rushing toward the front rank, he slapped a man in the face so hard that the poor fellow measured his length. Then he yelled at the driver, grabbed the Jew, who had been hanging around the carriage for

some time, shoved him onto the carriage, jumped on — and they were off in a cloud of dust...

The downed man clambered to his feet, picked up his hat, scratched his head and complained:

"How did you like that? That's surely some way of greeting people!"

"Why didn't you hit him back?" men demanded from all sides.

"I'll tell you why. That was because he jumped me so suddenly, damn him!..."

"They why didn't you at least help him onto the carriage?" a man joked.

"Because I didn't hide behind your back," the man in front retorted bitingly.

"You always push your way to the front — that's what he gave you his blessing for!"

"Blessing!" the crowd roared in laughter. "Oh, yes, that's what it was — a blessing!"

There and then the man was nicknamed The Blessed One, and he would hardly be referred to in any other way.

"That'll do — enough!" shouted a man with a snow-white head but a black mustache. "This is no time for laughing!... Better think what we are to do."

The laughter died down. Then the crowd droned:

"Why, we'll go to Kiev... or to the capital... to Czarina herself! That's a sheer outrage! Where has this devil come from anyway?..."

Some went to ask Mirin what he thought was the best they could do.

"Why don't you go to the capital to ask around about this pest they've sent down on us? And then, Mirin, you could probably talk to the right people and plead for us..."

"Me going there?... pleading?" Mirin roared. "I'd sooner take my whole family over to Turkey! Better to die in a pagan land than to rot in slavery here at home..."

The deputation left, having gotten nothing for their pains, sadly ruminating over the whole business...

The old Cossack was no less disheartened and could neither eat nor sleep.

"My son... grandsons... my blood... all the property... the land... the cattle.. everything — everything in serfdom!..." he would mutter, pacing the yard restlessly.

One evening, he suddenly disappeared. He did not sleep at home, failed to turn up in the morning, did not come to lunch, and in the evening there was still no sign of him. Where could he be? Had anyone seen Mirin Hudz, the old Cossack? Did anybody know anything about him? Nobody had seen him, nobody knew anything. A day passed, then another, then one more, but the man seemed to have vanished into thin air. Marina wept, Ivan

was desperate, his wife looked awful. Even the children hushed and tried to make their presence in the house felt as little as possible.

Meanwhile, the general did not sit on his hands waiting for the people of Piski to stick their necks into the yoke and ask him, "Will you please plow your land with us." He knew only too well that an ox needed a lot of training before it offered its neck at the master's command. Until it learned to do that, it had to be yoked by force. So the general acted accordingly.

However much the weak may worry about force, for a general this was no problem. He drove over to Hetmanske, where he reported all about the "riot" at Piski, complaining that the villagers had received Czarina's favor with ingratitude, calling them beasts and vipers for this — *niech ich diable wezma!* The following morning he was back in Piski — but not with the Jew this time. At daybreak, a company of soldiers marched into the village. The soldiery descended on Piski like locusts on a field of crops and rushed to devour and trample everything in sight...

This was something the villagers had not expected. Bewildered, they had no idea what they could do about it... Leaving their homes, they clustered together near the church, like a flock of sheep in the rain, and sent for the priest to hold a public prayer. The spiritual father, however, was frightened and never showed up. Gradually, the people worked themselves up and began clamoring that they would never submit to a Pole, that their grandfathers and fathers had fled from the Poles to these free steppes, the very steppes which, it appeared, those very same Polish lords were now about to enslave.

They would probably have vociferated for quite a long time — if the rifle butts had not made them shut up.

The people were dispersed and ordered to their homes. They scattered to all sides like scared sheep. Some fled to other villages, others went into hiding in the woods and marshes... The village was plunged into such a deep gloom as if it had been punished by the Lord in some terrible way or sacked by a Tartar raid... Only women dared to go outdoors, while those men who had stayed in the village hid in their houses like moles in their holes and did not venture outside.

Piski was thrown into a real panic — damn the general! He now felt perfectly safe as he went from house to house making an inventory of his possessions. Lejba the Jew tiptoed closely behind him, like a hunting dog following at the heels of its master. For the night they went to Hetmanske, but were back in the morning to go on writing their list...

While the general was busy writing, Mirin turned up. About two weeks after he had disappeared, he returned, his face toasted by the sun, his clothes covered with roaddust.

"Cheer up, son!" exclaimed the old man as he stepped inside,

without bothering to greet them. "Here, take this." He gave Ivan a paper. "You'll remain a free Cossack as long as you live... As to those who wouldn't listen to me, let them now take care of themselves."

It was as if the entire house were suddenly flooded by sunlight. Mirin was back, bringing them freedom! They no longer had to fear either serfdom or bondage.

Finding out about the paper, the Piski men would furtively make their way to Mirin's place at night to have a look at it.

"What's this?" they would ask. "How did you get it?"

"It says everything here," Mirin explained. "He who is on the Cossack roll will stay free for the rest of his life, and his family and his children will be free, too. Those who aren't on the roll will have to be the general's serfs."

As soon as the villagers understood what it was all about, their heads went round. What wouldn't they give to get their names on that roll! Company in distress makes trouble less. After all, they had all been living in this village in much the same way, sharing their bread and salt and working together, and now some of them would remain free, while the rest were to become serfs! Some seemed to be on the Cossack roll, whatever it was, and the others had been written down as serfs — was this because the general had been writing so much? Which of them were on the roll? Who was on that second list? Who could make it out? It was all a bloody mess.

The general could make it out very well. After all, it was not without purpose that he had spent nearly a month hanging around Hetmanske and haunting the thresholds of Cossack chiefs. Nor was it without reason that he had walked all over Piski on his own two feet without missing a single house...

* * *

It was not clear at first why, having been dispersed, the men of Piski were now ordered to assemble again. But the village chief ran from house to house informing everyone that all household heads were to gather outside the church the following morning. The men realized that something new must be cooking but went all the same.

It was early morning. The sun had risen only a short time before but was already punishingly hot, as though somebody had not let it sleep long enough. Suffering from heat, the men stood in the church graveyard and talked. Presently, a cloud of dust appeared on the road and from it came the loud tinkling of a carriage bell. Their hearts missed a beat and then throbbed faster. The voices died down, and all eyes were set on the road... Whoa! The carriage drew up at the gate. The crowd stirred and

heaved. Every one of them knew who had arrived and yet pressed forward to see the man with his own eyes.

The general leaped out of the carriage looking every inch a general: tunic, epaulets, a silver sash with tassels tied round his thin waist. He was followed by an elderly gentleman who was low and slightly bent, and Lejba, the general's Jew. Some soldiers lined up on a common behind the graveyard. First of all, the general went there to greet them. The soldiers gabbled like turkeys in reply. Then Lejba was sent to fetch the priest—to hold a public prayer... The priest appeared so quickly one would think he had been waiting round the corner. So that prayer was promptly held and done with. Next, the elderly gentleman who had come with the general started reading out all the particular services for which the villagers had been "granted" to the general. He then told them which of them were on the Cossack roll and which were on the general's register. He called out all the household heads' names—and made no mistake about it. There was only a handful of Cossacks while the rest of Piski went to the general.

That was when they staged a true battle for the general's benefit. All their fright suddenly evaporated.

"We'll leave everything here! all of it!... the lands, the houses, the cattle... we'll go to look for some other country... a better land... freedom!"

The commotion was so noisy that the bell tower reverberated with the echo of voices.

Meanwhile, the Cossacks began to edge away. Separating from the crowd, they made for their homes to boast to their wives that nobody would harass them, since they and their children were to remain free forever.

Only the general's men stayed in the graveyard. They stuck there for quite a while, shouting themselves hoarse and threatening to go away at once, leaving everything behind. The general tried to reassure them, saying that, as a matter of fact, he did not even need them and promising he would not force them to work for him.

"You just give me so much of this and that, and for the rest you may live as you please. I'm not going to live with you anyway, because I must be at the capital. Give everything due to me to Lejba—he'll stay here as my manager."

"Służyłem jasnowielmożnemu panu z małych lat i będę służyć do końca mego życia," * Lejba put in with a deep bow.

"Wiem, Lejba, wiem," the general told him. *"Ty jesteś szlachetny Żyd."* ** Then, turning to the villagers, he asked:

"Well, do you accept?"

* "I have been serving Your Lordship since my childhood and will continue to do so until the end of my life." (Polish)

** "I know, Lejba, I know. You are a noble Jew." (Polish)

"Paying you for our own land! Giving away our produce! Not on your life!" they shouted.

"As you please... If you don't want to pay, I'll drive you to work... I give you a day to make up your mind which suits you better. Do you hear? The day after tomorrow I must know your decision."

Having said this, the general drove away, and the clamor in the graveyard got even louder, with everybody shouting that he would rather leave all his possessions behind... Upon which they broke up.

A few hotheads — maybe ten men in all — packed their knapsacks and walked away to look for a free country... The rest, however, stayed. Where would they go? And how? Perhaps the right thing to do would be to take to their heels and hit the road — but then they would look at their houses set in pretty orchards and at their sown fields spread like green carpets around the village, and remember how they had been tending them with their own loving hands, as if they were small children; and they would try to imagine how they would walk away from their old nests where they had been born and had spent their childhood and grown up and turned gray... and how they would leave it all and their parents' graves... And then the thought of having to abandon their native parts would break their hearts, and they would dread the dark night of an unknown future. So they chose to stay — until the proper time.

The general came back.

"So what about it?"

"All right, Sir, we'll be giving you all you need — only let us live as before!"

"Good, fellows, good! You ought to have seen long ago what is good for you. Just be meek lambs and you'll only have to suck and wag your tails. Here's some drinking money for you!" He got out a gold coin and handed it to the man closest to him.

The Jew fidgeted at his master's side trying to say something. The general noticed this.

"Want something, Lejba?" he asked.

*"Niech jasnowielmożny pan będzie łaskaw, żeby chłopci ni jednej góralni nie budowali, ni też żadnej karczmy nie trzymali!" **

"Listen, there's one more thing. None of you is to make any more vodka or keep a tavern. You belong to me, and I'll keep my own tavern. Lejba here will be making vodka for you."

The villagers scratched the backs of their necks. They guessed that this was only a beginning — that's what it was!

The general said good-bye to them. Getting into the carriage, he shouted:

* "Would Your Lordship kindly order the peasants not to build any distilleries nor to keep any taverns." (Polish)

“Take good care of my Lejba — do you hear?” And then he was gone.

Lejba stayed in the village to run things. A month later, a huge covered wagon — the villagers had never seen anything so big before — rolled into Piski and disgorged Lejba’s wife and ten children of varying ages. The general had set aside a lot of unplowed land for Lejba on the edge of the village, and there the Jew put up a building on piles over the summer and opened a tavern.

Life continued in the familiar old way. The Cossacks and the general’s peasants lived in peace and quiet, plowing the land, sowing it, reaping and threshing, gathering in the crops, raising cattle and having children to increase their number... Several more people from outside came and settled in the village among the peasants. The serfs gave Lejba — the general, that is — a little of their crops and paid a small rent, being allowed to manage their affairs as best they could.

The villagers got used to Lejba. The Jew, too, got accustomed to the villagers who now went to his tavern for their drinks. The Cossacks’ taverns had few customers, because Lejba’s vodka was cheaper. Lejba became a useful man in the village.

Lejba was doing all right. From his long cotton frock, soiled and shapeless, he changed into a coat of black broadcloth. Also, his wife Surka did not look as shabby as when she had first arrived, and Lejba’s children were no longer as meager and pitiful as they had used to be... The Jew now kept a goat with a kid that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere; he hired a girl called Hapka to tend his cow and got himself a pair of horses... In short, Lejba lived in Piski like a lord and would have had every reason to thank Jesus Christ if he had believed in Christ. Actually, he was a “heathen,” and his forefathers had tortured Christ... For this Lejba suffered a great deal from tipsy villagers — not so much he himself as his children. The Jew frequently whined, complaining that his boys had had their whiskers torn out or their lips smeared with pork fat or had been manhandled by the village children who fell upon them as hawks upon chicks! But all that did not really hurt much. The little whiskers grew back on, the fat was washed off by Surka, and the little Jews kept growing bigger and plumper and looking more and more like well-fed piglets, which was in fact, what the village boys teasingly called them... So Lejba was doing fine!

The villagers also fared quite well. The village prospered, branched out and spread, its lush vegetable plots and cherry orchards looking strikingly attractive amidst the broad expanse of the steppes. Dismal gray dugouts disappeared one after another, while the thick-growing pears, weeping willows and dark-green cherries were spotted with whitewashed clay-plastered cottages with three windows and red clay banks running along the walls,

and containing a passage, a pantry and sometimes even a real full-sized living room. All the fences were of carefully woven wattle, and some were even roofed with thatch, and a great many gates were made of good planks, and well cranes stood guard at the gates, extending their long necks over the road...

But Mirin did not live to see all that. Serfdom cut him down like a scythe. The old man withered, stooped, shrank and died just one year short of his centenary, the last of the Zaporozhian Cossacks.

X

The Polskis

They say that misfortunes never come alone. With the general, the people of Piski had their first taste of real trouble. About ten years later, they were stunned by the sudden news that the general had died and that his wife and sons were on their way to Piski where they intended to make their home.

The villagers did not believe it at first. Why would she come here, of all places? Did she have any business in the village? What would she do here anyway? Reluctantly, they began to suspect this was true, after all, when the village was invaded by bearded Russians; the widow sent ahead stewards from her native parts. Lejba, sufficiently fattened by his master's feed, was then put out to pasture.

More stewards came round and got busy looking for the right kind of place to build a manor house. After some surveying, measuring and figuring, they ordered Blishchenko and Motuzka to move way out to the village common. Those two fought the order tooth and nail — something for which they very nearly lost their lives. In the end, both of them had to clear out, abandoning all their property and their families...

As the villagers watched it all, their spirits sank. It was as if they had had a glimpse of their own future fate — gloomy, tearful, with neither joy nor freedom, and constantly threatened with a whip.

Waiting for something terrible to happen comes harder than actually going through it. As each of them went to bed, he wondered what tomorrow would bring. In the meantime, there was enough work to keep them busy. One day was spent tearing down the houses of Blishchenko and Motuzka. The day after that, they laid the foundations for the manor house. Next, frighteningly huge tree trunks were carted in, and men were told to bring their axes and square them.

In a short while, as if by magic, a true palace sprang up with log walls, as many as a dozen big rooms, large cellars and a roof

covered with iron sheets. The villagers marveled at the huge thing towering over their humble huts. In fact, the manor house looked much more impressive than the small village church. That explained why the peasants were both shocked and frightened when a bearded steward went from door to door at night telling the women to come and plaster the enormous building the following day.

"Oh, dear, what will happen to us?" many a sobbing wife asked her husband.

"Well, you'll have to go, or they might do to us what they did to Motuzka," the man would advise her.

At daybreak the following morning, the women said good-bye to their children, as though they were leaving for some faraway place, and, their faces wet with tears, went to the corvée for the first time in their lives...

It did not take them too long to finish the job. Meanwhile, kitchens, barns, sheds and stables were being built. Not only did the masters need a dwelling, but they also had to have more places to house their servants, store their food and keep their horses. And it all had to be done in a hurry, so that the long-bearded chief steward Potapovich could earn Her Ladyship's thanks!

To deserve those thanks, Potapovich was laying himself flat out. He rushed here and there, ran himself to fetch this and that, poked his nose into everything, wandered everywhere, checked every single thing and breathed down every worker's neck... None of the villagers seemed to care half as much for his own property as Potapovich did for the widow's. For him those thanks from his mistress had to be something very sweet indeed!

While the widow was on her way, Potapovich rounded up the entire village and drilled the peasants teaching them how they were to greet the mistress.

Finally, she arrived...

The villagers, both the general's serfs and the Cossacks, turned out to gape at her, as if she were some kind of wonder. The Cossacks were ordered home, though. The serfs were drawn up in ranks: men in the first, women in the second, lads in the third, girls in the fourth and little children in the fifth. Gray-haired old men were sent ahead with bread and salt. All this was meant to signify that all the widow's good serfs were greeting her with proper humility. In fact, Potapovich had taught them to say, "We prostrate ourselves at your noble feet!"

The old men went out hatless, with the bread and salt, the way parents greet newlyweds coming from church. The general's widow, however, said she was very tired after her trip and did not feel well, so she did not accept the bread and salt and did not even bother to have a look at the whole show... The shot went wide off the mark! The villagers only had a glimpse of their

“young” mistress’s back — long and lean, like that of a sun-dried fish — when she alighted from her posh coach and proceeded to her rooms, leaning against the arms of two well-dressed maids...

Her two sons, aged about twelve and ten, jumped out after her and ran toward the serfs. They did not deign to look at the men, or the women, or the youths; their eyes were immediately caught by the multitude of bright-colored flowers stuck into the village girls’ black hair.

Having examined the little girls, they ran over to the boys’ line. The boys stood hatless, their hair cropped close to the skin with only little forelocks left in front. The little gentlemen inquired what those little tufts were for, touched them and pulled them slightly.

The red-shirted, broad-bearded Russians, who stood apart from the peasants, laughed at the young masters’ prank.

“Now you see, Afonya, what those locks are for!... Cute, aren’t they? Come on, Master, pluck that kid over there!”

“Which one?” the elder boy asked, looking now at the boys, now at the Russian peasants.

“That one with a grimy face!”

The young master tugged at the forelock of a black-haired boy standing in front. The boy violently pulled himself free, like a hawk.

“Why d’you grab my hair? Just look at him!”

“You... you... shool!” the bearded servants hissed at the boy, clenching their fists and teeth.

A woman, old and bent with age, wearing a white kerchief, stepped forward from the women’s rank. Her face as white as a sheet, she barely spoke for the tears:

“Why d’you hurt the poor boys? That’s a sin!”

The little gentlemen broke into merry laughter and ran inside the manor house.

Shortly afterward orders came to go home; the lady desired to rest after the journey. The ranks broke up... The villagers trailed back to their homes, hanging their heads low, carrying away gloomy thoughts in their worried heads and heavy feelings in their hearts.

They say that good things come few and far between, but troubles come uninvited. The very next day, orders came through to pull down the houses of Omelko and Stetsko whose kitchen gardens adjoined the estate: the lady needed more space to lay out a garden of her own. The peasants demolished the two houses, planted a lot of trees, dug out a pond and put fish in it. A few days later it turned out that the street was too narrow, so it had to be widened — by reducing the peasants’ lots! This, too, was done, and the street became as wide as a square. Next, the serfs were directed to remove all the peasants’ houses which faced the

manor house, for those lopsided huts spoiled the view! So they were replaced with tall, slender poplars...

Every new day brought more whims and orders. Every new day was used to further erode the human concept of freedom. Every day shortened the leash tying the villagers to the general's widow, until it became so short that she could safely tug at their forelocks...

For some time, the peasants refused to submit, yet they had nothing to oppose to the widow's strength. Then they turned to the last resort of the weak. They used their feet and began to flee. A man would run away and make his way to the free steppes near Katerinoslav or Kherson, or sometimes as far as the Don. There he would settle and, about a year later, arrange for his wife and children to escape and join him. Many people then cleared out, both on their own and in whole families. It was then that the saying was coined: running away is the only way!

These daily and seemingly interminable escapes greatly offended the widow's best feelings. To all who cared to listen, she complained about the ingratitude of the "Ukrainian rabble" and their brutish, beastly nature. Indeed! These confounded bumpkins did not appreciate the privilege of plowing the fields of the merciful, highborn Lady Polski, née Deryugina! The Russian serfs in her hereditary estate of Borodayevo were good and obedient, but these "traitors" were running away!

Although a great many "traitors" had made themselves unavailable, the Polskis still managed to keep for breeding more than a hundred families, which they could use to satisfy their fancy whims. The widow's whip-wielding stewards did a fine job of it. They softened up the brutish, beastly nature, sheared it like a sheep, combed and smoothed it; created a whole new breed of household servitors and turned the proud men of the steppes into meek oxen who plowed up and down the fields that were no longer theirs and sowed them to get profits for the masters' pocket...

* * *

It surely took a lot of work to fill up that pocket! The widow had quite a family, may the Lord be thanked! She brought with her two sons — fat and fast like pig sucklings. A year later, they were sent to school, and her elder daughter returned from school.

"Hey, whoever is there!" the widow called.

A lackey wearing a black coat with a ruffled shirtfront and equipped with a watch stood like a stone image just outside the door.

"Find Potapovich," she ordered in a hollow voice, drawing out her vowels.

The man went out. Shortly afterward, the steward came in.

"I say, Potapovich, Vera Semyonovna will need a maid."

"Certainly," the steward said in a deep drawl.

"Find her a pretty girl."

"As you wish, Your Ladyship."

"It'll have to be somebody young — about sixteen, I would say. Only be quick about it."

"Yes, Madam."

"Try to do it tomorrow."

"Very good, Madam."

"You may go now."

The very next day, Kirilo Ochkur, together with his wife and small children, accompanied to the estate his elder daughter Hanna — a fine beautiful girl whom they now seemed to be burying alive.

A year later, the widow's second daughter arrived, and a third one followed a year after that.

Somebody had to comb and braid their long hair. Somebody had to lace up their corsets. Somebody had to embroider their skirts, collars and sleeves.

Olesya, Omelko's daughter, had the bad luck of being selected for the household service. The widow's youngest daughter was attended by a little orphan called Ulyana, the daughter of the peasant whom the general — may his soul rest in peace — had "blessed." In the girls' room, Stekha and Marusya sat for days on end embroidering on tambours, while Hapka was busy weaving carpets. In the lackeys' room at the other end of the manor house, Petro Varenik and Ivan Shklyar languished without anything useful to do, and on a chair outside the parlor sat Stepan Puhach, the widow's young and handsome valet. There were many more in the kitchen.

Feeding this whole hungry herd was no simple matter. They had to be clothed, too. Then the widow had her own children to think about. There were those three lovely daughters of hers... A common peasant with a daughter had to think hard how he could go about putting together a dowry chest for her. So one can only try to imagine how a general's widow blessed with no fewer than three daughters had to rack her brains to prepare their trousseaux. One thought, however, was foremost on the mother's mind. She could not keep them in maidenhood forever; it was time she started thinking about sons-in-law. Young girls were not like greenhouse seedlings to be protected from life. They needed light — lots of it. They had to be seen and needed to see others... It was important that they have pleasant memories of their girlhood.

The manor house seethed with hectic activity... Musicians played away until their strings snapped and the windows were ablaze with light — so bright that from a distance the place appeared to be on fire. On a night when the widow gave one of her big parties, the whole forecourt would be crammed with carriages of all kinds,

the drivers would light their lanterns and play cards while they waited, and in the stables dozens of horses would chew the delicious steppe hay.

The rooms were jammed with guests. Some hussar officers would ride over from Hetmanske, old Krivinsky would bring his brood of spinster daughters; the Shved widow would not miss such an occasion and would be present together with her smart daughter; hovering about the latter would be the young Sayenko, a vivacious black-haired fellow, a dancing enthusiast and the son of a Cossack captain; not far away the son of an ex-Cossack colonel Kryazh would be sauntering with Colonel Karmazin's son who had come with his young wife all the way from Romni... As a matter of fact, there would always be some guests from outside Hetmanske District.

The widow played the part of a hospitable hostess well. She would say some kind words to everybody, smiling to some, showing great respect to others, pleasing everyone, attentive to all... The guests had the time of their life! Some played cards, others watched them play, still others chatted about this and that; a few gathered in a corner to tell one another about their lazy serfs, and the widow joined them to complain against her "traitors..." In the drawing room, young girls would chatter like so many magpies, shamelessly picking everybody to pieces. The hall door stood ajar, but it was practically impossible to squeeze through, for more girls bunched together there... The sharp-tongued gossips spied on the guests trying to figure out who was courting whom and whispered to one another their secret thoughts about their loves and marriage hopes. Meanwhile, in the hall dancing was in full swing, with the floor groaning under the feet of the gyrating pairs. Which was no wonder, with so many hussars about the place. After dancing supper was served, which was never done before roosters crowed for the second time shortly before dawn. Guests began to go home after daybreak...

Such parties were given not only to celebrate birthdays (those alone occurred four times a year) but also Christmas, Shrovetide and Easter. These were special affairs to which guests were invited. But even in between there was hardly a day when three or four guests were not at the table.

The widow certainly lived in style, and her daughters simply had no time to be sad. Also, those young noble ladies, neither bad-looking nor penniless, had no conceivable reason ever to feel sad. To be sure, they never bothered to think whether they were poor or rich. Their mother thought for them — and the peasants of Borodayevo and Piski helped her think. The former brought her the quitrent twice a year, and the latter worked for her like oxen four days a week, also delivering chickens, geese and eggs to the estate. So why shouldn't they live in style?

In this fashion the late general's family caroused for five years

or so, until slightly visible crow's feet appeared at the corners of the eldest daughter's eyes and her expression turned somewhat sour. But then suddenly, a petty landowner, one of their Boro-dayevó neighbors, came and married her. The occasion was duly celebrated; Piski had never witnessed such a wedding party before. The manor house roared and groaned.

They say that a good beginning is half the battle. Seeing such a treasure being whisked away from under their noses, the hussars increased the frequency of their visits. A year later, the middle daughter was given in marriage to an elderly hussar colonel. The youngest girl now remained her mother's sole comfort. A poor comfort she was, too! As a matter of fact, the widow was not particularly fond of her. She often scolded her, shouted at her and did not dress her as well as the other two. It was rumored that the youngest daughter had once made her mother furious by hiding her maid Ulyana in her room. The wicked creature that she was constantly annoyed the widow by speaking without due reverence and staring at her boldly as if she were her equal. "Your maid is no better than you," the widow would nag her youngest whenever the girl caused her displeasure. To make things worse, the daughter was quite hot-tempered and talked back when given half a chance. That led to frequent quarrels and rows between them.

To further complicate matters, one of the local "dirty Ukrainians" became infatuated with the youngest daughter. That was the young Sayenko, a rather decent fellow. He was up to his ears in it.

"I wonder, Dunya, why he keeps coming. Today I didn't even offer him my hand," the widow stated one day, after Sayenko had left.

"Which was a wrong thing to do. Sayenko is a proper gentleman."

"Who? That dirty Ukrainian?"

"It doesn't really matter that he is a Ukrainian," the daughter retorted. "Aren't Ukrainians human beings?"

"Traitors — that's what they are! Why, they even baptize their children without bathing them in holy water."

"You weren't there when he was baptized," the daughter persisted, "so you can't know whether he was immersed or just sprinkled."

"You are defending that fellow as if you've already fallen for him."

"What if I have? He'd make as good a husband as any other, Mother."

"Are you in your right senses? He's way below you. Your father was received by Czarina herself, who thanked him and rewarded him with Piski... What about him? His father may have been a bandit for all I know, a rogue! A tar-maker! Pah!"

"Why should I care about his father?" the daughter snapped, going away to her room.

The following day Sayenko was back in Piski.

"He's got no shame — and no honor either!" the widow fumed. "I turn my back on him, and he still comes every single day. It's very true that a churl will never become a gentleman."

Yet the churl achieved the purpose of his visits. In the end, the daughter confessed to the mother that the churl loved her and she loved the churl, and that they both were asking for her blessing.

"What!" the widow screamed. "That tar-maker! I'd sooner let my hand wither away than bless such a marriage!"

"As you like. If you won't give us your blessing, we'll have to get married without it. May God be with you, but you are no longer my mother, nor am I your daughter."

Hearing this, the widow burst into tears.

"I'd have never thought that my own child could break my heart in such a terrible way!"

They remained in a state of war for about a month. Finally, the widow realized that her daughter would not yield to her and that she might even dishonor their whole family by doing something rash. Reluctantly, she gave them her blessing.

There was no wedding party, for the widow claimed ill health...

Sayenko took his young wife to his village of Kitayka. But he did not carry away any dowry...

* * *

The widow remained all alone. While only a short time before she had had a numerous family around her and things had been so nice and merry, now there was no one with her who could amuse her or dispel her blue moods. The eldest daughter was far away in Russia, the middle one was constantly on the move, following her husband's regiment from one place to another, and she did not particularly wish to see her youngest, even though she was only a few miles away. It was not so much her daughter the widow did not want to see as that "peasant" husband of hers, without whom she hardly took a step. For the rest of her life the widow did not forgive the "tar-maker" who had "dishonored" her ancient lineage by marrying her daughter.

Thus, the widow had to spend her old age in bored solitude. Age was not nice to her. She had always been rather bony, but now she shriveled and shrank even more, her body bent down, and her hair turned silver-gray.

The big building stood empty. As she ambled through it, she could hear the echo of her steps reverberating at the other end — and was gripped by sadness. The widow felt gloomy and de-

pressed. Not even generals' widows were immune to sorrow. Her Ladyship simply did not know what to do with herself. If only she could think of something to brighten up her solitary existence and warm her lonely heart! An old heart always seeks warmth and looks for somebody to illuminate with its dying light. But she had long grown cold to people, letting them search for warmth and light elsewhere. Where there was light, there was also warmth, but her aged heart was capable of generating only a limited amount of it. To whom could she give it?

Without giving it a second thought, she gave all of it to cats. Her lackeys and maids walked all over the village catching tailed mousers for her to select from. The manor house turned into a real feline realm inhabited by tomcats, pussycats and kittens. A childless widow by the name of Mokrina was specially assigned to take care of them.

Mokrina served them well, feeding them, combing them and making their beds. So the animals ran after her all over the place. Once she did not notice a kitten at her heels and pinched it in a door. As Lady Polski heard it squeak, her face went ashen. Next day, the kitten died. Mokrina did not get away with it, of course. The widow was not the kind of person who would forget and forgive. Nor did she forgive Mokrina for that kitten's death. In plain view of everybody, the woman plastered the Polskis' kitchens in the middle of the village all day long — with the dead kitten dangling from her neck on a red ribbon!

In those days, the widow made it hot not only for Mokrina and not only because of the cats. Everybody got his or her fair share. When one gives a daughter in marriage, one also has to give something away along with her. The widow had married off all of her three daughters. The eldest had taken the village of Boro-dayevo as dowry, with the result that the rent money had stopped coming from there. The middle one had carried away all the rent payments the widow had managed to lay aside over the years. Only the "churl's wife" had gotten nothing at all. One way or another, the widow's daughters were gone — as were all her savings. Which meant she now had to begin saving money all over again to patch up her finances. The serfs of Piski had been working in her fields only four days a week. Why shouldn't she make them serve a fifth day as well? No sooner said than done. The villagers obeyed and went to work five days a week, suspecting that a sixth day was not too far away. Somehow, it was slow in coming. The widow would not have the time to introduce it.

"This Ulyana will be the death of me! She can't do a thing right and lies at every turn."

Thus, Lady Polski often complained to her neighbors against her maid Ulyana, who in her service had blossomed out from a little adolescent into a full-blown lass with a pretty light-skinned

face, black braids, large mirthful eyes and an irresistible urge to sing.

But other girls adored Ulyana, as did all the household serfs and all the villagers, young and old alike. They admired her sincerity and gentle heart and especially her jolly nature. Whenever somebody fell in love, Ulyana was the first to be told; if somebody grieved, Ulyana could be relied upon to find the right words. Ulyana never seemed to suffer. At least, if she ever did, it never showed. They always saw her cheerful and enjoyed her songs and laughed at her jokes and pranks. She surely was a devil of a girl!

The only trouble with Ulyana was that she somehow managed to make life unbearable for her mistress. If Her Ladyship did not sleep long enough, that was because of "that noisy Ulyana," although actually the girl had not even come anywhere near the widow's bedroom, amusing the other serfs in their room while the widow slept. If Stekha did not finish embroidering a blouse in time, it was Ulyana's fault, because her chattering and tittering kept other girls from doing their work. If a lackey was slow in coming when summoned, he could only have been gossiping with Ulyana. In short, life with Ulyana was a sheer nightmare.

One day, the widow realized that the girls' room was unusually silent. Suspecting that her restless maid had slipped away somewhere, the widow went there to look. Ulyana was not there.

"Where's Ulyana?" she asked the girls.

"She seems to have gone to the kitchen to drink some water."

"Get her!"

Ulyana came.

"Where have you been?" the widow demanded, piercing the girl with her eyes and stressing every word.

A bad sign, the girls thought.

"I've been in the kitchen... drinking water," Ulyana replied.

"Isn't there water here?" The widow pointed to the carafe.

"It's a bit stale... I went to drink some fresh water."

"Fresh? It's a lie! You've gotten mixed up with depraved men. You've been with Stepan... Stepan! Stepan!"

Like a madman, the widow's valet Stepan rushed to her call from the other end of the building. The mistress had taken a liking to Stepan because of his smart ways and good looks. At Easter, he alone of all serfs was allowed to kiss her hand. Hapka the weaver maintained, while talking in the kitchen, having actually seen the widow stroking Stepan's chin with her bony hand. Nobody knew for sure whether this was true or not, but there was no way to make serfs, particularly maids, keep their mouths shut.

"Where have you been?" the widow attacked Stepan staring him straight in the face.

"In... in the lackeys' room."

"You are lying! You were in the kitchen. Tell me the truth: were you there?"

"Yes, I was," the man confessed.

"You see! Didn't I tell you so? That's where he was! So you've been trying to deceive your mistress! You've been debauching my men... taking lovers in my house! Well, you just wait! Petro! Ivan!"

Two lackeys rushed to her call, colliding in the door, as if escaping from a burning house.

"Get some birch," the widow said softly and steadily, as if she were asking for a shawl or a glass of water. But her eyes lit up with ferocious fire.

The men hurried out. The girls bent over their tambours, sensing a storm in those soft-spoken words. Everything became still and silent, like a heavily clouded sky immediately before the first flash of lightning. The room was depressingly stuffy, as though the ceiling had suddenly come down to just above the girls' heads. None of them stirred... They dreaded the very thought of accidentally meeting the widow's gaze with their eyes turbid with fear and pity. They were also afraid of looking at Ulyana — lest they should cry!

Ulyana stood by one of the walls near a door, looking like a ghost. Across from her, at another door, stood Stepan. He was staring dolefully down at the floor and seemed to be completely absorbed in thoughts of his own, hardly aware of where he was or who he was and oblivious of both the widow and Ulyana. The widow loomed in the middle of the room, between the two culprits. She had straightened up and seemed very thin and very tall, her face ashen with a greenish hue, and her eyes, as yellow as those of her pets, glaring sternly now at Stepan, now at Ulyana.

The lackeys came back with birch rods.

"Go ahead, teach her not to cheat her mis —"

"Oh, no, dear Madam!" Ulyana threw herself at the widow's feet.

"Get away from me!"

"I won't do it... I wasn't with Stepan... Ah, I won't... I wasn't in the kitchen at all... He-e-elp!... I ran to see my Aunt... Oh, help me... he-e-elp me all who trust in God!"

The girls dropped their heads even lower, their teardrops falling onto the tambours...

Stepan burst out of the room.

With great difficulty, they helped Ulyana to her feet.

Stepan seemed to have evaporated. Ivan and Petro were made to pay dearly for letting him run away. But he just vanished into thin air and was never to be seen again.

The widow became alarmed. Where could Stepan be? Why hadn't that fool wanted to exchange his old skin for a fresh one? Again, it had all been Ulyana's fault! Hadn't the widow been

saying that this nasty girl would not let her live out the rest of her days in peace?

These worries wore the widow out. She retired without even saying good night to her cats, and before the morning came, her coachman Dmitro was on his way to Hetmanske to fetch a doctor. Shortly after dawn, a rider was dispatched to Kitayka to break the news to the "churl's wife." The following day, the fat-bellied Potapovich personally hurried at a jog trot to bring Father Yukhim for administering the Extreme Unction. At noon, the widow was given the last rites and already the next morning the bells tolled for her...

The bad maid did her in, after all!

* * *

Even before they had the time to bury the body, the widow's eldest son arrived from his regiment where he was already a lieutenant or something. Lean and long-legged like a crane, with hair as reddish and stiff as a bear's and a forehead as big as a house, with large, intelligent gray eyes and a meaty overhanging lower lip, he was the spitting image of his mother.

Vasil Semenovitch took charge of his parents' property. First of all he ordered to evict the feline community. The cats' sweet existence suddenly came to an end. Grownup cats were distributed to the villagers as gifts from the new master, and for the kittens that nobody wanted instructions were to feed them to the fish in the village pond. This was soon over and done with. Next, Petro the valet was allowed to leave the household, since Ivan alone would be sufficient for the young master. Somehow, Vasil Semenovitch did not hurry to disband the girl servants. He would often drop into their room to banter with them. Apart from hunting, this seemed to be his only entertainment. Of all the maids, he showed special preference to Ulyana. That merry songbird kept the young gentleman from getting too sad.

"It seems as if a nightingale has built its nest in your throat," Vasil Semenovitch praised her voice.

"A tomtit, more likely," Ulyana smiled.

"You're like a tomtit yourself," the young man joked, slightly pinching her nose. That would always make her blush like a rose.

The girls really enjoyed working for the young master. Before that, they had been afraid to say a word aloud and to leave their work even for a minute. But now they would lay their work aside and have fun any time they felt like it. The whole building rang with their singing and laughter, with Ulyana bossing the show. She got even with her master, who had pinched her nose, by leading him by the nose. Whenever she wanted something, she always managed to have her way.

This state of affairs lasted for about half a year, until one night

the master ordered Ivan to pack his suitcases to leave for a long trip in the morning.

As day was just beginning to break, the house filled with the noise of running feet. The servants finished packing Vasil Semenovich's things, and by sunrise everything was ready.

Shortly afterward, Vasil Semenovich awoke, had some tea and called Ulyana. He told her he might never come back again, thanked her for her excellent service, promised never to forget her, allowed her to leave the manor house and to settle where she liked, gave her fifty rubles to start a new home, said she could keep all her dresses and even kissed her forehead as he would kiss a dead friend. Then he was gone.

Ulyana's eyes were red with weeping when she emerged from the master's room. Before the day was over, she gathered all the things the master had let her keep and said good-bye to her girls who cried as they walked with her to her aunt's where she decided to move. Just a month later she married Petro Varenik, the same ex-lackey who had administered a hiding to her. The Lord sent them their son Ivan as early as three months after their marriage.

All this time Piski was ruled by Potapovich. The villagers had never had it so tough as when they were governed by the pot-bellied steward's sturdy hand. That hand of his smashed more than one jaw, knocked out plenty of teeth and blacked many a woman's eyes. He was a burly bully and quick with his fists.

A year later, Vasil Semenovich returned with a young wife. Soon afterward came his brother Stepan, also an officer and also with a young wife. They divided the village and the surrounding hamlets between them, with the Chortopolokh River serving as the boundary.

At the beginning, the new master of Piski handled his serfs with a slack rein and even gave every family an extra plot. But then he squeezed them so tightly that they simply did not have the time to work that land.

Now Potapovich could be dispensed with. He bought his freedom and started a tavern near the town of Romodan. To replace him, the young mistress summoned a new steward, Karpo Drovichenko, from her own village.

Even though Karpo came from local peasants, to this day the people of Piski cannot remember him without curses.

"Potapovich was bad enough!" they would tell one another. "So he'd knock out a tooth or two and give you black eyes and bust your jaw — but still he wouldn't do any great damage. But this fellow is just like rust. Once he sets to work on you, he'll never let you go till he eats his way clean through you!"

The peasants of Piski nicknamed him Rust, and it stuck. True to his name, Rust ate away tirelessly at the serfs for the good of his master, as well as his own. It was he who prevailed upon

Vasil Semenovich to take away the extra patches and to give the serfs a six-day week instead.

"They've turned into lazy drunkards. The more we make them work, the less they'll drink," he reasoned.

The villagers had indeed turned into lazy drunkards. They had even stopped running away. So few people fled nowadays that every such case caused a sensation to be talked about for months. Slavery, like a poisonous gas, dulled the peasants' brains. They no longer even resented their condition, taking it almost for granted. Instead, they had taken to moping in taverns. A serf was either working for the lord or hanging around a tavern. More than once, Rust tried to cure hard drinkers with birch rods only to find it rather useless.

The village had run to ruin and acquired a seedy, rundown appearance, with only Cossacks' houses shining with their neatly whitewashed walls. Also, robbers and thieves got to work here and there. That was something new for Piski! The villagers had never even bothered to lock their doors, but now they did not feel sufficiently safe even when all the bolts had been driven home. Sometimes, the master's warehouses were broken into as well...

Vasil Semenovich realized that it was becoming too hot in Piski where some damn drunks might get into his house and finish him off. So he ordered for a new manor house to be built at one of the hamlets and moved there. After that, the place came to be known as Krasnohorka.

* * *

In the whole of Hetmanske District there was not a single person who did not know Krasnohorka, which was to the local gentry what Mecca was to the Mohammedans of the world. Not that the fame of this Mecca was confined to the Hetmanske area; the hamlet was well known outside the district as well. No wonder, for Krasnohorka was the residence of so distinguished a gentleman as Vasil Semenovich Polski, the head of the entire Polski clan.

The clan had grown considerably, both in number and in power. Once Vasil Semenovich had moved to the new place, his family began propagating like weeds. Nearly every coming year brought him a child. He was only unfortunate in having just one son in ten years. The rest were girls, six in all.

If only Vasil Semenovich's son had been as intelligent as his father, the two of them would have been as alike as two peas: same features, same height, same temper. Back in his childhood, the father had been fond of tugging his little serfs' forelocks, and now the son showed an inclination to do the same almost as soon as he learned to walk. And since the village boys no longer wore

the long Cossack-style forelocks, he soon discovered he might as well paw their flesh.

Vasil Semenovitch proved to be a man of his word and did not go back on his promise not to forget Ulyana. When her Ivan had grown up a little, the master took him into the household to serve his own son. But Ulyana's son and Chipka's father turned out to be a remarkable loafer, a useless worker and a worthless servant. The only thing he ever did was make trouble. Vasil Semenovitch's dear little son suffered a great deal from his servant until the latter felt a sudden urge to travel. Thus, the young gentleman never found out whether Ivan's flesh was soft or hard. Shortly afterward he himself was shipped off to school.

Vasil Semenovitch's daughters were something else again. Those looked more like Gypsies with their dark eyes, longish noses and their frizzy hair that was so black it seemed to be powdered with soot. That surely made them look like Gypsy girls straight out of the camp. On the other hand, Stepan Semenovitch's daughters were as pretty as pictures to be framed and hung on the wall. Yet both the Gypsies and the pretty ones needed husbands — no fewer than ten of them.

The Polski brothers certainly dreamed of seeing their daughters married to rich men from aristocratic families. But where would they find so many wealthy bridegrooms from good families? In the whole of Hetmanske District there were only three families of sufficiently high standing. Of those, the Hetmanskys never lived in their estates. Born and baptized in the capital, they spent their lives there as well. Another wealthy family was that of the Shved widow. Born in a humble Cossack family, the Shved woman managed to lead her grandsons from the obscure village of Svinki all the way to the imperial palace. The third family were the Polskis.

Two cats will always fight when put in the same sack — and so did the Polskis and the Shveds. Vasil Semenovitch liked to brag that his father had been received at the court as one of the few privileged. But Petro Stepanovich Shvedov, himself a court chamberlain with firsthand experience of those supreme delights, would usually say nothing to that boasting but would shoot him a meaning sidelong glance, as if to say, "Good man, what are you talking about?" And then Vasil Semenovitch would lower his gaze... Their enmity started out of nothing, just because of noble-men's vanity. Which was all the more deplorable, because Petro Stepanovich had sons, while Vasil Semenovitch had daughters. But no! The two men became bitter enemies, may God have mercy on them!

As years went by, the Polski girls didn't get any younger. Vasil Semenovitch got so desperate that he almost tried displaying them at a marketplace. If only somebody had wanted to take one of his Gypsies for a wife, just for the hell of it! But nobody

did! Stepan Semenovitch's daughters, even though younger, had already given him grandchildren, but these girls stuck in their father's house like Gypsies in a camp tent...

The only solution for Vasil Semenovitch was to throw open his house to gentlemen of modest means and social standing, provided they belonged to the nobility. This he did and then let loose his "Gypsies" upon his new guests, which gave him sons-in-law who included a Sovinsky, a Krivinsky, a Boretsky and a Mihil. "Gypsy" hamlets sprang up all over the district. Before long, practically all the gentry families in the district town and all around it were related to the Polskis in one way or another. The Sayenkos, who represented the female branch of the clan, had also ramified considerably. Those, too, were of the same blood, of course.

The new in-laws were mouths to be fed and stomachs to be filled. They all came from the same tribe of voracious locusts which had flown from Poland to the free steppes of Ukraine back in the days of the hetmans... Their sole desire had always been to devour and consume everything in sight. Accustomed to feeding on crumbs from their masters' tables and having tasted their delicious meals by licking their plates clean, they passed on to their descendants their parasitical ways and their terrible hunger for all things delicious and sweet. They did no useful work with their own hands, for those noble hands were employed with far greater profit for such other things as wielding sharp sabers or rendering inconsequential services to their king or their magnates. Their progeny imbibed this conviction with their mothers' milk... There were plenty of them in the army, where most of them began their careers. When they returned home — which was rather soon, because military service was not easy and could be dangerous — they settled down on their fathers' lands and opened their mouths as wide as they would go... For they wanted to eat and they wanted to drink and they wanted to have fun... How could they do it? Where would they get the money without soiling their noble hands?

This was achieved by marrying into the families of rich lords. Frankly speaking, they sold themselves in the hope of being rewarded.

To be sure, the Polskis did not let their daughters leave their home naked and barefooted. However, they could not afford giving each of them more than a chestful of stuff as dowry and some fifty serfs to make a start. There was not much one could hope to accomplish with such a handful. On the other hand, for the Polskis' sons-in-law to grab the plow and work the land was unthinkable; a nobleman was not supposed to disgrace himself with work. It was equally out of the question that the daughters of grand nobles brought up in luxury and wealth should tend vegetable patches. That much was clear.

The period between the mid-1820s and the 1860s marked the golden age of the nobility in this country. Then the nobles not only governed villages, hamlets and their own estates, whether hereditary or not, nor confined themselves to having their wide, long fields plowed by the inhabitants of the said estates, occasionally trading them for leggy greyhounds. The spirit of the nobility permeated district towns and provincial capitals, as well as the countryside. Everywhere, nobles were in charge of everything. Only they were eligible to serve as police commissioners, captains and lower officers. All judges and court clerks were chosen by the gentry from their midst... Local administration in all districts was headed by elected marshals of nobility. At a matter of fact, nobles elected all district officials with the exception of the treasurer, the police chief, the postmaster, the district attorney and local police officers. That was almost too good to be true!

Such were the times when the Polskis took over Hetmanske District. Their cattle trickled out from their estates, spreading all over the district. Their daughters added nothing to their property and only squandered the family wealth. Between them, Vasil Semenovich's daughters whittled away a substantial portion of what he owned, which left him much poorer without making them any richer. Well, a needy man must think of something to make both ends meet. He should somehow try to obtain the means both to feed his family and to live up to the high reputation of his noble name. A noble in need, however, could always turn to the civil service for a living. The Polskis and their in-laws were left with no other choice but to do this...

And so they did.

* * *

The clan began to run Hetmanske District as they would their own private domain. Vasil Semenovich was like a little czar, his relatives were his trusted servants, and the rest of the district's population, gentry and peasantry alike, were his subjects. He also granted audiences of almost royal dignity. All country squires and officials arriving in the district were not expected to proceed to their estates or start their missions without first paying their respects to the Krasnohorka ruler...

And they all went to see him and bowed their heads to him... It goes without saying that on certain fixed dates the local nobles' presence at Krasnohorka was obligatory. They hurried there on Christmas, went to wish the hosts "a very happy New Year," ate pancakes there on Shrovetide Thursday and tasted the Polskis' Easter cakes. Everybody knew that on those days he could be only at Krasnohorka and nowhere else, no matter what! Sick wives and dying children were no excuses. On Christmas

there could be such snowstorms that travelers could hardly see where they were going, and on Shrovetide and even on Easter the roads often turned into impassable quagmire, sometimes with a downpour on top of it... Still, the entire district administration was on its way to "Mecca." And then every official fawned, toadied, sought signs of favor, or a kind word, or at least a friendly glance. He whom Vasil Semenovitch "honored" with some special sign of attention would suddenly grow taller, and the rest would enviously wonder how a mere kind word could instantly increase a person's height... But he who was unlucky enough to cause Vasil Semenovitch's displeasure might as well go and jump in the lake there and then, abandoned and shunned even by his dearest friends...

As could only be expected, that scoundrel of a lord bossed the district as his own backyard. His word was law. His orders were not discussed. Everybody served and tried to please him and him only and maybe also his leaseholder Lejba Ovravovich, the son-in-law of old Lejba who had been the late general's manager.

With so many of Vasil Semenovitch's relatives employed as his assistants and clerks, the rest could only try to serve and please him as best they could. Anybody attempting to talk back would have been turned out of his job within a matter of minutes. With Hetmanske District administered the way it was, no one could expect to hold a civil service position without Vasil Semenovitch's consent.

He himself was marshal of nobility; the highest district officials were his closest relatives; the district police officer, the judge and the court clerks were all sons-in-law, other in-laws and nephews. Like a hen gathering its chicks under its wings, Vasil Semenovitch got a whole district under...

And all its people remained silent, humble and obedient, and toiled for the monstrous Polski clan and bowed their heads lower and lower before their despot.

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XI Mohammed

After the deaths of Mirin and Marina, Grief, having barely brushed the lives of Ivan and Motrya with the tip of its tear-soaked wing, flew on to other homes stricken by greater poverty and want, that is, to the lonesome dwellings of serfs. The Cossacks' nests bathed in the quiet happiness of rustic life. For them, the years that followed were filled with tending crops and cattle, gathering the fruit of labor, hard field and household work and

the enjoyment that children gave those who were blessed with them.

Ivan, set on farming when still a child, continued on with it. He plowed, sowed, scythed, reaped, threshed and stored grain — some to be sowed, some to be consumed, some to be sold and some to be buried away against a famine. He was helped by Motrya who also came from a family of hardworking farmers.

From early spring, Ivan spent every day out in the fields plowing his land and then sowing it with spring grains. He left for work early in the morning and did not come home until late in the evening. This lasted until Easter. Once the Easter holidays were over, the haymaking season began. Then Motrya, too, had plenty to do, piling up the hay. Next came harvesttime. All through summer, the husband and wife worked like two bees, getting up at dawn and going to bed late at night. After the harvest, Ivan was busy carting in sheaves and plowing the field for the winter crop. Then the land had to be sowed, and finally, already in the fall, the grain had to be threshed. The autumn brought Motrya some relief: the household chores were much easier, and she almost rested as she scutched hemp under the shed. Then winds began banking up the snow. Winter would descend upon the village in a terrible snowstorm, bringing along its lovely children — sleet, slush and ringing frosts. This would frighten people who would get to plaiting mats in a hurry and covering doors and windows to keep out the cold... Still, one did not sit on one's hands — not even in winter. There was enough work both for men and for women. Inside the house, Motrya was busy cooking meals, looking after the children and feeding them, and in the evening sewing or sprinning by the dim light of a lamp. Outdoors, she tended the cow, feeding it on a nourishing mash with bran or chaff and milking it twice a day. Ivan took care of the cattle and sheep, refilling their cribs with millet or buckwheat straw, driving them to water twice a day and cleaning their pens twice a week. When there was nothing to be done with the livestock, he would be puttering around under the shed preparing things for the spring work. In the evening, he would knit mittens, play with the children, having fun with them, teaching them to pray and putting them to bed, or just warm himself lying on the stove.

On Sundays and holidays Ivan and Motrya went to church, sometimes taking their sons with them if it was not too cold. Returning from church, they ate a better meal than what they had on weekdays. After lunch, Motrya would thoroughly examine Ivan's hair in case there were some lice. Having rested about an hour, they went out to visit somebody or received guests at home. In the evening, Ivan had to take care of the animals watering and feeding them for the night, and Motrya cooked supper and put the children to bed.

Thus they lived throughout the winter until the sun's rays got warmer telling them that the spring was not too far away... And then they went back to the fields, and the same work and worries as the year before would start for them all over again... And this went on and on, not one year, not two years, but a whole lifetime. They worked to eat and ate to be able to work. So much about the happy peasant lot!

But those who got accustomed to it found it quite happy, even joyful. Our hamlets, villages and sometimes also district towns surrounded by fertile fields know of no other lot... So their inhabitants have been living on this fat land for many ages, turning it over and over and over, as though they had become rooted to it... People are like the land they live on. If it is rich, so are they; if it is fallow, they, too, go hungry... A peasant without land is like a crippled beggar. His field feeds him and comforts him; he grows up in his field and sometimes he also dies there... It is almost like the air to him, for he dies when deprived of it.

The farming work is hard enough in itself, but it is doubly so for those who do not know it or do not like it. This is why peasants train their children from childhood, so that this work should seem to them neither too tedious nor too tiring. Farmers' children learn to work early. Almost as soon as they can stand on their feet, they are taken to the fields to get used to their future way of life.

Ivan and Motrya also intended to bring up their children in this way. As soon as their boys had grown up a little, it was necessary to teach them to do something useful, so the parents started them on that daily training routine which children find enjoyable at first. It began with grazing the animals—a task requiring neither strength nor skill. It was simply a matter of watching them nibble grass. Learning to drive oxen came next. Hey, come on and whoa was about all a little driver was supposed to know.

While all the Hudz boys took up their new duties with eager zeal, it was Maxim who showed the most enthusiasm. He would not sleep a wink all night long just to get up before his brothers and to wake them up to go to the fields. However, he was also the first to get bored. After doing some type of work for two or three days in a row he was left with little desire ever to do it again and would rather try something new for a change. Then he would yield to neither force nor threats. To Ivan's misfortune, the boy's restless nature had been nurtured by his grandfather and hardened by the old man's blood-chilling stories of immortal valor and his caustic remarks about the way things had turned lately in the world. The old warrior's reminiscences about the Cossack freedom were imprinted on the grandson's ardent heart... The yearning for the freedom Mirin had told him about hatched out, like a bird, in the little nest of his heart and now filled him with

anxiety and defiance, made him rush from one thing to another and hate everything that hindered him, preventing him from doing what he liked and acting as he pleased. Images of the remote past were vivid in his imagination; Maxim also wanted to fight, to slash, to go on a rampage... But fight whom? And where? Thoughts went round and round in his head...

A column of dust rose beyond the village. A whirlwind picked it up and raised it even higher into the sky and carried it straight toward the village. Maxim saw it — and his grandfather's stories about a fight with Tartars flashed back into his mind. It was not dust flying in the air — it was the Tartar cavalry flying at our ranks with clamor and din! "Wait, brothers!" the Cossack chief shouted to his men. "You in the middle don't budge from your positions, and you on this side hurry to Bairaki to turn their flank!... Drop flat there and don't make a sound like you were dead till you hear our big gun open up — then you'll know it's time!..." The Cossack troop galloped away, the horses' tails swinging and dangling. The Tartar yells approached nearer and nearer. A pasha rode in front, his saber at the ready... The Cossacks backed away a little... then some more... The Tartars pressed them hard. There were screams, shouts and the clang of weapons... Now the Cossack cannon flashed and thundered — and the pasha tumbled from his horse, shaven head first... "Kill them! Smash them!" cries rang out from one end of the battlefield to the other. Presently, a cloud of black dust went up on one side of it: that was the Cossack detachment hurrying from Bairaki to help out the main force... The ground groaned under the hoofs of their horses as they tore along... The vision took Maxim's breath away and heated his blood... Now he saw himself galloping after those valorous fighters... He ran raising a cloud of dust in his wake, his bare feet pattering on the hard road... Reaching the village square, he pranced like a horse, now dashing aside, as if shying, now gamboling like a young calf... He cracked his whip, whistled and shouted... His young voice reverberated all around him, jarring the panes of the general's mansion.

Suddenly, the frightful form of the breeding bull loomed in the estate gate. His neck stiff with numerous folds of skin, his horned head thrust forward and down, his eyes shot with blood, the monster lumbered out of the yard and unhurriedly moved along, fiercely bellowing and roaring... The ground moaned under his hoofs, and his wild roaring filled the air... Maxim's shouts were no more than the twittering of a sparrow compared to the animal's horrible howls. But the boy was not scared. Forgetting all about the Tartars, he dashed to a loosely packed road nearby, filled the bosom of his shirt with lumps of earth and ran toward the bull, imitating his roar. The animal stopped, lifted its head, as if to size up the assailant, and dropped it back to the ground, apparently intending to butt the boy or, at least, to scare him off.

But it was so fat that it could not even point its horns properly. Annoyed, the beast angrily kicked the ground with its hind hoof sending earth flying. Maxim threw a lump at it. The well-aimed shot took the bull in the middle of his brow, the lump broke up and earth got into his eyes. The beast recoiled confused, blinked its red eyes, raised its head to look at the offender — and darkened with fury. Bending down its head, it advanced on Maxim. Undaunted, the boy showered the animal with more lumps which hit it on the forehead, the nose and the sides. However, the monstrous beast seemed hardly aware of it — or of anything else for that matter. Roaring, it went straight toward Maxim — faster and faster...

“Hey, kid!” a voice called from the estate. “You’d better run for your life or you’ll be in big trouble!”

Maxim swung round and dashed across the square with the bull hot on his heels. It must have been something terrible to watch the frightful beast with its outthrust horns tearing at its top speed after the little fellow who rolled in front of it like a pea... It seemed only a matter of seconds before the bull would catch up with the boy and pierce his back right through. Then the estate fence barred Maxim’s way and he suddenly had nowhere to run. Now, it seemed, he was cornered... No, he was not! Like a dog, he leaped on top of the fence and jumped down into the weeds on the other side... The bull also attempted to jump across but got stuck on a fence post. Blood gushed from his pierced side... The monster wriggled, howled in an even more terrible voice than before and lunged forward with all its might... The fence fell, and the bull fell with it and howled with pain. The post tore open his whole belly, gutting the poor animal. Human voices were heard and household serfs came running. A hubbub broke out.

“Do you see what you’ve done?” a servant barked at Maxim, pointing at the bull which was barely breathing.

The boy laughed.

“Why are you baring your teeth, you son of a b—? Come on, let’s go to the lady.”

Maxim broke away and ran home.

Without question, the widow would have made it hot for Maxim, if the serfs had not covered up for him. They told her the bull had hit the fence while chasing a dog. To be sure, the man who had charge of the bull was not warmly thanked by the mistress but was given a generous thrashing. For this Ivan treated him to all the vodka he could drink. The bull died, though. Maxim got off with a lashing from his father. That was not really much of a punishment. The boy went back to his pranks as soon as his tears were dry.

His soul craved for freedom, and his youthful strength cried for action. He felt gloomy in the middle of the broad empty steppes and on a plowed field; he was cramped in his parents’ quiet

dwelling; he was oppressed by the company of mute animals which he, as the eldest brother, had to graze. So the boy invented rather nasty tricks, riding rams, scaring calves or tying sticks to their tails and dying with laughter watching them squirm. Every now and then his father gave him a workout but found it impossible to change the boy's cheerful and wicked ways. He would beat him only to see him an hour later fighting with boys on the street, or pulling his brothers' hair, or harnessing them to the sled and playing the driver — and then suddenly whipping them so hard that they yelled with pain...

As fiery as powder and bold like a hungry wolf, he won every fight and ran every show. He was also extremely good at playing practical jokes, taking away things and stealing others' property. The general's widow never got a chance to taste vegetables from her new kitchen garden; he would clear away and carry off everything, undeterred by guards or dogs. Once he was surprised in an apple tree but that was nothing to him. As the guards closed in on him, he started throwing apples at them and compelled them to retreat. Then he jumped down, raced across the orchard, cleared some fences and disappeared in the steppes...

But real trouble with him began when he had grown up and ripened. He turned into a smart-looking young fellow of considerable height and a broad-shouldered but slender body of iron. He was as sharp as a fox and loved a good song and a hearty laugh. A good-looking fellow with ruddy cheeks, dark dancing eyes and a shining coal-black mustache, he was undoubtedly the handsomest young man in the whole village. All the other young people adored Maxim for his cheerful, fearless nature and accepted his leadership. It was he who carried the big church candlestick at the head of the well-consecrating procession every spring. Naturally, it was also he who led the young lads' gang on his street. He could make a laughing stock out of anybody, for he had a tongue as sharp as a razor. When Lutsenko's gate was stolen and hung on the very top of a centenerian oak, there was no doubt that only Maxim could have done it. Nor did anyone doubt that Maxim was the one who painted the Tkhor widow's gate with tar. Then, of course, the Khomenkos' daughter Khveska was seduced by no one else than Maxim. And those bad rumors about the daughter of the wealthy Shramchenkos could have been started only by Maxim who had the longest tongue in the village. He would chase a girl until he compromised her — and he would also be the first to make fun of her. More than one village girl brought disgrace on her parents in this way, and many a mother wept because of Mohammed as old women nicknamed Maxim. Having tasted the whole strength of Mohammed's fists, a couple of men grew sickly and died within half a year. When it came to carousing, he could drink any drunkard under the table. He and his pals made a lot of trouble after their drinking bouts.

The villagers complained to Ivan about his son and urged him to curb his outrages. However, there was not much he could do with such a giant. Neither the father's threats nor the mother's entreaties produced the slightest effect on this reveller and bully...

"Let's try to marry him!" Ivan told himself and spoke to Motrya about his idea. Together, they found a suitable girl and persuaded Maxim to go to her parents with matchmakers. They soon wished they hadn't. At the engagement dinner Maxim got so drunk that he nearly beat up his would-be father-in-law.

"May the Lord thank you for such a fiancé," the man told the matchmakers. "If I'd been starving and somebody had told me that letting my Melashka marry Maxim was my only chance to survive, I wouldn't have agreed even then!"

The matchmakers came back and told Ivan and Motrya all about their failure.

"This child is my bad luck and my curse!" the father cried out.

"You, son, have disgraced us in our old age," the mother wept. "You don't care if we both die before our time because of you."

Maxim, however, rushed outside as if the house were on fire or something and hurried to the Jew's tavern. Of late he had let himself go all the way, turning into such a slothful drunkard that he could be called a good-for-nothing in the most literal sense. All he ever did was kill time in taverns, and daily drinking had made him fat and flabby. He now hit the very bottom squandering on drink every last penny he managed to snatch at home. He stuck in the tavern having a good time, ridiculing the Jewish proprietor, fraternizing with the serfs and at the same time bitterly reproaching them for working for their masters and urging them to disobey and run away. Making trouble was all the fellow was good for!

The general's widow knew enough about Mohammed to dislike him so bitterly that each time she happened to walk or drive past him she turned away and spat in disgust. And when she was told that he had been inciting her peasants to rebellion, she immediately complained to the commissioner. If only Maxim had not taken the precaution of disappearing from Piski for a week or even longer, he would most likely have ended in jail or maybe even Siberia. But what was Siberia to such a daredevil? Nothing at all!

His father suffered because of him for quite a long time until one day he confessed to his wife, fighting back tears:

"There's nothing more I can do with this scoundrel! Neither kind words, nor demands, nor curses get through to him... And I'm not strong enough to fight him... Let him go to the army! Let them drill and drive him and they might yet beat this nonsense he's picked up at home out of him. Let others try to teach him, because I've given up trying!"

Motrya burst into tears. She felt pity for her child. No matter how bad and evil he might be, he was still her own flesh and blood. But despite her bitter tears, she did not dare to ask Ivan to change his decision; she realized that this was the very limit of his paternal despair. That was something no entreaties would be able to shake.

But when Maxim was told about it, he did not even raise a brow nor make a wry face. Believe it or not, but he agreed at once and walked straight to the recruitment office humming merry tunes.

Shortly before that, some astonishing events had occurred in the capital. The old czar had died leaving two brothers. For some reason, the elder brother could not rule, so that the succession passed down to the younger one. This change did not come off peacefully, though. The czar's Guards, together with the Freemasons, mutinied, and many innocent people, as well as rebels, lost their lives before the mutiny was put down*. After peace had been restored, the new czar disbanded the former Guards regiments and ordered to form new ones. Soldiers were to be all alike — tall, straight and smart-looking. Maxim fitted these requirements admirably. When he was leaving the office, they did not even bark, "Shave his head!" Instead, some mustached officer shouted, "Let him serve in the Guards!" Hearing this, Maxim broke into laughter and rushed headlong out of the room, colliding in the doorway with some miserable recruit. Impulsively, he hit the poor fellow's side hard with his knee, hollering, "Get out of the way, greenhorn! Can't you see a Guard's coming?" The man reeled and nearly fell...

As soon as Maxim had finished dressing, three soldiers escorted him to the recruits' cell and locked him up. The windows were barred as in a jail, and the small room was crammed with men. Some sat crying, others did not cry but looked just as cheerless. In one corner, a cluster of men were noisily laughing at some joke.

"Let me join you, brothers," Maxim turned to them.

"Come and do your bit."

"Why have they thrown us into this cramped cage?" Maxim asked, looking around at the sooty walls.

"That's to keep you from running away," a voice replied.

"Why the hell should I run? How long d'you think they'll keep us here?"

"Nobody knows for sure... Three days, so I've heard..."

"Too bad. If only we had some booze, it would be much nicer."

"What about some kvass with dead rats instead?"

"Drink it yourself if you like it so much!"

Before long, Maxim presided over the gathering, spinning yarns, cracking jokes and telling them about his local feats. He

* Reference to the Decembrist uprising (1825) against Nicholas I

kept everybody laughing and rolled with laughter himself. There was a sociable fellow! But at night, when the sentinel outside began shouting "Look out!", he suddenly felt sad.

Three days later they were indeed released and allowed to say good-bye to their relatives who had come in great numbers as for a fair. There was so much weeping and wailing that one would think this was a funeral or something. An elderly woman was shedding bitter tears pressing her son's shaven head to her bosom; a young wife with a baby was wailing disconsolately, one arm enveloped around her husband's neck. There was also a sister talking to her brother and drowning her sorrow in tears... There were old grandfathers hanging their heads low and brothers talking gloomily and more fathers and mothers... Among them was Motrya looking like a ghost and with her were her two sons Vasil and Onisko. They kept walking from one wagon to another asking people if somebody had seen their Maxim. Nobody had, though... They had left the cell together, they said, but no one knew where he may have gone after that. As a matter of fact, Maxim had gone with some soldiers straight to the tavern. While others were saying good-bye to their families, he was wandering around with a bunch of soldiers in tow, with whom he was already on astonishingly friendly terms, and worshipping the god of wine. In the end, Motrya and her sons left for home without having seen Maxim...

Shortly afterward, the recruits were to leave for some faraway place. Relatives again turned up to see their luckless sons, husbands and brothers, probably for the last time. Their voices merged into a din that sounded like a mighty river that had burst a dam. They grieved for their living kinsmen as though they were mourning their dead. Motrya was there again. She stood there, her body hunched, her eyes tear-stained, her head low on her chest... At her side were Vasil and Onisko — and Maxim. Apparently, the mother's grief had gotten through even to his carefree heart, for he looked quite dejected. Then a drum rolled, and soldiers barked orders for the men to form ranks... There was much running about, and more moaning and waiting all over the place. It was time for the last words of parting. Maxim stepped closer to his mother.

"Farewell, Mother!... Remember me kindly..."

"Farewell, son! Good-bye, my child... Take good care of yourself..."

Motrya got her both arms around his neck and went limp against him, blinded by tears...

"That's enough, Mother, please... Cheer up, I'll manage it all right!" He freed himself from her stiff arms to say good-bye to his brothers.

The recruits were drawn up in a column, one behind another. The drum sounded once more and officers shouted more orders...

"Farewell!"

"Keep well!"

"May God help you!..."

"Good luck!"

"Good-bye, Mother!" Maxim said as he was passing past Motrya.

"Wait, son..."

She rushed to Maxim and thrust some money into his hand.

"Thank you, Mother!..." he said, putting the money into his pocket without falling out of step. "Good-bye and thank Father for me for letting the army have me."

"Look... after... yourself and good... bye..."

Motrya did not finish. But Maxim was already far ahead and could not hear her anyway.

The villagers went home. Motrya, too, returned with her sons, wet with tears and crushed by grief... Ivan paced the room, as gloomy as a night in the fall. He did not even glance at the boys and did not utter a single word. Only when the sons had gone out, he asked Motrya:

"Well... did he go away?"

"I saw him off," he said, sobbing.

"What was he like?"

"He looked all right."

"Did you give him the money?"

"Yes."

"How did he take it?"

"He told me to thank you for having him taken."

"Let him thank his silly head," Ivan snapped and fell silent again.

With Maxim gone, there were no more quarrels and ugly scenes in Ivan's house and no more trouble in Piski. Without their ringleader, his buddies fell apart. Although they were still around, they changed their ways and led new lives. A few died, and the rest got married, settled down and raised children.

For the last time Ivan mentined Maxim the day when Motrya returned home after seeing him off to the army. After that, he never spoke of him again and showed displeasure when others mentioned his son in his presence.

"I don't have a third son — and never have!" he would say. But having said it, he would then keep silent for the rest of the day. The man must have found it difficult to chase certain thoughts away.

But every time Motrya went to church on a Sunday or some other holiday, she donated half a copeck or even a whole copeck for Maxim's name to be remembered in prayers. Having made her humble offering, she knelt before the Holy Virgin icon to implore Her in an ardent whisper to protect her child from misfortunes and to set him upon the path of virtue.

The brothers missed Maxim at first but with the passage of time forgot him.

Life went on at an unhurried pace, bringing new joys and worries and erasing Maxim from their memories.

It might have been different if only he had sent a word. Where was he? How was he getting along? Nothing at all was known about him.

Meanwhile, the Hudzes were getting their share of worries and troubles. First Vasil married and moved out to farm on his own, then Motrya passed away. Feeling that before long he would follow after his wife, Ivan married Onisko and divided his property between his sons leaving the house and two *desyatinas** of land to the "soldier" in case he ever turned up. Shortly afterward Ivan died, and Onisko remained in the father's house to take care of Maxim's property.

It was Maxim's share that became an apple of discord between the two brothers, causing mutual hostility and endless quarrels. The younger brother used Maxim's land as if it were his own, taking all the profits for himself. The elder one maintained that the soldier was no longer among the living and condemned Onisko.

"He's no brother to me!" Vasil fumed. "What kind of brother is that? He's laid his hands on everything and he wants to be my brother. The soldier must've died long ago, and I bet not a bone of him has remained. Then why doesn't Onisko let me have my share? That would be a *desyatina* of land and half the house. I don't even need that house, because I've got my own. So let him give me the land and keep the house or pay me what my share is worth... But he wants it all for himself... He's a dog, not a brother!"

Onisko was hardly less adamant, and it often came to blows between them. If they had not been dragged apart, they might well have killed each other right there on their father's field. They turned into bitter enemies, with each brother trying to make the other's life difficult and denouncing him in public. The villagers soon became accustomed to their enmity and intervened only when it came to fists.

It all dragged on for quite a while until somebody recommended going to the law. Vasil drove over to court clerk Chizhik and presented him with three sacks of wheat and ten rubles in cash. A law suit was filed. Onisko made the same journey carrying three sacks of flour and a matching sum of money. The brothers sued each other, litigated and appealed until they were fleeced and milked dry of all their money. In the end both of them were ruined, just to find out that Maxim was alive and had even been promoted

* *Desyatina* (Rus.) — unit of land area equal to 2.7

to some rank. Then they made up their quarrel. Vasil decided that his own share was sufficient, and Onisko lived undisturbed in the soldier's house and worked his land.

XII The Army

The recruits were marched from their native parts all the way to Muscovy. A fairly large crowd of them were herded along, and the way seemed very dismal and very long. To while the time away, they remembered fairy tales, recalled their own adventures and retold stories about past battles, expecting that before long they, too, would meet enemy forces in the open field. Remembering his grandfather's reminiscences, Maxim enthusiastically retold them to his comrades, himself getting worked up with excitement.

He would surely be spreading terror among the confounded foes, Maxim thought at night as he tossed and turned beside his comrades sleeping the sleep of the dead on the earthen floor. Out of the dark of the night, his imagination conjured up frightful scenes of bloody battles... Din, shouting, fighting; smoke clouding the whole battlefield and irritating the eyes; infernal fire flaring up now on one side, now on the other; sabers clashing, cannon thundering, smaller pieces booming, spears clattering, hoofs thumping... There are Tartars galloping away at a break-neck speed... "Aha, blasted Tartars!" he cries and goes after them on his fast black horse... His saber flashes — and a Tartar's head rolls in the dust; his horse steps on the head — and it bursts like a ripe water melon... The vision took Maxim's breath away... Oh, God, let it be soon!

In the morning, they got up and were driven back onto the road. Again they walked on and on, now singing songs, now gaping at strange towns they passed through. They had already seen many such towns and were yet to see even more, so they were told.

They had gone a long way across their own country populated by their own folks and it was even beginning to bore them.

"Is this Muscovy still far?" they asked one another.

"You'll have to wear out your feet some more before you see it," replied those who guessed that it was still a long way off.

Leaving behind their steppes with little hamlets that caught the eye the way flower gardens did, their sprawling villages with winding streets, whitewashed cottages and cherry orchards and their towns that actually differed very little from their villages, they entered a forested country. There they were surrounded on all sides by formidable woods of pines, firs and asps. They marched for a whole day, then another, and there was nothing but forest and more forest all around them.

"That's where Muscovy begins," a man said.

"Is that so? Well, it surely looks pretty grim to me... All you see are just trees with only a small patch of sky above."

Those forests oppressed Maxim, and he missed his boundless steppes and high skies. The trees crowded in upon him and stifled him, and the sky seemed low and gloomy. It was indeed low and gloomy, for the fall was not far away. Dark-gray clouds sailed across the sky and it often rained.

Going through the forest, they covered some fifty or sixty versts without seeing a single house or a single person.

"But where are their hamlets, or villages, or towns?" the men wondered. "Aren't there any people here at all?"

"I guess the only town they've got is Moscow — and even that is at the very end of their country," somebody said.

They got grim and cheerless and plodded on in silence, their heads down.

Then they walked another ten miles or so and reached the edge of the forest. Smoke curled up from under the board roof of a blackish cabin. All their eyes became fixed on it.

"What's this — a forge?" Maxim asked.

"It's a village," said the noncom in charge of their party.

"But these must surely be forges on the edge of it."

"No, they are just *izbas*."

"What's an *izba*?"

"It's what you call a house, bumpkin."

Maxim broke into laughter.

"Houses — I'll be damned!" He turned to his countrymen. "Why, our forges are cleaner than these houses. And to think that they still praise their country. That's some country, too! God save me from seeing another one like this ever again."

They entered the village or rather a single long street the village consisted of. It was all quite unfamiliar. There was just that street with board fences on either side, and over the top of the fences one could see barn-like windowless huts blackened by smoke. Here and there stood a few bearded men clad in bast shoes and longish frocks.

"But those are Muscovites!" Maxim explained, having heard their speech.

"That's what they are... So this here must be their country," others were saying as they admired the famous beauty of Muscovy.

When they were billeted for the night, Maxim wanted to spit. Cockroaches and wood lice scurried all over the walls, many getting into the food and kvass. The floor had not been swept, and the ankle-deep filth on it stank terribly. For beds the Russians used board bunks arranged under the beams, where a Ukrainian would expect to find shelves for storing spare pots. The room was lighted not with oil or pig fat but with very thin splinters of

wood. Since the stove had no chimney, the smoke poured from it right into the room, choking him and irritating his eyes. Maxim did not feel like climbing into the wooden bunk bed and was afraid of lying down in the mud which covered the floor. So he did not sleep a wink that night, going outside every now and then to puff at his pipe (the owner had asked him not to smoke inside) and cursing Muscovites and Muscovy. For the first time he had seen a Muscovite in his own home. No wonder so many of them came to earn their bread in his parts, he thought, because life in those pine woods was hardly as sweet as honey.

In the morning, they were driven on.

Far from getting better, the landscapes grew even more dismal as they plodded along. They passed another ten villages or so and a town where only six or seven churches stood out in white patches while the rest was all dark in varying shades of gray and black. Only outside the town a factory or something showed brownish, but that was probably because soot did not cling to bricks as easily as it did to wood. Or maybe that factory had been built not long ago. The men's spirits sank even lower. Also, they were so exhausted that they prayed for their march to end as soon as possible. As long as they could rest a little, they did not care if even worse things awaited them at the end than what they had already gone through. They had been marching for two weeks and two days.

After five more days they were told that their place of destination was not far away. Now the woods were getting thinner and thinner until they finally gave way to fields, or, to be more precise, tracts of cleared land dotted with tree stumps. That area, too, must have been covered with trees not too long ago. Presently, some tall shapes appeared in the distance, here and there. Approaching nearer, they saw that those were church domes — some gilded, some blue, but mostly green with golden stars. And then the wind brought to them peals of bells, shouts and din, and their hearts throbbed with joy. At long last they would be able to take some rest!

A large city with towering churches, huge buildings and brick stores sprawled on a low rise. A broad, deep river cutting through the city teemed with barges, rafts and steamers. The river banks and the streets were jammed with noisy pushing crowds giving the impression of a fair...

The recruits were overwhelmed by this display of urban wealth. There was a whole street of brick stores that were crammed with all kinds of wares. Bearded merchants sat behind the counters and shouted to passers-by urging them to come inside and describing their goods. There were also markets with plenty of foods and drinks. Maxim could not help thinking how it would all have looked in Piski. Then there was an enormous building with such big polished windows that a man standing on the street could see

all of himself in them, as in a mirror. The streets were broad, straight and paved with stone.

"So that's the kind of people they are," Maxim told himself. "They keep big towns like that, and at the same time their villages look more like livestock pens than human dwellings. They must've hauled all the best things there were in the country here..."

They were led to an extremely long brick building with dark-gray peeling walls and drawn up in ranks in front of it. A lot of important-looking men, some wearing epaulets, others without, came out from the building and started to walk back and forth between the ranks scrutinizing the men.

"Oh, what a fine fellow you are!" one of them said, staring at Maxim.

"Try to grow just as big yourself," Maxim snapped.

Everybody burst into laughter. The young officer shot him a stern glance and moved on.

"To the barracks!" somebody in front of them shouted.

They were led inside.

The rooms were spacious but dark and dismal. Rivulets of moisture streamed down the moldy walls. Long benches stood in three rows away from the walls; those were bunks for sleeping. The earthen floor was littered, and the air was thick and heavy. The whole barracks stank like a garbage dump.

"Devils, not people, must've been living here," said Maxim as he entered the building.

As they lay down to sleep on the long bunks, the men felt grim and gloomy. Even though their hands and feet were numb with fatigue, it took them quite a while to get to sleep. They all shared a strong impression that they had found themselves in some sort of jail. What if their families could see their wanderings? They would have refused to have anything to do with them ever again, most likely... Some of the men wept as they recalled their homes. Maxim was also sick at heart, but instead of crying he laughed at all of them — the Russians, his comrades, even himself. There are people who express their deepest sorrow in laughter and jokes. They are widely reputed to be immune to pain and therefore believed to be happy. Maxim, too, could be called happy in this sense.

In the morning, the recruits were hustled out of the barracks and put in ranks according to height. Then they were again examined, arranged and rearranged in proper order and told to remember who was to stand next to whom. Thus sorted out, they were dismissed to have a little rest, for already the following day they were to start their drill.

Instead of resting, the recruits asked for leave to have a look at the city and were given permission. All day long, they wandered around the city gazing at everything and getting so tired that,

returning to the barracks, they dropped on their bunks at once and slept like logs. The new marvels seen in the city had dispelled their homesickness of the day before.

The drum rolled when day had hardly begun to break. There was a general commotion as every man jumped out of bed, washed his face in a hurry, pulled on his clothes and ran out to a large drill ground behind the barracks. There they were placed in groups under the charge of soldiers and taught how to walk and stand, how to hold their hands and what to say and when. Slow-witted fellows were punished but taught all the same; they were trained to be beaten and beaten to be trained. All this dragged on and on, day after day. "What are we doing it for? Who needs all this drilling? Why?" they asked themselves as they returned from the exercise ground. To them, their training was worse than any forced labor.

But for Maxim this was child's play. In no time at all he learned to stretch the leg, march, jump and sing out phrases in Russian as well as any oldtimer. Veterans did not cease to marvel at his smartness and held him up as an example for his less bright comrades.

Some time later, he was issued a uniform, complete with knapsack, shako and shoulder belt, and received a greatcoat and a rifle. Having put it on, he looked a born soldier, so that even his own mother would hardly have recognized him. Spry and snappy, he now was every inch a military man.

Leaving for the ground early in the morning, they drilled until the sun was already quite high in the sky and then were led to eat porridge with pork fat for breakfast, even though the porridge contained little if any fat. Then they had a little rest and were assembled for lunch. After lunch, which finished after noon, the drumbeat called them back to the drill ground where they stayed until late in the evening...

Months passed, a year... It was all the same.

Damn it all, Maxim thought. If only they were ordered to march somewhere or some enemies were found... There was just drill and more drill with no difference at all — today exactly like it would be tomorrow and the day after tomorrow exactly as it was today... Stretch your leg, shout, "One, two!" Slope arms! Arms down! Take aim a hundred times a day without firing even once. He had once wondered what the army was all about. Now he knew. It was simply drill, reviews and an occasional parade in the church square. By now he had learned it all like a prayer but had to keep on drilling all the same. It bored him to death.

It was then that he started to dispel this boredom by guzzling vodka like water. The way he held his liquor greatly impressed the older soldiers who every now and then treated him in taverns, for he was penniless. The money his mother had given him had long been spent on drinks.

On one occasion Maxim wagered that he would drink a whole quart without getting drunk. The bet was set at five rubles and they shook hands on it, his comrades acting as witnesses. A quart was ordered, and Maxim drained it in just three swallows. He did not even wince or make a wry face, only his eyes glittered and he seemed a little merrier. Taking out the money, his opponent held it out to him.

"What the hell do I need the money for?" Maxim snorted. "Come on, fellows, be my guests!"

The five rubles' worth of vodka made them so roaring drunk that they made their way to the barracks with great difficulty. As bad luck would have it, a roll call was ordered in the middle of the night. Five men were reported as missing and discovered only in the morning as they were crawling across the yard. Much to their distress, they were immediately locked up.

"Cheer up, brothers," Maxim encouraged them. "Company in distress makes trouble less. I'll get you off the hook."

"How?"

"It's simple: just say I got the stuff and talked you into drinking."

"And then?"

"That's all. Leave the rest to me."

Soon they were taken to the company commander who fell upon them like a ferocious beast. Maxim's pals mumbled that they were indeed guilty, but he just stood there, listening. Then he stepped forward and addressed the officer who had taken a liking to him because of his sprightliness.

"That was all my fault, sir," he declared. "I got them drunk. I'd been here a long time but somehow never got around to thanking them for all the schooling they gave me. At last I picked a good night but it went wrong. Beat me as much as you like, sir — it'll only serve me right, too. But please don't punish my friends and teachers here!"

The officer liked that kind of talk. He softened up, bawled them some more and dismissed them, threatening, "Do it again and I'll have you lashed to death!"

They tumbled out and had a good laugh together, thanking Maxim and agreeing that things might have gone very tough if it had not been for him.

After that, Maxim became the life of the company. Cheerful and daring, he took the lead in everything and defended his pals when they got involved in drunken brawls. Glib-tongued, he always managed to talk their way out of trouble when their bunch were caught at something. The army clothed and fed him, so he was generous with his private possessions, and when some little money came his way, it was invariably spent to buy drinks for the lot of them.

His comrades adored him. Together, they always helped him

out when he found himself in strained circumstances. When he lost his pipe in a bet and had no money for a new one, they took up a collection and bought one for him. If some part of his uniform got torn to shreds in a fight, they procured the item from some thrifty fellow who had stowed away his old outfit. In short, Maxim commanded general esteem.

He grew accustomed to such life. Oh, no, he thought, Muscovy was much better than his native parts after all. Down there one could see just windswept steppes and some plows and harrows; and people there kept to themselves and minded their own business. Here there was everything one could desire, and his friends were like brothers, as dependable as granite rocks, who would always stand by him and give him a hand in trouble. Why, living with them was surely better than back home with his parents!

As they say, Maxim lived in clover. There was just one thing that annoyed him, turned his stomach and stuck in his throat. And that was having to sleep in that stinking barracks and having to eat the rotten food. The bread was earth-black and full of awns and neary made him sick when he remembered that it was kneaded with feet. The cabbage made him wrinkle his nose, and the porridge was nauseating.

"Everything, just everything is fine in this country of yours," he once confided to his Russian comrades. "Only the grub is no good."

"You wait till Sunday," they told him. "Then we'll ask for a leave to go foraging. That'll be fine, if only we manage to make a deal with the sergeant major."

"What's foraging?" he asked.

"Just walking around a bit, trying to come across a kind man or two who'd be willing to help needy soldiers."

Maxim felt uneasy but did not say anything.

At daybreak on Sunday his buddies came running to shake him awake.

"Quick, get up, man!"

"What's the matter?"

"Get up, let's go to the captain."

"What for?"

"Oh, come on! Don't you remember?"

Maxim got up. Some more men awoke, and they talked it over together.

"How did it go with the sergeant major?" one of them asked.

"He's a son of a bitch!"

"Why?"

"Because. He asked for twenty-five rubles! He's a beast, man, you can take it from me. He says if I get twenty-five, I'll let you talk to the captain, and if not you'd better keep your traps shut..."

"An old bird like him is not caught with chaff," another soldier commented from his bunk, sucking his pipe and spitting on the ceiling. "He knows perfectly well how it works out."

"Don't you understand, Mitrich, that it's a crying shame to charge so much. After all, he's fleecing his own men, not some strangers."

"Aw, come on. He can't tell a stranger from one of his own as long as he gets paid."

"Isn't he an animal? That's what he is — no doubt about it."

Thus spoke the soldiers while Maxim was washing his face and dressing. Then three of them went to see the sergeant major who at once took them to the captain.

"Well, Fedoseich?" the officer asked. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine, sir. There's just one thing."

"And what's that?"

"It's hard for the boys, sir."

"What do you mean?"

"The provisions are bad, sir. They'd like to do some foraging, sir."

"Where? What for?" the captain shouted. "I'll show them foraging!"

"There's nothing to eat, sir," the noncom insisted. "They say they're starving."

"What are you talking about, old fool? Who's starving? I bet they've already sweetened you."

"No, sir! They say they'll give you a quarter of the total if you let them go."

Pensively, the officer twisted his mustache.

"Who's going?" he asked, after a pause.

"They are right here: Ivanov, Yevpraksejev and Maxim the Ukrainian. Come in, boys!" the sergeant major shouted, opening the door.

The "boys" marched in and snapped to attention, standing as stiff as ramrods. The captain at once turned to Maxim (he had a special fondness for the "little Ukrainian"):

"How's life, brother Maxim? Has it gotten so bad?"

"Very bad, sir. We've got nothing to eat."

"So you want to go foraging?"

"Yes, sir," they mumbled in chorus.

"Should we let them go, Fedoseich?" asked the captain, casting a sidelong glance at the noncom. "That would be easy enough... But what if you get caught?"

"No, sir, never..." they muttered all at once.

The officer did some more thinking.

"All right, you may go... Only mind you: I'll skin you alive if it goes wrong! Do you hear?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Well, may God help you. Dismissed."

"Thank you very much, sir!" they sang out before leaving the room.

The entire company stirred with excitement. Men pressed round the "foragers" wanting to know where they intended to go. Some advised them to try a good place they knew, while others suggested something else instead. The barracks buzzed like a beehive. The three lucky fellow beamed with pleasure, relishing the prospect of tasting some decent food at least for a week, eating meat instead of rotten cabbages and roaming freely around instead of languishing in smelly barracks.

"Why don't you take some holy images and call on merchants' houses?" a soldier suggested.

"Why not? That isn't such a bad idea," the foragers agreed.

They talked it over, got ready and were off. In the evening they returned, bringing nearly fifty rubles. The company rejoiced and exulted. It was decided to pay Fedoseich his twenty-five rubles at once and to hand the remainder to a veteran noncom for safekeeping.

Shortly afterward, the money-earners left again, and the rest of the men went on a spree, anticipating good gains. Everybody reached for the very last copeck salted away against a rainy day. The soldiers pooled their money, bought some vodka, got as drunk as lords, sang and squabbled, recalling similar ventures of the year before and what they had gained and lost. The liquor untied their tongues. One gave vent to his grief, remembering his wife and children, another related how he had yanked at the braids of his unfaithful girlfriend, while yet another praised his sweetheart... Every man had his own story to tell.

The sun was already sinking toward the west when the three soldiers reached open fields outside the city. They kept walking right on for another five miles or so. Ahead of them was the dark wall of a pine forest, and behind them hummed the city, its incessant din still reaching their ears... The men walked on and on. Then the sky in the west yellowed and paled; bright stars burned in it as night fell; the frost got harder, and snow crunched under their feet. They trudged on in silence. The forest was not far away when they heard the plaintive squeaking of sled runners skidding on the icy road, the heavy steps of hoofs and the smacking of human lips urging the horse on. Presently, a fully laden sled appeared. On it sat a burly bearded man dressed as a merchant.

"Stop!" shouted Ivanov and, dashing across the road, seized the bit. The horse halted.

This made Maxim's flesh creep. Wondering what would happen next, he stepped aside, looking at the scene. A third soldier, Yevprakseyev, approached the merchant.

"Good evening, mister merchant. I'm just curious what goods you may be carrying."

"Who are you to ask?" The man rose from the sled. "I see no reason why I have to answer to you. Get away!"

"You've got a pair of eyes, so you can see for yourself," said Yevpraksejev.

"Of course I see you're a soldier... But what do you want?"

"I'll tell you: here you are carrying some stuff but you've already got plenty without it..."

"Oh, come on!"

"You'd better save that kind of talk for the horse... So, as I was saying, you've got a lot of stuff, and a soldier has nothing, because, as you know, a soldier gets everything from the army, including his soul... Just be so kind as to donate something to help us carry on."

"Where do they make smart fellows like you?"

"That's something you don't need to know... We're just asking you. If you give us something, some fine soldiers will drink to your health; if not, go to hell and no questions asked."

"Go to hell? Don't get too smart. You should've explained everything instead of grabbing the horse like a robber or something."

"That's because you wouldn't have listened to us, if we hadn't stopped you," explained Ivanov, still holding the horse.

"So are you going to give us something?" Yevpraksejev insisted.

"You may take this!" The merchant showed him a fist.

"All right, may God be your judge. Let him go, brother," Yevpraksejev told Ivanov.

The latter released the horse. Maxim joined them, and together they resumed walking toward the woods. The merchant looked after them thoughtfully. Suddenly, he shouted:

"Hey, you, what's-your-name!"

"What's the matter?" Yevpraksejev asked, turning around.

"Come back!"

"Never mind, drive on."

"Come back, I tell you!"

The soldiers walked back to the merchant.

"Here's ten rubles for you, brothers. Drink the health of Paramon, God's humble slave." He held out a red bill to them.

"Thank you, mister merchant. We won't forget. Paramon, is that right?"

"Paramon, brothers, Paramon!"

"Good-bye then. Have a safe drive."

"Good-bye, brothers. Are you going far?"

"To the villages."

"You on leave?"

"That's right."

"May God help you!"

"Thank you. Good-bye, good man."

Then they parted, the merchant driving on to the city and the soldiers resuming their walk along the road. Maxim was greatly surprised. "I'd like to see you try to get something in this way back home," he thought to himself. "Like hell you would."

"There's a generous man," he said to his comrades.

"Sure. Merchants are fine fellows, mostly. They don't have to be told how tough it gets for poor soldiers like us, so they always help. A nobleman, brother, is something else again. Those are sharp rascals... No use asking them — you won't get anything unless you knock them out cold."

Talking thus, the soldiers continued on their way through the forest. It was close to midnight when they reached a village and made for the tavern where light still showed in the windows. From inside came thin drunken voices crooning a Russian folk song.

The "foragers" went in, put down their bags and sat on a bench together.

"Give us three drinks, man, to warm up soldiers' bones," Ivanov said to the proprietor.

"And why should I give you anything?"

"And why not?"

"Because I'm not sure you've got money."

"What d'you need more money for? Haven't you gotten enough from the customers? Or don't they come to your joint any more?"

"Why, they do... thank God... there've been some good people."

"Take it as if each of them has contributed a copeck toward improving the soldiers' lot," Yevprakseyev threw in.

"No way. Forget it."

"But that's true."

"True or not, the people here have gotten out of hand. They now buy too little vodka."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not. Why should I?"

"Come on. Stop it."

"As you like. Just pay — that's all. I don't make any vodka, you know, I buy it too."

"I don't care if you buy it. You sell it at a profit anyway. But where can a soldier get any money? Don't you know that a soldier is never his own boss?"

"Filippych!" a tipsy native called to the owner. "Let them have their drinks, I tell you. I love soldiers, man, I know they belong to the government. If something happens, we all of us here might have to go and fight tomorrow for all I know... I hear those darned Turks don't obey our dear Czar... Give them!"

"Will you pay me for them?"

"I will — when I get the money. Give them!"

"Nothing doing. It's hard enough to make you pay for yourself, let alone others."

"Don't you trust a decent man's word, you bearded goat?" shouted Yevpraksejev, reaching for the owner's beard.

"Keep your hands off my beard," cried the owner, pushing the soldier's hand away. "I bet you would've worn one yourself if they hadn't shaved it off."

"Why would I ever let such an ugly thing as your beard spoil my noble face?"

"And you? What are you?"

"Don't you know, miserable profiteer? Can't you see what I am?"

"Anybody can see you're a soldier. So what if you are?"

"Don't you know? D'you need me to tell you what kind of man a soldier is? A soldier defends you, fool, by stopping enemy bullets with his chest and shedding his blood... That's what a soldier is!"

These words moved the customers to drunken pity.

"I say, Teryokha... The soldier's right, though... Oh, I wish I could tell you how right he is... A soldier's a poor devil... a military man... Czar's servant... That's nothing like you and me! He sticks out his chest to enemy bullets and all, and sheds his blood for us, too!"

Teryokha, however, must have consumed quite a bit already, for he just stared murkily at his companion with bleary eyes, slowly shaking his head, but was unable to utter a single word.

Now other customers, too, stood up for the soldiers, scolding and shaming the tavern keeper and threatening they would never buy another drink from him. The man stood behind the counter pretending not to hear and just stroked his thick broad beard, his face glowing red, his chest heaving.

"But why should we merely stare at him, brothers?" Yevpraksejev shouted to the drunken company. "Let's go get a whole pail while we are at it." He dashed behind the partition to the barrel.

"Touch it and I'll kill you!" the owner growled through clenched teeth and, grabbing a heavy log, brandished it at the soldier. Some men rushed to them and wrested the log out of his hands.

"So you think nothing of making an attempt on my life, bearded fool?!" Yevpraksejev roared, clutching the man's beard. The owner screamed.

"Get him down, brothers, grab him! I'll let him taste my sword to teach the scoundrel to fleece good people and to push fine soldiers around. Go get him!"

As one man, the village drunks fell upon the owner. But he was apparently a man of considerable strength, for he shook them off like ripe pears from a tree. Springing to Yevpraksejev, he knocked him down and pounced on him like a hawk on a chick.

Maxim could not bear to see his comrade being beaten up. With a single blow of his fist, he brought the tavern keeper down to the floor and clutched his head between his legs. At this moment,

the third soldier rushed to them and started thrashing the owner's back with the flat of his sword. The owner did not resist or shout and only groaned. Having given him a good thrashing, the soldiers released him. The man broke into tears, cursing.

"Will you give us drinks now?" Yevprakseyev demanded.

"Get them — and may you choke on them!" the owner muttered through tears and went out to a back room.

The drunks giggled. The soldiers had a drink each and munched some bread.

"There's no time for more. We still got a lot of work to do. Good-bye, good people! Good-bye, mister... Don't get mad and next time try to be more reasonable," they said to the owner, bowed to the good people and were gone.

A couple of drunks tagged along. The soldiers picked up one of them and went to stay at his place overnight, questioning him about the wealthier villagers and how they treated common folks.

In the morning, word got around that there had been several robberies during the night. The tavern keeper, scratching his bruises, also related his own mishap. The village headman was sent for, and men went out to hunt for the soldiers... But the birds had already flown. As a matter of fact, they were busy selling their loot in another village.

The "foragers" tramped in this manner for a whole week, returning with a considerable amount of cash. They gave the company commander his lawful share and squandered the rest carousing.

At first, such expeditions involving lies, robberies and theft aroused certain qualms and apprehensions in Maxim's soul. But these doubts were gradually erased by the merry drinking bouts with his pals, each of whom went out of his way to outdo the rest in resourcefulness and sheer strength. Soon they vanished altogether. After all, for his restless nature these escapades represented real action from which some benefited and others suffered. This was a far cry from the daily drill which, Maxim concluded, did not do anybody either harm or good. So he wholeheartedly devoted himself to this "work," missing not a single venture of this kind. There he put all of his brains and muscles to good use. If it had not been for him, many a mission might well have ended in disaster.

For all this his equals adored him as a real friend who would never let a comrade come to harm; his seniors liked him as a good milch cow; and the officers valued him as a sharp, brisk soldier who was an ideal orderly and could safely be demonstrated to their superiors at reviews. Soon Maxim received a promotion.

XIII

Maxim's Career

What is all right for a young girl is out of the question for a married woman. What a private could get away with a noncom was never supposed to do. Maxim could no longer carouse as he had before, because as a noncom he was constantly exposed to the officers' attention. Nor could he ask to go foraging, for noncoms were not allowed to do that.

Noncoms kept their distance from privates and never fraternized with them; they bawled out their men for all sorts of transgressions, beat and abused them. This earned them the privates' undying hatred. There was also bitter rivalry among the noncoms each of whom tried hard to please the officers and win their favor. Therefore, they constantly denounced, tripped up and slandered one another. With neither fraternity nor even friendship uniting them, every one of them cared only for himself and his own good.

Maxim, too, was changed by the promotion. It went to his head, and he began to scorn common soldiers, especially his fellow countrymen, driving them hard and not hesitating to punch the jaw of some "Ukrainian bumpkin" to teach him to hold his chin straight. He also got into the habit of striking recruits on their hands and legs with the flat of his sword to punish them for handling rifles in the wrong way or an imperfect goosesteep. His charges had to endure it all. Even though they cursed Maxim at heart, they dreaded even his shadow... After all, that was what army service was all about!

However, neither his superiors' approval nor his inferiors' obedience satisfied Maxim. The rank for him was as bitter as wormwood. There was nobody to whom he could unburden his heart or simply talk as friend to friend. Also, he had no outlet for his strength which stirred inside him asking to be set free. Yet there was no freedom for him.

A primer once came to his hand. He attacked it as he would an enemy and nursed it like a baby. He began to study. It was hard and boring to learn his ABC but learn he did, for he had to. It went easier after he had mastered the alphabet, and his spirits rose. He watched letters lining up to form words—and was fascinated by it. Soon he started reading but was faced with a problem. He simply could not find a book to his liking. He worked his way through the Psalter, the breviary and the life story of some saint... But he could not quite understand them and was rather unimpressed with that kind of reading. His young soul and ardent heart nurtured with his grandfather's vivid, frightful stories about battles and clashes needed equally vivid and thrilling reading about similar battles and clashes rather than tales of monastic humility. Those tales were beyond Maxim's comprehension, and he would listen with much greater interest

to some gray-mustached veteran's yarns about the campaigns of the "Most Illustrious Prince Suvorov" or his own past escapades in Moscow. Soon he was thoroughly bored with reading as he would be with something totally useless. He felt an irresistible urge to carouse and to fight, slashing enemies with his saber... But with his luck all was quiet and nothing stirred anywhere.

What was he to do? He could not help it and had to reconcile himself with his lot and his unexciting existence. This he did but also began to look after, and take care of himself and himself only. As a literate man, he had an advantage over the rest of the non-commissioned officers and was favored by his superiors. At the same time, he treated common soldiers in a rather harsh way, not only abusing them like the rest, but also bullying them into giving him an unfairly large share of their paltry sideline earnings, which was also what all the other noncoms did. To unwind, he kept a harlot, whom he occasionally took out for carousing.

This was in 1848. The people of France revolted against their king and dethroned him. The Germans and the Italians followed suit. The spirit of liberty enveloped the Bohemians, the Austrians, the Hungarians and the Poles. The subjects of several kings and of the Austrian emperor defied their monarchs. The flames of freedom could be seen everywhere. Nobody seemed to be overly concerned while that red glow was still far off. But then fire broke out in a neighboring country and — God forbid! — threatened to spread to our side... What if it did? "To arms!" shouted our rulers and raised an alarm. "To arms — to defend the Austrian emperor from his rebellious subjects!" Nor was this something new for us. Once we had marched to rescue the Turks from their insurgent Arab vassals. Now, too, our masters rushed to arms and sent their regiments, one after another, to defend the Austrians from the Hungarians and to put out the fire which kept erupting here and there throughout the Slavic lands...

Maxim also went there at the head of his platoon. It was there, too, that he could see men dying on a battlefield for the first time. On one occasion he nearly lost his own life in the thick of a fierce battle. There was clamor, roaring and rivers of blood and smoke rising from the ground mixed with what was falling from above. Three of them were attacked by as many as ten men who slashed away at them. But our men stood their ground. Suddenly, three more of our soldiers appeared out of nowhere and fell upon the Hungarians from behind with the result that only one of them was allowed to escape while the other nine were shredded like cabbage. Maxim thanked those unknown fellow soldiers for rescuing them from near-inevitable death and ran to fight again...

On another occasion, he himself saved three soldiers and a flag. It had been a hot sunny day made even hotter by artillery fire

from both sides. Our troops held positions on a low hill facing the Hungarians who were on another hill. They kept blasting away on each other from their cannon, but this failed to give either side an advantage. Then our cavalry was ordered to capture their battery. Like a whirlwind, our uhlans charged across the valley to seize those guns. The Hungarian uhlans flew out at them and attacked them fiercely. But all the time, the cannon pounded them, making the earth groan. Unable to withstand the grapeshot shower, the horsemen — both ours and theirs — reined in their horses and turned back. What was there to be done? “Fix bayonets!” The infantry charged. Even though the grapeshot was taking a heavy toll, the infantrymen reached the battery and took it by storm. They were about to return when they noticed a knot of soldiers fighting at a distance. Among them one could see a flag, now sinking down, now rising again. Maxim was on a flank. As soon as he saw the scene, he shouted, “Platoon, follow me!”, without waiting for orders. His men rushed after him. Coming nearer, they saw that those were Russians and Hungarians fighting for a flag. Maxim fell on the enemies like a lion springing at a hunter. Seeing that they were outnumbered, the Hungarians took to their heels. “Fire!” Maxim commanded. His soldiers aimed their rifles: boom! boom! boom! One Hungarian reeled, another two stopped in their tracks. Maxim took aim: boom! A Hungarian officer fell on his face without a cry or a twitch... Not a single enemy escaped alive. Only then did they turn to have a look at their own. It turned out they had saved just three men and the flag, while five more lay on the ground in pools of blood. Maxim glanced at the living, noticing that they were badly wounded. Then he looked at the dead — and trembled. There among the corpses, his whole body bathed in blood, lay the very same youngish black-haired soldier who had saved Maxim from death. There he lay, writhing, still alive...

“Oh, God!” shouted the dying man. “Please help!... Motryal Khivryal... Save me!... Forgive me!...” Then he wheezed and gave up the ghost...

“Who’s that?” Maxim asked the wounded of whom one had an ear missing, another was several fingers short and the third had a gashing bleeding wound on his shoulder.

“The standard-bearer... Khrushchov, the Ukrainian,” replied the one without fingers...

“Let him be,” said the soldier who had had his ear sliced off. “Leave him, Zakharych... Let’s take the flag...”

“All right...”

And they all walked back.

Maxim led his platoon back. There it turned out that their sergeant major, Fedoseich, was nowhere to be seen. Where was he? Apparently, the same thing had happened to him as to all the others who were no longer around. This was reported to the

company commander who went to tell the colonel. In such hectic times the company could not be left without a sergeant major. Whom should they promote then? Who had killed the most enemies and rushed to fight at the hottest spots? None other than Maxim, of course. It was he, too, who had saved the flag. He is the right man then. So Maxim was promoted to sergeant major. Shortly afterward he was decorated with the St. George's Cross for the flag. Then the war came to an end. Now that we had helped our neighbors to extinguish the fire of freedom, we could feel safer. That's all! Now let's go back home!

And home they went.

* * *

Maxim found the higher rank an even greater burden. Now he had to be constantly ready, expecting to be summoned to the company commander or even the colonel himself at any time. He had to be careful lest his breath should smell of vodka...

He gave up drinking completely and broke with his girl. Now he only took care of himself even more than before. Which was good for him. Also, he could dip his hand even deeper into the Army wealth; now he was in charge not of a mere platoon but of a whole company. Many a little makes a mickle. Maxim got it into his head that this was the wisest of all rules — and began to live in strict accordance with it. Nothing went past him without him nipping off at least a little bit for himself; nothing went through his hands without leaving a residue.

He amassed a great deal of money and clothes... What did he do it for? He did not know himself what to do with it all or where to put it. If he at least had a family, it would be different then. But he was all alone. A family? This would be nice, Maxim thought. Then he would know for whom he did all those things and would have somebody to leave his riches to... A family would be fun, too...

Thus he often thought as he mused over his nomadic life. The only trouble was that he could not find himself a wife. Russian women did not appeal to him. Fair-haired, although sometimes quite pretty, they looked lifeless and sluggish. Such a wife would lie there like a log, unable to embrace or kiss him. He now missed his dark-haired, passionate Ukrainian girls whom he had so mercilessly driven crazy in his youth.

He wished he could go home soon. At least, there he would be able to find a wife before his hair turned gray.

Much to his delight, the right girl came along rather quickly.

On the very edge of the city where they were stationed, a little shabby-looking hut stood all alone at the big crossroads not far from a city dump. Its walls were rotten and crumbling, their bare

logs moldering away. In springtime, foaming slime flew past the hut. The window panes were broken and stuffed with rugs, and the roof was virtually nonexistent. This was a wreck rather than a dwelling. All around it there were just wastes and garbage heaps. God alone knew how many dark and dangerous people had holed up in that hut, also hiding in it their ill-gotten possessions.

Now it harbored some ex-soldier and his unwed wife. Most of the time the couple were busy brawling, carousing, hiding all sorts of vagabonds and selling their loot.

For better or worse, a young girl was growing up in that hut. Named Yavdokha, she appeared a year after the squint-eyed Melania had shacked up with the lame Teryokha. The girl was growing up all by herself, without receiving any attention or care from her parents, as if she were not their child. Her father and mother could not care less if she was hungry or cold. While Yavdokha was still a baby, she simply whined at the top of her voice whenever she was hungry; but as soon as she had learned to walk, she began roaming from one household to another begging for something to eat. Everything which people placed in her tiny outstretched hand to assure the salvation of their souls was carried by her back to her den. There all the money was immediately spent on drink, and the clothes were pulled over old rags to be worn without change until they fell off in shreds and tatters.

Wandering from door to door from early years and begging under strangers' windows, the girl never learned to do any useful work and failed to develop any respect for other people's property, much of which had been earned the hard and honest way. Besides, she had an example before her very own eyes. Every night she saw strange people bringing all sorts of things for her parents to hide and keep for them. She learned the lesson well and started to pick up all that lay handy.

Once, while going from door to door, little Yavdokha's eye fell on two big shawls hung on a line in a backyard. Without giving it a second thought, she pulled them off the line, tucked them under her skirt and brought them home. Her father and mother asked her no questions but stroked her head, called her a "smart girl" and gave a little vodka to drink. Yavdokha liked the vodka which made her feel warm and cheerful. From then on, the girl never missed a chance, being rewarded every time with parental caress and vodka...

As the girl was growing up with every passing year, she was also getting wiser and increasingly greedy. She soon drank vodka like water. Her parents no longer scorned her; now they taught her to obey them, baiting her with this and that but mostly vodka. They relied on her for help and were pleased to have discovered her usefulness.

They made another discovery when the girl turned fifteen. It

was then that they took notice of her string-thin brows, glittering gray eyes, flaxen hair and rosy complexion... Her girlish prettiness impressed them. They talked it over, agreeing they must not waste such an asset.

The girl was washed, combed and clad in new fancy clothes and shoes. Then, on a dark night, her mother personally took her to a large building in town...

Let off the leash, the girl spent every day and night in the town. Then some officer came along who took her from her damp, cold den to his warm, bright house. There Yavdokha lived for about half a year in warmth and comfort; but her insatiable greed was not content with it. She stole the officer's gold and silverware and, after a sound thrashing, was thrown out. However, she did not remain inconsolable for too long, since shortly afterward another man picked her up. Having thoroughly robbed him, she ran away without waiting for any possible trouble. After that, she never again went to live with anybody. Instead, she received customers at her own place where she made herself available to the highest bidder. Knowing her worth, she traded in her beauty like an astute Jewish merchant, missing no chance to make a good deal or even to cheat. But word of her practices got around, discouraging officers and gentlemen from using her services. Much of her profits was spent to buy expensive dresses, foods and drinks... Much to her chagrin, her looks, too, soon began to fade... Something had to be done. She had to find herself some shelter and support before it was too late. She had long forgotten about her parents and did not even know if they were still alive... Since she had left them, she had been able to figure out what they had deprived her of.

At that juncture of her life Maxim came across her. Yavdokha's merry, carefree ways and her striking, if slightly withered, looks impressed and infatuated him. He began to court her. Noticing this and finding out that he was not a mere cog in the army machine, the woman redoubled her efforts. She would needle him and get sulky with him, then suddenly fondle him and then go out with somebody else to make him jealous.

Maxim raged but became enamored of her even more. Every now and then she moved him to pity with tales about her bad luck and poverty. The following night he would bring her lots of gifts to make her happier.

Not that she was totally indifferent to the man. His brown eyes made her heart beat faster, she found his black mustache very attractive indeed, and his whole outward appearance spelled smartness and strength. Besides, he was not without means of his own and was never penniless...

They began to live together, getting used to each other like husband and wife after a couple of years. There were no children. No worries or troubles marred their existence. They had to do

their drinking and to have a good time quietly and on the sly to prevent it from reaching the ears of Maxim's superiors.

Then the regiment was transferred to another city. Maxim went with it and soon began to miss her. Left alone, Yavdokha was also sad. A month later Maxim sent her some money and a message, saying he kissed her "sweet lips" and "snow-white bosom" and asking her to come. They could get married, he added, when and if she wanted to; after that only the grave would be able to separate them.

Yavdokha packed her belongings and traveled to join him. Shortly afterward, they were wed.

* * *

She made a good soldier's wife. Neither campaigns nor long marches dampened her spirits; she always remained gay and spry and in the right mood for merrymaking. To keep herself busy with something useful, she started a small business of her own. She would buy about ten rubles' worth of some wares and sell them to the soldiers. Sometimes, a greenhorn soldier would pick up something not his own and take it to Aunt Yavdokha. Then she would accept both the gift and the man... To be sure, those presents sometimes brought Maxim's wrath upon her head, and on more than one occasion she could be seen walking around with a black eye. But nobody really cared. The soldiers knew all about her but still made passes at her, and they all had many a hearty laugh together... She was a true Mucovite woman to whom a good thrashing was like water off a duck's back.

In this fashion they spent some ten years. Maxim aged considerably, and so did Yavdokha. Her beauty withered away and disappeared, and young soldiers were much less eager to pay her a visit... It was time to draw a line, whether she wanted to or not. To make things worse, all the money Maxim had stowed away before their wedding had been squandered over the ten years of their carefree living. Now she again had to think about the future. That she did and a year later was rocking a baby — a girl named Halya.

Halya abruptly changed their lives. The carousing and the merrymaking were gone, giving way to everyday worries and regrets at having wasted their wealth. Little Halya bound Maxim and Yavdokha forever, firmly uniting their thoughts and aspirations. Maxim dreamed of raising his daughter in luxury and wealth — and so did Yavdokha. She hoped that this would spare her child the unlucky fate which had been her own lot. Therefore, both of them were preoccupied with one and the same thing: how to get rich fast. One way or another, they had to have the money!

Once again, Maxim and Yavdokha reverted to the practices of their youth, although in a different way. Maxim gained from the

“foraging” and Yavdokha profited from stealing. Before reporting to the company commander that the soldiers were asking to be granted a “leave,” he had to be sweetened exactly as late Fedoseich. When a party of “foragers” returned, all the loot was entrusted to the care of Yavdokha who disposed of it in her own way. For her services, Aunt Yavdokha was entitled to half of the proceeds...

Maxim was soon due to be discharged but had to forget it. That same year, the last war against the Turks broke out. He was sent to Silistria and then transferred to the Crimea. Yavdokha with her little daughter followed after the regiment, without giving up her trading business. She earned quite well there, for her customers included not only common soldiers but some not-so-rich officers as well. Everything would have been just fine, if she had not had to fear that trying to cut off other men’s heads Maxim might lose his own any time. This never happened, though. Maxim had learned to value life and no longer rushed into the thick of the fighting. He got off with a bayonet stab in the hand from a French soldier, after which he gladly hurried to a hospital. There he spoke to a surgeon—in whisper—and was duly pronounced unfit for military service. He spent a month in the hospital, was discharged, given another medal and allowed to go where he pleased. Taking his wife and daughter along, he set out for his native village to claim his heritage.

Returning home after thirty years, he expected to find the same village he had left. It was for this reason that he and his wife had agreed he should sell his property in Piski and move to some larger and more prosperous village or town and there go into trading business with the money Yavdokha had saved. But he was greatly surprised when he reached Piski. This was no longer the village he had known. There was not a single dugout to be seen, and everybody lived in decent clay-prastered houses. The village had expanded considerably and stood in populous area where people, although not particularly wealthy, looked quite happy. A good place, Maxim concluded, for a man of means to make more money.

“Well, old lady,” he told Yavdokha. “It looks like we’ll get buried in my native parts after all. See what lovely country we’ve got here?”

Yavdokha saw it all right. Maxim settled in his father’s house.

Yavdokha started to trade in the village. Maxim bought himself a horse and drove out to markets. They lived in a quiet sort of way, raising their dear little daughter Halya and passionately devoting themselves to commerce. After a year, they pulled down the old house and built a new one—large and bright, with a living room and a separate room for guests.

It amazed the villagers to see what the Moscow service did to men. Maxim had gone to the army as a rogue and a debaucher

and was now back as a respected citizen with decorations and plenty of money. Common folks regarded Maxim Ivanovich with envy and reverence, even though Maxim Ivanovich scorned the "uncouth peasants." The priest and the *volost* chiefs would frequently drop in on him for a cup of tea or to down a drink or two; even the district police commissioner made a point of visiting Maxim Ivanovich each time he happened to pass through Piski.

Maxim lived in the village for three or four years. Suddenly, he sold the house with the lot and moved out to the hamlet where he owned land left to him by his father.

The priest and the *volost* officials deplored his decision:

"Don't leave us, Maxim Ivanovich! Piski will be empty without you."

"I'll feel much better there — not as cramped as here," he explained. "Lots of envious types in the village. Nobody passes my place here without casting envious glances my way."

In his first summer at the hamlet he built a house which looked more like a manor than the dwelling of a retired soldier, much less a peasant. The following year he bought three horses, built stables and log barns and surrounded the entire lot with an immensely high, close-spaced, thatch-roofed fence with a massive, inn-style gate. As rumors had it, he really intended to open an inn.

The good people of Piski were open-mouthed with surprise. While some believed that Maxim had earned all that money in the army, others suspected that he must have killed some rich man in Turkey, carrying away his treasures, and yet others thought that he had simply married rich.

Yet no one saw or knew how he lived in the hamlet. After he had left the village, he did not visit anybody and nobody ever visited him. It was almost as if the man had died. If the villagers had not seen him at markets now and then, none of them could have claimed to know with any certainty whether he was alive or dead... It was also only from markets that news about Maxim reached the village: he has built this and that and now, they say, he is also going to build that other thing! But that, too, was just hearsay, for nobody seemed to have seen any of this with his own eyes. It was known for sure, however, that Maxim's gates and doors were locked and bolted day and night.

"The soldier has built himself a fortress!" the villagers joked sometimes.

Part Three

XIV No Land

Life is not a bed of roses. It is rather like weather. Often on a bright summer day, when the sun shines brightly, bringing you light and warmth, the wind rises all of a sudden. Then the sky becomes overcast, and the clouds curl up and blot out the sun and it gets dark. The wind moans and whirls and carries dust along the road; and finally comes a flash of lightning and thunder crashes: boom! bang! It is the same with life. It can be still and quiet and very nice indeed, but then bang! — and the good weather is suddenly gone...

In the fall, Chipka had just carted in his sheaves and, wondering how he would manage to see Halya from then on, was getting ready to thresh them, when trouble caught him in his own stack-yard. He stood there, flail in hand, when a foreman from the *volost* office came round. "What can he possibly want?" Chipka asked himself and grimly looked him in the eye.

"You're to come to the office," the foreman said, without coming near.

Chipka cast him another look, thought a little and only then asked:

"What for?"

"I don't know," the foreman said. "They want to see you. Some man has come from the Don..."

"What man? What does he need me for?"

"I can't tell," the foreman said. "He just came and had a word with the clerk — then they sent me to tell you..."

"All right," said Chipka. "I'll be there."

The foreman turned and walked away down the street at a dignified pace.

Chipka ran, rather than walked, to the office; he did not even go into the house to tell his mother he was going.

Soon he returned — and hurried into the house straight away. Motrya was puttering around the stove.

"Just like that, Mother!" he said.

"What's like that, son?" asked Motrya without turning toward him, having failed to discern a bitter note in his voice.

"Some tramp has turned up. He says he's Lutsenko's nephew. He wants our land."

Motrya spun around and froze, her eyes fixed on Chipka. She stared at him but did not see him and did not understand anything.

"He says he'll sue if we don't give him the land..."

Growing pale, Motrya muttered with difficulty:

"What nephew?... Where from?..."

"From the Don — didn't I tell you?" Chipka said.

"From the Don?" echoed Motrya in a strangely timid voice as she sank onto the bench.

That short word "Don" hit her like a hammer... Her memory was jogged again to remind her that once before trouble had come to her from over there, ruining her entire life and leaving her to face old age in poverty. Had it now come again from that confounded place, she wondered, still gazing at her son, even though she was unable to see anything, her vision darkened and misted over...

Chipka glanced at his sad, frightened mother and checked himself. He realized that the news had struck the old woman like a thunderbolt.

"Never fear, Mother, cheer up!" he tried to comfort her. "Let him sue... The commune has voted to give us the land. I don't care. I'll let no one snatch it from my hands..."

"But what about all the trouble... the courts?..." Motrya asked thoughtfully.

"Never mind. I won't give up the land even if I have to hold it with my teeth!"

"Hold on to it, son... That land is all we've got... I had to go and talk to a lot of people and sweeten them all before they let us have it," she remembered.

"Cheer up, I tell you," said Chipka and went to the stackyard to thresh.

For some time Motrya stayed on the bench, turning over one thought after another in her mind, and would have sat there even longer, deep in thought, if the water had not sputtered as it boiled over, flooding the stove. Then she rose to her feet, took off the pot and went back to her chores.

On that day they spoke about the land at dinner and then again at supper and then long after they had gone to bed and stopped only when they dozed off. Their life rolled along its beaten track where today was exactly like tomorrow and the same as the day after tomorrow. Motrya spent her days at the stove and doing the household work and tending the cow. Chipka worked in the stackyard threshing, winnowing and binding straw...

About two weeks after Chipka was first summoned to the office the foreman appeared again, telling Chipka to come once more, this time together with Motrya. Chipka did not comply, though. He hurried to the office alone, ordering his mother to stay at home.

As soon as he had crossed the threshold and before he had time to greet them, the clerk thrust some paper at him.

"Here's the court decision on your land. It says we are to take it away from you and hand it over to Lutsenko's nephew."

Chipka was stunned. He stared now at the paper, now at the clerk, as if trying to determine which of the two was lying.

"How can it be?" he asked. "Didn't the commune vote to give it to us?"

"What if it did?" said the clerk. "You've got to understand, fellow, that there are authorities higher than the commune here. It then gave you the land, and now the court takes it away from you."

"D'you mean I'm to give up my land just like that?"

"That's right."

"No, I'll never do that."

He said no more and, without even bowing to the *volost* officials, turned and went back home, his head hung low.

"What are we to do now, Mother?" he asked even before he closed the door behind him.

"What do you mean?"

"The land is gone!"

"How?"

"They say the court has taken it away from us..."

It was as if old Motrya were suddenly stabbed in the heart. Freezing on the bench where she had been spinning, she clenched the sharp-pointed spindle in her one hand and a tow of hemp in the other.

"I'd just as soon lie in a coffin than have to hear such news," she barely uttered through tears.

But Chipka did not hear and did not listen. He was hardly aware of anything around him, for that matter. He paced up and down the room, beating his hips and talking excitedly, as if to himself:

"No, they won't have it their way! They are just lying... I know those damn swindlers too well!... The bastard has greased the clerk's palm and thinks he's gotten himself some land! No way! I'm not buying this... I know my way around... and I'll get it fixed my way... Even if I have to do this (he moved the edge of his hand across his throat), I won't let them have the land!"

Stopping beside his mother, he glowered at her, his hands on his hips.

"Get out all the money there is!" he shouted heatedly.

"What money?" she asked in a surprised tone.

"All we've got... I'm going to town — to sue."

"How can we have any money? There are just those five rubles I got for the lambs. It's in the chest, in the cloth roll. You may take it if you need it."

"Go get it, I don't know where it is."

Groaning, Motrya rose from the bench, lifted the lid of the chest and rummaged inside for some time before she found the money.

"Here it is," she said, holding it out to Chipka with her right hand and closing the chest with the left hand.

Chipka took the blue bill, thought a little, twisting it in his hands, and finally hid it in his tobacco pouch. Then he stuck the pouch in his pocket, sighed and took his hat.

"Good-bye, Mother, don't wait for me today. I'll be back to-morrow night maybe."

"Good luck, son. At least take some bread for the road."

But Chipka was already closing the door behind him and did not hear.

Motrya remained all alone with her grim thoughts. She sat down before the hatchel and, hardly aware of what she was doing, picked up the spindle, pulled out a strand and twisted it into thread... All sorts of images drifted into her mind, brought back the past... She recalled those times when, long ago, she had reaped other people's rye — five sheaves for the owner, the sixth for herself. Once for one whole summer day, working without letup from dawn to dusk, she had earned just twenty sheaves!... And then they also had to be carried home and threshed. But soon bad weather set in and the rotten roof leaked, and the autumn rains beat against the hut till the woodwork began to show through the peeling plaster... And the winter was not far away and she was hungry and cold... Motrya's face grew as white as a sheet — and the thread snapped... Tears rolled like peas, from her eyes, falling on the earthen floor...

* * *

Leaving the yard, Chipka walked as fast as his legs would carry him. His anxiety spurred him on; he wished he could fly to the town. The road to Hetmanske led past his field and the old soldier's hamlet. But this time Chipka did not look either at the black-and-yellow stubble or at the white gable of the soldier's house — the only part of it which could be seen over the high fence. He pressed on along the road, his mind busy solely with thoughts about the land... What would he be without land? The gnawing question whirled in his stooped head. A fellow to be pushed around, fit only for odd jobs... There could be no freedom without land. It fed one and made one his own master... Without land everything was dead. His hopes, too, were dead...

"May you, too, be dead soon, damn you!" Quite involuntarily, the curse escaped his lips.

"May I know to whom you wish such a lovely lot?" Standing in the wicket, Halya spoke to him in a most kind manner.

She had long noticed him, but he had failed to see her until now.

It was as if someone had poured a bucket of cold water on Chipka's head. Lifting his head, he looked where he was, then

fixed his eyes on her — but found himself unable to speak. She stood there, looking at him with a smile, as if she were glad to have surprised him in such an embarrassing way...

“See? You almost jumped — and you a man, too!” she clucked.

Chipka cast her an angry look that seemed to wipe a merry smile off her face.

“To bad people, Halya...” he answered her question with some difficulty and in a lower voice. Then he turned toward the wicket.

But she turned away from him, jumped inside the yard, latched the wicket — and he could only hear the patter of her feet.

“She, too, has run away!” he said bitterly. “She didn’t want to wait... to talk...”

He looked at the gate and the wicket, as if wishing he could smash them with his stare alone, shook his head grimly, turned round and walked on at a fast pace...

* * *

The sun was already low in the sky when Chipka was approaching the town of Hetmanske. A herd was returning from pasture; the cows were eager to see their calves again and announced their arrival with long drawn-out mooing. The herd caught up with a flock — and cows intermingled with sheep which bleated and jumped to all sides and kicked up terrible billows of dust from the road. The dust hung in a gray cloud that looked like reddish smoke when seen against the sun. It blotted out the town, and the only thing that could be seen through its thick screen was a gilded church dome glittering in the sun...

Chipka did not pause to admire the view. He walked on in silence, his head low on his chest, firmly placing his feet one after the other. Hetmanske was certainly a good way off from Piski. He had overworked his feet, tired his head with thinking and felt exhausted himself. He thought he should rest and wondered where he could spend the night. Presently he entered the town.

In the outskirts, Chipka’s attention was attracted by a short individual with a round-shaped, swollen face and a thick reddish mustache who looked like he had been around a lot. Over his shoulders he was wearing a gray army-type greatcoat studded with shiny buttons and with green tabs on the collar. Soldier or not, his appearance smacked of some government service. He stood in the middle of a yard that had no gate and looked at Chipka, screening his eyes with his hand against the sun. Chipka went to the yard. Seeing this, the man walked toward him, away from the unplastered house. Wrapping the greatcoat around him, he leaned against a gate post and spoke:

“What do you say? Got any problems?”

“The Lord has sent him to me,” Chipka thought to himself, taking off his hat.

"Would you be so kind tell me where Clerk Chizhik lives here?"

Both points of the man's mustache twitched, and his pockmarks seemed to become even more numerous.

"What d'you need the clerk for?" the man asked, as if restraining himself. "He doesn't receive such as you... If you have some business, I'll write a paper for you myself... What's your problem?" he pressed Chipka.

"Well, it's like this..." And Chipka started explaining his problem to the stranger.

"I see... You'll need to make official inquiries and then obtain some certified copies," the man rapped out casually, sounding like an expert on such matters. "You'll have to submit a petition, too. All right, I'll write it for you... Have you got money?" he asked, looking Chipka straight in the eye.

"How much will it come to?" asked Chipka.

"You must have about five rubles to begin with... Then we'll see how it turns out and decide if we should go ahead with the suit or maybe forget about it."

Chipka stood there digesting what the man had said. The stranger's clothes were too shabby to inspire confidence. Was the man simply trying to cheat him out of his money? Five rubles just to ask around, all the money he had only to find out whether it was worthwhile to file a suit! Wasn't that fleecing?

"Come inside then."

"No..." Chipka hesitated. "Good-bye."

"Wait... Look here! Wait a minute, I tell you!"

Chipka stopped.

"I say, I'll write it all for you for three..."

"No, thank you." Chipka again turned to go.

"Wait!" the man stopped him. "What's your name?"

"Varenichenko."

"Are you a Cossack or what?"

"My father's in the army."

"Good. That means you don't need stamps — we can write on plain paper... D'you want me to write it for a rubble? Nobody will do it for a ruble but I will."

"Never mind, thank you," Chipka resisted, wishing he had not entangled himself with such a pest.

"D'you think I'm pulling your leg? No, Vasil Porokh has never cheated anyone... Haven't you heard about Porokh? I've certainly been causing a lot of trouble to that clerk of yours!"

Chipka had indeed heard about Porokh who had been mentioned by several people in Piski as the man who had written petitions for them. He paused, looking the man over once more.

"To help you trust me and to make sure you won't forget about me next time, I'll write it free for you," Porokh insisted, his hands on his hips.

Still, Chipka could not make up his mind.

"Come on!"

Chipka followed Porokh into the yard.

"I'm doing this for you only," announced Porokh, leading the way. "I've never done it free for anybody in my whole life. At least buy me a drink."

"All right," said Chipka.

"Can you see the bottle hanging over that house?" Porokh pointed across the street. "That's the tavern. Go get some vodka, quick."

Chipka walked off in that direction. Porokh went into the house. In a little while, Chipka returned, carrying a bottle. Porokh met him at the threshold and led him inside.

The interior struck Chipka as extremely squalid. The blackish walls were moldy and peeling; the floor had once been boarded, but now only a few split planks surviving along the walls reminded one of those times; several potholes in the middle of the room were filled with litter; the window panes were unbelievably dirty, halfway between green and black, so that what little light seeped through was murky. It was all dismal and disgusting. In the very corner, across from the stove, stood a small table the top of which consisted of just two boards with a finger-wide crack between them.

"Good evening to you in your home," Chipka greeted him again.

"Good evening, good evening," Porokh twittered merrily. "Sit down." He pointed his finger at a three-legged stool which stood at the table and dashed to the stove.

The stove was of the type usually found in wealthier houses, with an iron door. Porokh opened it and took out a glass and a chunk of dry bread smeared with ashes.

"I've got to hide the good bread from those locusts," Porokh chattered. "They devour everything you leave lying around. The bread has gotten a bit dry but it's all right. Some ashes have stuck to it, too..." He blew on the chunk and tried to wipe it clean.

"Where's the vodka?" He turned to Chipka.

Chipka rose to bring the bottle which he had put in a corner near the door.

"Sit down, sit down," Porokh twittered, noticing the bottle. "I'll fetch it myself."

He brought it, poured himself a glass and gulped it down. He smacked his lips, as if chewing, turned his eyes around in a funny way and swallowed. Then he poured another glass, drank it and smacked his lips as before...

"Who sold you this?" he asked after the second glass.

"A Jewish woman."

"That's what I thought, damn her soul! She's impossible, that

Rivka! Ovrám's a decent enough fellow, but Rivka's too smart for me... Here's some, try it."

"No, I don't want it."

"Why? Don't you drink?"

"I've never tried it before, to tell the truth..."

"So you don't even know how it tastes?"

"No."

"You're a fool. You don't know what's good for you. This is the best stuff there is in this whole world. Lots of fellows would hang themselves without it. But it's here... Come on, drink it!" he shouted at Chipka, giving him the glass.

Chipka had long heard that vodka made things easier. Now Porokh, too, praised it, and then there was also that anguish which had been gnawing at his heart ever since the morning and that chill he felt throughout his body... All these feelings assailed Chipka, and every one of them shouted, "Drink!" There was nothing to be done about it except to try it... He took the glass and emptied it... The vodka burned his mouth, he nearly choked on it and coughed...

"It's clear enough that you can't drink," said Porokh. "Here's how you do it!" He poured another glass into his mouth, swallowing it like water. Then he broke off a piece of bread and started chewing it.

Chipka followed suit. The bread was so dry that he had difficulty chewing it.

"You are really good for nothing," Porokh said. "You can neither drink nor eat properly."

"But how can anyone drink such bitter stuff?" Chipka pointed to the bottle.

"It only seems so. Wait till it gets through to you — then you'll be asking for more of the same."

Soon it came. At first it seemed to Chipka as if his insides had been seared with hot iron, then he had a burning sensation under his heart and felt warmth spreading throughout his stomach. Presently the fire died down, giving way to thirst and hunger. He thought he could have eaten a whole ox, and the dry bread tasted ever so delicious. His vision brightened, his head sang, and his spirits soared. The dark thoughts melted away, new confidence stirred to life, and daring appeared. It was all a pack of lies, he told himself. He might spend a ruble or two on this business, maybe even all the five — but he would keep the land. That scoundrel's claims were ridiculous, of course... Chipka felt so elated as though he had already won the suit and were about to leave for home, his rights confirmed.

"What do you think it will cost me?" he asked Porokh.

"Ah, the suit? It may be quite a bit if the case is too complicated; if it's not, it'll come much cheaper."

"How does it look to you?"

“Better let’s have another one before we get down to business.”

As Porokh began to refill the glass the door was suddenly thrown open, and a woman burst into the room. It was hard to tell whether she was married. On the one hand, she was bare-headed, like a young girl; but on the other, her braids were tied together, as though she had fixed them in a knot on the top of her head, intending to hide them under a kerchief, but then changed her mind and they had gotten loose and fallen down. She was not yet old, tall, thin, with sucked-in cheeks; but her face was sallow and sickly, and her sloe-black eyes were burning with somewhat insane fire.

“Drinking again, may you suck your own hot blood instead!” she screamed in such a crazy voice that Porokh’s hands began to shake. “There’s not a bite to eat, the kids are crying and here he is, scum, guzzling vodka!”

“Go away, get out!” Porokh sputtered. “I’m going to write a petition for this here man, so you’d better go.”

“May you write yourself to death, bastard! I can’t live because of you...”

“Nobody’s holding you. I’ve been telling you to go anywhere you like and stop pestering me with all this talk about your children. But you just don’t have the guts to do it.”

“Like hell I don’t...” Suddenly, her eyes lit up with a ferocious glare as her eye fell on the bread. Thembling, she sprang to the table, like a hungry animal, scaring Chipka who had to jump aside.

“Bloody scoundrel! No bread, he’s been telling me — and hiding so much of it!”

“Take it and get out,” said Porokh, putting the bottle away.

She swept the room with her wild stare and walked out, un-hurriedly.

“Just a —” Porokh began. “She’s my sister. You see, she’s not all there... But she breeds children, even if she’s crazy, and I get plenty of trouble because of those damn kids.”

Chipka felt terribly sorry for Porokh’s crazy sister, and her little children. What if they were hungry and cold? Would she have fallen so low if she had been rich? It must be nice to be rich... And here they were trying to grab the only land he had... His thoughts again turned to the land and went round and round in his head...

“Well, let’s get down to that petition,” Porokh interrupted his reverie. Chipka came to with a start.

Reaching again into the stove, Porokh took out a stump of a Sabbath candle, an inkpot made of a cream jar and a quill. He put it all on the table and went out of the room. Soon he returned, carrying a sheet of paper and a pair of eyeglasses. He began with fitting the candle into a broken bottle.

“When it gets dark, we want to be ready,” he explained. “Now

let me have this stool — you may sit on the bench or anywhere you like.”

Chipka took a seat on another three-legged stool. Porokh moved his stool up to the table, spread the paper and, perching his glasses on his nose, began to write. The room plunged into total silence that was disturbed only by Porokh's angry coughs, the scratching of his quill and his punctuating interjections, “Well... aha!... er... good!... next?...” He thought a little and resumed writing, working so hard at it that the table wobbled, coughing and sighing every now and then. Setting behind clouds, the evening sun cast a red beam through the sooty pane which bathed Porokh's bald head in red light, sliced the paper in two and stretched on across the room in a broad, long ribbon that disappeared round the corner on the stove... In that light, Porokh's normally florid head seemed flaming red. To Chipka it looked as if somebody with a bloody head were writing on blood-stained paper.

Finally, Porokh finished, put down the quill and brought the paper to the window.

“Will this be all right?” He started to read.

“Is it all right?” he asked again, having read it through.

“It's all right,” Chipka said, although he was not exactly sure.

“Here's your petition then. Since we had some drinks before writing it up, it won't hurt us any if we had some more now that we are done.”

“Good,” Chipka agreed. “To my good luck, you mean?”

“That's right,” Porokh said. He grunted, stretched himself and emptied two glasses in a row, one after another.

He then poured a glass for Chipka who drank it and spat. The sun had set, and it had grown quite dark in the room. Porokh did not light the candle and paced the room in silence. Chipka felt ill at ease.

“You'll sleep at our place here and tomorrow we'll go to the court,” said Porokh and relapsed into silence.

The silence weighed heavily on them. Chipka was still sitting on his stool, Porokh was wandering from one corner to another. Neither of them was speaking. To break this spell, Chipka asked:

“Is this how you live then?”

“As you see. The only good thing is that we own the house.”

“Not too good, I should say.”

“It takes just a couple of drinks to make it seem better. Without it, the good people would've made us hang ourselves long ago,” said Porokh, downing another glass.

“It's real nice for everybody then,” said Chipka.

“What did you think? Nobody's without his own troubles... D'you know Polski?” Porokh asked, stopping in front of Chipka.

“Which of them?”

“Your lord who lives in Krasnohorka.”

“So what about him?”

“Let me tell you. He’s the one who destroyed me — crushed me underfoot!” Porokh again started to pace the room. “He’s driven me into a tight corner since he was elected marshal... Slanderer is what he calls me! That’s why I’ve been treated like dirt. Before he came along, I’d been doing all right. I was in the civil service... This building has now sagged as you see but it hasn’t always been that way... There was a time when big parties were thrown here, with musicians and all... The police commissioner himself was entertained here... Now it’s just grinding poverty, of course... And it’s all because of him!”

“What has he done to you?” Chipka asked.

“He had me kicked out of the service... branded me as a slanderer — that’s what he did! But never mind. It’s not that easy to make people believe Vasil Porokh is a slanderer... Vasil just isn’t that kind of man! He had my brother shipped off to Siberia, because my brother was a fool... His nephew seduced my sister — but she’s crazy anyway... But with Vasil it’s been tough going for him! Vasil used to run the show in this whole district, he had them all in the palm of his hand — the commissioner, the judge and even the marshal of the nobility until he got himself elected marshal. As soon as he got in, he started to show his gentlemanly pride. I did not care much for his pride, because I did all the work here anyway... Pah! But no... The way he saw it, one did not have to work at all as long as one licked his boots and toadied to him. But that’s something Vasil Porokh just can’t do... Let others lick his boots if they feel like it — but not Vasil! If I ever get around to polishing his boots, they’ll wish I’d never started! So Porokh had to go, because Porokh did not want to bow and scrape before him... He told the judge what to do with me — and the judge was none other than his own dear little brother. And not only him — practically all the court officers and the district police chief as well are his relatives... same breed, same blood... How can anyone hope for justice in a place like this? They were told to kick me out and kick me out they did. That was easy enough. But getting me off their backs is something else again. I don’t give a damn. What do I care about that job? But I’ll get them yet. I’ll let some cats out of the bag — and let them try and catch them again! One of them was a trustee and I got him in the dock... They fixed the case, of course, so he pulled through... Never mind! How can that court clerk serve at all? Never mind, I say... I thrive on such things. I’ll write again... You just touch me and you’ll find it hard to stay clear of me... I’ll keep on writing about everything. I’ll write about those elections they rigged... and I’ll write that all of them here are kith and kin... I’ll write it up all right... I’ll show them up for what they are. I’m not a slanderer for nothing! Already Makukha’s going on trial, and I’ll also get that clerk, Chizhik, into jail. May I croak if I don’t!... I know how Chizhik

got the Sovinskys off the hook. Sovinsky shot a girl. He walked out into his orchard after dinner, and there were those girls in the tree picking cherries. Well, he says, let's see if you can jump down from that tree... And he fires his gun — boom! And a girl tumbles down like a stone — the very one who hadn't yielded to him... What does he do? He flies to Vasil Semenovich right away... That one sends for Chizhik. Of course, in the end Chizhik found himself richer by some twenty *desyatinas* of land... It was he, of course, who hushed up that little matter. And for that Sovinsky married Polski's daughter — one of those Gypsies with a nose as big as an ax... And they covered it all up. Imagine covering up human blood... But wait! What does Vasil Porokh live for if not to tell the whole story? Blood is not water... Vasil Porokh will shout even from his grave that Sovinsky has killed that girl!... Murderers!..."

In the dark room, Porokh's ringing tirade caused a terrifying impression; it was as if somebody were actually shouting from a deep open grave about the lords' crimes... As Chipka listened to the man's outpourings, he simmered with wrath...

"I see that everybody's happy," he joked bitterly. "There's plenty of justice to go around for all."

"Are you looking for justice?" Porokh asked sternly. "A full bottle is about all the justice you can get. Because an empty one is a very cruel thing. All right, let's take some refreshments."

He tilted the bottle to his lips and let the vodka gurgle down his throat.

Chipka declined. Already his head was ringing. Porokh's words had deeply touched his heart. He clearly visualized all the unfairness of it all. Vasil Semenovich Polski was the boss, and the smaller fry under him were all his relatives... His word was law, and all the rest crawled to him... He was the lord of the peasants and the lord of the lords as well! For him there were no restraints and no limits. How could there be any justice in that setup? Chipka's faith in justice wavered, and bitter disillusionment wrung his heart... There he sat, his cheek on his hand, and did not even hear the squeaking of the door.

"Are you sitting in the dark?" a woman's voice asked, and the door closed again.

A short while later, Porokh's sister came in, carrying an oil lamp. The light struck Chipka's eyes. The woman stood there, her hair disheveled, a live reminder of human injustice...

"Shall we eat supper here or there?" she asked, holding the lamp.

"Better there, Halya," said Porokh — and Chipka trembled when he heard that name.

"Let's go and eat then," she said and led the way.

Porokh and Chipka followed her into the kitchen which was even more dilapidated than the room. At the far end of the kitchen

there was the black gap of an open door which apparently led to a second room. Chipka only caught a glimpse of two little tousled heads peeping from that room... Those must be her children, he thought.

They sat down to eat. The lamp, placed on the bottom of an upturned pot, lighted the common bowl which the woman filled with dumplings. Before eating, they had a drink each. Porokh's sister also drank and this without batting an eyelid. Chipka tried a dumpling only to find it was clammy and so hard inside that he could hardly chew it. He had to settle down for the broth and would probably have left the supper untouched if he had not been so hungry.

"We, too, want to eat dumplings, Mother," a child bleated from the other room. "Give us some..."

"Shoo!..." Porokh shouted at them. The children vanished from sight.

"Shame on you!" Halya snapped at him. "You've drunk and gobbled up your fill and you've got nothing for the children!"

"Why don't you give them some?" Chipka said to her.

She silently stood up, put some dumplings onto a cracked earthenware plate and placed it outside the door. Two children showed themselves in the doorway. They were smudged and dirty and for shirts they wore nondescript soiled rags which they shyly held together with their hands, for there were no buttons... Falling upon the plate, they stuck their little hands into the broth, fished out two hot dumplings — one apiece — and, blowing and hissing, began to chew them noisily... The scene filled Chipka with revulsion. It must also have embarrassed Porokh, for he shouted at them again. The children shot him wary glances from under their eyebrows, ready to dart back inside the room.

"Stop yelling, drunkard!" Halya rebuked him. "Stay where you are," she ordered the children.

Chipka did not feel like eating any more. Having finished the last dumpling, Porokh stood up. Chipka thanked Porokh and his sister.

"Now you may go to sleep," Porokh told Chipka.

Together, they went out of the kitchen. Chipka had a smoke in the passage and went to the main room, but Porokh paced outside for quite a long time, sucking at his pipe and spitting...

Chipka tossed and turned on the floor, unable to sleep. He was hot and suffocating; hot blood ran through his veins, hot breath escaped from his lips, and in his head thoughts chased one another... Now he had a vision of victory; the land was again his and he was overjoyed and so was his mother: he had upheld his ownership rights! He also saw Halya's nice image... Say what you like, but she is a fine girl! It would be quite something to have her for a wife... The very thought of it delighted him.

Then a chilling wind blew from the opposite direction. The

land was gone... his efforts had all been in vain and his money spent for nothing... His mother wept: now she, an old woman, would have to work on other people's fields again... And what about himself? He had lost everything... Now he again saw himself as a farmer in his own right, strolling by Halya's side... She looked him in the eyes, ever so gently, and smiled at him... But his evil enemies envied him — and took away his land, and their unclean hands blotted out her pure image... What was there left to him? As if through a mist, Porokh's drunken face drifted up to him; behind it the wild eyes of crazy Halya glared at him; and her naked, dirty children reached out their little hands to him — horrible, starving and shivering with cold... And all the injustice of mankind loomed up before him... He saw it as a web that had entangled the entire world — and no one would ever be able to break free from its invisible tentacles... Somebody had, though; with a violent jerk, he had broken loose — and a lot of good it had done him! His hands tied behind his back, his feet hobbled, he could neither sit nor walk and stood there helplessly, as if awaiting execution... "Oh, Lord, where's Thy justice?" Chipka whispered. "Where am I to look for it?" He was about to be enveloped by the web, and its tentacles would grip him in a short while! He quaked and wriggled... He longed for oblivion, for sleep... He turned to the other side. But sleep would not come, as if he were bewitched.

The door squeaked as somebody came in.

"Is that you, mister?" Chipka asked.

"That's me," Porokh said. "Aren't you sleeping yet?" He made his way to his lair at the far end of the room. Within ten minutes, he began to snore.

A happy man, Chipka thought. He lost no sleep over his many troubles... He himself had barely had a glimpse of trouble — and look what it did to him!

XV

The Hard Luck

In the morning, Chipka rose with a heavy heart and a hazy head. He took the petition, bowed to Porokh and went to the court building. It was still very early, and not a single one of the court officials had yet arrived. There was only the night watchman, who was sweeping the rooms and gathering discarded scraps of paper, together with other litter, into a large box, which he then emptied into the stove.

"An early bird," he said when he saw Chipka. "You'll have to wait. There's nobody yet."

Chipka went to sit in the porch. After the sleepless night and the hangover, he enjoyed the morning freshness which seemed

to revive him. Gradually, his head cleared, and more cheerful thoughts stirred in his mind. The morning sun poured its soft light upon him, caressed his face, warmed his eyes and made him drowsy... His head swayed — and he dozed off. He was woken up by a hum of voices. Opening his eyes, he saw several men entering the yard. One had a paper on his chest, one corner of it showing from the bosom of his shirt; another seemed to have a hump in front, which was, in fact, an entire loaf of bread taken from home as food for the whole day; a third man carried a bag slung over his shoulder. Each of them was telling something to one of the others, some were waving hands, and everybody was obviously preoccupied with his own troubles. Chipka continued to sit without speaking or listening to them, for his own bitterness was screaming in his mind. Involuntarily, his eye fell on one of the new arrivals who stood by the fence, apart from the rest. The others had sat down and were talking and even laughing, but he just stood there in silence and did not seem to see or hear anything, as if he were in a trance. The fellow's case must be something serious, too, Chipka decided.

Suddenly, somebody shouted, "The clerk!... The clerk is coming!" Startled, the men jumped to their feet. Chipka also stood up. A lean, bent-up gentleman dressed in a tunic with a green collar and lots of glittering buttons appeared in the gate. Chipka looked him over. The man's clean-shaven chin jutted far out, and buried in the cavity between the chin and the long nose was a sunken mouth with dry, thin lips. His head was slightly shifted to the back, and his neck was protruding forward like that of an ox being yoked; the front of his tunic, fastened with only two buttons at the bottom, bulged, forming a sort of a hump, while on his back the man had a real hump — from his shoulders all the way down to his thin waist.

Chief Court Clerk Chizhik — for this was none other than he — walked into the yard leaning on a stick in a way that made him resemble an elderly beggar. He surveyed those assembled with his mousy stare and went up to them.

"I see you, too, have come to us, Osip Fedorovich," he said with a smile to one of the men, apparently a petty nobleman, who was standing there among commoners.

The man nodded and explained his business. Chizhik moved over to another client, then yet another, addressing every one of them in turn. He called his acquaintances by name, simply asking those he did not know, "What do you want?" Soon he reached Chipka.

"What do you want?"

"I have a petition."

"About what?"

Chipka handed him the paper. The clerk sniffed, dipped his left hand into the bosom of his tunic, pulled out a black handkerchief

with a broad red pattern and wiped his nose. Then he slowly read it through.

"Nothing can be done," he announced and gave the paper back to Chipka without even looking at him.

"Why?" Chipka asked with surprise.

"Because. You've got no documents."

"But the commune did give us the land..."

"It doesn't matter."

"Does he have any documents?" Chipka asked, meaning his opponent.

The clerk shot him a sharp glance and sniffed again.

"Wait," he told Chipka, going into the court building.

Chipka waited for an hour, then another, then one more... He saw quite a few people going in and out, but nobody called him. Finally, the watchman appeared.

"Come with me," he said and led Chipka inside. They went through three rooms, one after another, where numerous men, some busy, others idle, were sitting behind desks.

"There goes another one," they giggled, looking after Chipka. "A fly can surely smell honey."

Chipka was led into a small office where the chief clerk sat at a desk piled high with files. The janitor went out, closing the door behind him. The young man remained alone with Chizhik.

"Aha!" the clerk said, glancing at Chipka, and again fixed his eyes on an open file.

Chipka, standing by the door, remained silent.

"Did Porokh write your paper for you?" Chizhik asked, without looking up from the file. He scribbled something on it.

"Yes."

Again there was silence. Chipka felt rather uncomfortable.

"What did you pay him?"

"I didn't pay anything."

Chizhik cast him an incredulous look.

"I say —" he began and paused. "Fifty rubles can help to put this matter straight..."

"He-e-e!" Chipka snorted, whether amused or amazed.

"Why do you giggle?"

Chipka kept silent.

"Where's justice then, if it can be done this way?" he mused aloud.

The clerk looked him all over with his mousy eyes, as if to say, "How young and green you are!"

Chipka looked at the clerk; their eyes met. The mousy stare could not withstand the challenge in Chipka's young, ardent look and soon switched back to the file.

Again silence.

"Why are you standing then? Don't waste my time and yours, too..."

"I'd sooner let my hand wither away up to here!..." shouted Chipka, pointing to his right elbow. Then, without finishing, he burst out of the room.

"As you like!" the chief clerk shouted after him. "How hot you are! Just make sure you don't burn yourself." He hurried after Chipka.

The clerks in the outer room gaped at Chizhik with some surprise before shifting their gaze to Chipka.

Swiftly and proudly, Chipka strode across the rooms. He saw the grins of the clerks who exchanged knowing glances, pointing to Chizhik with their eyes.

"The crook!" Chipka blurted out, running outside. Blood rushed into his head, his heart was throbbing violently, his face went white and his eyes burned wolfishly. The people looked at him and parted to give him way... He made straight for Porokh's place.

"How did it go?" Porokh asked when he saw Chipka.

Chipka's eyes glared even more ferociously.

"Scoundrel... thief... He's bent up something terrible — and serves him right, too!"

"What exactly happened?"

"He wants fifty rubles... Fifty rubles for my own land! Fancy that! How come the Lord doesn't punish him?"

"That's the way it is. How did you think such matters were fixed?" Porokh added fuel to the flames. "You've got to oil the wheels to get along... A dry spoon hurts your throat..." He coughed. "See how dry my throat's gone? I'd sure like to gargle it some..."

"Is there any vodka?" Chipka asked grimly.

"Nothing at all — not a drop of it left. Look!" Porokh held up the empty bottle to the window.

Without a word, Chipka got out a ruble and tossed it on the table. Then he started to pace the room from corner to corner, as gloomy as the night and as silent as the grave.

Porokh snatched the coin with both hands and darted out of the room. Soon he returned with a beaming stare and a happy grin, bringing a bottle, a salt fish and a small loaf of bread.

"Cheer up!" he said. "We've got a full bottle. Let's drink!" he proposed in a sweet voice, looking at the young man. "It's good that the devil's taken my sister out of the house. Will you join me for a drink?"

Chipka did not reply.

"Here's to our health!" Turning to face him, Porokh emptied the glass into his mouth.

"Good health!"

"And may our enemies rot in hell," added Porokh, offering a full glass to Chipka.

Chipka also drank.

"D'you feel better now?"

"Like hell I do."

“Have some more — and you will.”

Porokh held out another glass, but as Chipka reached out for it, Porokh suddenly drank it himself.

“The stuff is surely bitter — like you say,” he said jokingly. “All right, take this — it’ll raise your spirits.”

Chipka drained another glass. The liquor went to his head, fogging his eyes. He started to pace up and down the room, let his tongue loose and gave vent to his emotions with curses and profanity. Porokh, nibbling away at the fish, fanned Chipka’s fury with his remarks.

They drank again and again... Chipka’s eyes became bloodshot, and his pupils sparkled. What was going on in his heart was something nobody could fathom or gage. The liquor mixed with the fury had set his heart on fire... All this soon wore him out. He sank down on a stool, dropped his head on his hands and fell asleep...

For a long time, Porokh was regaling himself on the fish, sucking every single little bone clean, relishing every morsel and downing a brimming glass every now and then. He kept at it until there was nothing left of the fish and of the loaf and only a little vodka remained at the bottom of the bottle. Then he rose from the table and hid the bottle in the stove after emptying it into his mouth. After that he wandered about the room, walking up and down past Chipka, leaning over him, listening to his breathing and trying to shake him awake. Chipka did not stir. Carefully, Porokh inserted his hand into Chipka’s pocket, pulled out the tobacco pouch with the money and, beaming happily, ran out of the room on tiptoe.

Chipka slept until dinnertime. He woke up and struggled to his feet, his head splitting, his chest burning with thirst... He tried to remember... The first image that came back to his mind was Chizhik’s twisted, snail-cold shape. He waved his hand in disgust, found his hat and went out of the house. Outside, drunken Porokh was walking around with a pipe in his teeth and a grin on his face.

“Good-bye.”

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“Good luck.”

And Chipka carried to Piski his heavy head and broken heart. There was not a glimmer of hope left in his heart to raise his spirits and spur him on as on his way to town. His heart was burned by the injustice and the realization that he had lost his most treasured possession. He plodded along, barely able to move his feet.

By nightfall, he reached Soldier’s Hamlet — and his field. There he shivered, as if with cold, and then felt hot. He paused... No sounds reached him from beyond the fence. There was nobody in

sight. He had seen her only the day before... She must know already... May death punish the whole confounded lot of them! He walked away at a faster pace.

Presently, he left his land behind him without even looking at it. He walked on and on... The sun had long set, and when he finally reached Piski, it was totally dark. Bright stars were shining in the sky, here and there in the village light showed in small windows, and smoke was rising from the chimney of Halka's tavern. The impression was as if the tavern were smoldering inside. His own house stood dark and still.

His mother must be asleep already, he thought. Let her sleep then...

And he directed his steps toward the tavern.

* * *

"Get me some vodka, Halka!" he called to the Jewish woman keeper.

"What are you going to do with it?" The woman grinned eyeing him curiously.

"Don't ask questions — just be quick about it!" He made straight for the table to take a seat in the far corner.

"You don't have to yell, because you won't scare me. How much do you want?"

"Just get me some, satanic breed!"

"Are you sure you haven't gone crazy? Some vodka! Out with the money first!"

Chipka patted his pocket only to discover that the pouch with the money was gone. He threw off his coat.

"Take this — and start moving!" He hurled the coat across the table.

"What shall I do with your coat? I don't need it."

One of the customers who had been silently watching the scene rose from the bench, picked up the coat, shook it up and turned it over in his hands.

"Serve him, Halka," he said. "I'll pay a ruble for it."

"What do I need your ruble for?" she screamed, snatching the coat from the man's hands. "You mind your own business! Is it yours, this coat? He's pawning it..."

"Then why are you making so much fuss over it? The lad's asking you for vodka, so give him vodka."

"Vodka, vodka," the woman mimicked him. "How much of it?" she asked Chipka.

"Lots of it, damn your soul! Come on!" Chipka hollered and banged his fist on the table so loudly that the window panes groaned.

"I'll give you a quart..."

She darted to the back room, tossed the coat onto a pile of old

clothes and brought out a quart of vodka. Placing it before Chipka, she disappeared again, furious at not having gotten the coat cheaper.

Chipka drank three glasses in quick succession. His senses became blunted, his vision blurred. Other men were staring at him in silence, no one daring to speak to him.

Presently, Yakiv Kabanets came in.

"Is that you, Chipka?" he asked. "So you, too, are here already... Shall we drink then?"

"Let's drink," Chipka said grimly. Then, in a bolder tone, he repeated, "Let's drink." Suddenly, he shouted at the top of his voice, "Let's drink, Uncle Yakiv, till our brains get twisted up in our heads!"

And — bang! — he struck the table again. Bottles and glasses jingled, some nearly falling down.

One by one, the others found their tongues. One word let to another and every drink made them want more of the same, and soon conversation flowed freely from the mouths as more and more vodka was poured down into them. More customers arrived. Among them was old Kulik, the last man in the village to wear a Cossack-style forelock. Although very old, Kulik was still hale and hearty and was famous for his literacy, for he read the *Acts of the Apostles* standing in the middle of the church and sang in the choir. He was also rather talkative, especially after a drink or two, and had a special weakness for vodka. Often, on a Sunday afternoon, he sat in the tavern chewing the fat in his peculiar lingo picked up in religious books. Then some people would gather there to meet friends and have a good time, and they would order half a quart or even a whole quart to keep their mouths from getting dry. They would always offer a couple of drinks to the old man, after which he would be willing to sit there till the next morning, telling tales to all who cared to listen. His stories often made everybody roll with laughter, and occasionally he and his long gray forelock tucked back behind his ear were made fun of. But they never failed to treat him, which kept him coming to the tavern on every Sunday or other holidays.

There he was now, soon followed by other regulars. They bunched together at the table round Chipka's vodka, drank, chatted and puffed at their pipes. Most of them were former household serfs. Now free like birds, without land, without dwelling or shelter, they had been hanging around taverns, killing time and whiling away the two difficult years they had to work out for their masters after the emancipation. Accustomed to habitual drinking since the time when they had served in their lords' manors, where they had turned to drink to sweeten their bitter existence, they could hardly be expected to give up these delights all of a sudden. Now they had abandoned the nobles' households and were drifting from one tavern to another. When they had no

money, they waited until somebody offered them a drink or two. Tavern friendships were easy.

Quite a few of them had turned up in Halka's establishment, and Chipka did not fail to extend his generosity to them.

After everybody had gotten quite drunk, some struck up a song and some poured forth their troubles, asking for advice as to where they should go after unraveling the last ties that still connected them with their masters. But Chipka did not listen. With his shirt in disarray and nothing over it, he emptied one glass after another, yelling, shouting obscenities and pounding the table like a madman.

"What does it all mean, Chipka?" Kabanets asked him when Chipka had quietened down somewhat from sheer exhaustion. "It seems you didn't care much for this stuff."

"I didn't. But now I'll drink."

"Why so?"

"Because there's no justice anywhere... no happiness... and no more land... My land's gone! Why shouldn't I drink?"

"What's happened to your land?"

"Happened?... Those damn leeches have taken it away from me — that's what happened! When land is lost, everything is lost!"

"That's right!" the ex-lackeys took up. "What's a man with no land? How can anyone live without land?"

"As fishes die without water, so do people without land," old Kulik threw in in his learned style.

"Sure!" Chipka agreed. "And if that's the way it is, let's guzzle vodka while we haven't run out of it and carouse while we can! Without land... nothing matters... everything's useless. There's no need for a cow, a horse, sheep... No need at all! So let me go all the way now!" Bang! — his fist landed on the table.

The table trembled, the glassware rattled, and a glass fell to the floor. But no one bothered to pick it up, for everybody was gaping at Chipka. He went on:

"Uncle Yakiv! There's something you don't know... nobody here knows... Damn them! They wanted fifty rubles for the land! Land is not so important — never was! What's land? Land!... A good harvest takes a lot of work... and land makes you your own master... Land means a lot... And without it everything is lost — *everything!*" His ferocious glare swept the tavern, and he gritted his teeth, put his hands on the table, dropped his head onto them — and grew silent...

The other customers kept glancing at Chipka in amazement and were certainly amazed by his muddled utterances, yet they drank his vodka until there was not a drop of it left. Then, one by one, they began to leave.

"Come on, Mikita, time to go home," a serf swaying on his feet said to his pal sitting at the table and listening to Kulik's

story about Joseph betrayed by his brothers. "D'you hear, Mikita? Get moving!"

"Wait a little," Mikita said.

"What for?... Let's go, I say, or I'll leave you here!... By God, I'll go without you... Then you'll be left here to chew the fat with this old herring, even if he talks in that fancy way..."

Kulik looked up at the peasant, shook his head reproachfully and muttered:

"Abide... and heed... for He hath created the world... Satan envied... Adam sinned with Eve... but may He reign! Oh, my people! No evil cometh from hearing..."

Mikita strained his ears. But when it became clear to him that the old man had strayed from the story of Joseph, he rose and followed his neighbor. Some of the more sober men reached for their hats. Soon only drunks remained. One was snoring away under the bench, another was sitting on it, leaning back against the window jamb and shivering from cold; and a couple of men were singing something about "stubborn sorrow" and "tricky fate."

Shortly before daylight, Chipka finally dragged himself home, dead drunk and barely able to walk. Motrya was shocked.

"What's the matter, son?! What have you been celebrating?"

He sunk onto the bench, drooping his head...

"Where are your coat and hat?... Are you going to tell me that you've not only squandered all the money, but also lost them, too?"

"My coat?... The hat?... They're gone!... What do I need them for?... What do I need anything for if... Hoo! Hoo!" he howled, shaking his disheveled head, his eyes flashing tearfully.

Motrya's heart was wrung with pity. She tried to talk some sense into him:

"You don't have to torture yourself, son. Are you trying to kill yourself or what? Forget about that land. There's nothing we can do. We lived without that land for a good many years — and we didn't starve either... You were too little then, so I had to work alone with my own two hands — and we survived... Now it's nothing like it used to be. Now you can earn enough, and I can still help you... What are we to do? It's just His sacred will!"

"Aw, it's just talk! Now I've got nothing left — not a thing! What am I now? A beggar to be pushed around? A hired hand? Everything's been lost — everything!... My property's lost, and my soul is lost, too... because there's no justice in the world — not among the people... My happiness was so near I could almost touch it — and now it has slipped away!..." He made a helpless gesture and paused thoughtfully. "It's all because of the people... They took my father away from me, beasts; they hated me when I was still a child — didn't let me play with their children, kept away from our house, crossed themselves each time they saw

me... I was just a kid but I saw it all... They thought I was a little devil... Me — a devil, eh? Yes, I'm a devil, a lord of devils!... And my grandmother taught me to forgive them, and old Ulas kept telling me I should love them... Fools — fools, all of them... They don't deserve a single kind word... They must be tortured, tor —”

He tumbled to the floor and began to snore.

Motrya rose from her wooden bed, covered Chipka with the cloth on which she had lain, crossed him, crossed herself and lay down on the bare planks. Yet she was unable to go back to sleep... Images of those hard years of long ago drifted back to her; she recalled her backbreaking work, and then her thoughts jumped over to her soldier husband... Where was he? What had happened to him? Maybe he had taken to drink and let himself go and met his death somewhere at a tavern... She glanced at her son, who lay there like a log, snoring, and whispered softly:

“Oh, Lord, save him and protect him!”

When Chipka woke up, the sun was quite high in the sky. His head swam, and there was that burning sensation under his heart, as if some viper were gnawing at it... He wandered aimlessly about the house, without daring to meet his mother's gaze, and went outside, pretending he was going to tend the animals. But instead of going to the pen, he made straight for Halka's... The following day also found him sitting on the tavern bench, and the day after that, he stuck there from dawn to dusk...

XVI The Bunch

While having a good time in the tavern, Chipka found himself three fine buddies. Lushnya, Matnya and Patsyuk were birds of a feather. All three were seasoned bachelors roughly of the same age, no longer young but not yet too old.

Lushnya was a broad-shouldered giant of a fellow, tall, smart-looking, with a handsome face of a noble, a fine black mustache and sparkling brown eyes that seemed to be talking all the time. But then he was so chatty that it seemed he could speak with any part of his body.

True to his name *, Patsyuk was lean, quick and mousy-looking. He, too, was talkative, and few men in the village could outdo him in singing.

Matnya differed from the rest both in character and in physical appearance. He was stocky, slow and clumsy. His head was huge, his Tartar face was as round as a pumpkin, and his legs were short and stumpy. He cared little for talking, much less for

* Patsyuk (Ukr.) — a rat

singing, and of all things on earth he loved only vodka which he guzzled like water and which alone brought him genuine pleasure.

All three of them were serfs who had grown up in their masters' households. Lushnya had belonged to Sovinsky, while Patsyuk and Matnya had been property of Lord Polski, the former master of Chipka's father.

Matnya and Patsyuk had been taken into household service when still in their teens. Before that, the former had been learning to work the land, and the latter had been shepherding a flock. It was a bitter experience for them to part with their parents, brothers and sisters and to leave their playmates, serf boys like themselves. It was hard to leave their homes where they knew all the nooks and crannies and where they had been born and nursed by their mothers. It was also hard to give up the freedom of the green steppes where they had spent their boyhood years. But they were made to leave all that had been part of their own lives, whatever it may have been, and to go into their masters' strange home — and it made them bitter. Yet there was nothing they could do against the master's will. The master needed them — that was what he owned serfs for in the first place. Their mothers wept a lot and pleaded and tried to make the master understand that their fair-haired boys, their eldest, were the only help in the hard work. But their tears and reasoning failed to sway the master. He just did not care. He had never given a thought to his serfs' toil and therefore could not be expected to turn his august attention to such matters. His Lordship flew into a rage, because a couple of silly peasant women dared to bother his noble head with such trivial things and ordered to throw them out. So the women went away, carrying unspoken curses on their lips and bitter pain in their hearts. Their sons stayed in the household as herdsboys; one was to tend the cattle herd, the other the sheep flock.

Lushnya had been born and raised in his master's household. Old Lushnya had died, leaving a few children. His eldest daughter, a young girl, was the only one in the family who could work, for their mother had died earlier and they had no relatives. Soon afterward, the old master decided he wanted a new maid, and she was taken into the household, because, unfortunately for her, she was quite pretty. A serf family was moved over from the household to her house. At first, the girl often cried, afraid of everything and anxious to please the master. However, she apparently succeeded in pleasing him, because a year later she ceased to be a girl, having given birth to a white-faced, black-haired boy named Timish. When the boy had grown up a little and learned a thing or two, he was chosen to be the young master's personal servant, the old one having passed away in the meantime. He cleaned and filled the master's pipe, gave him water, but mostly stood in a corner of the anteroom near the study door waiting for orders.

The little boy had to endure a great deal. All too often, he fell asleep on his feet, exhausted by his vigil. Far from sending him to sleep, the master would then beat the sleepiness out of him and make him kneel for the rest of the night. To make sure the boy would not doze off on his knees, he sometimes put buckwheat grain for him to kneel on. Occasionally, the master failed to immediately find some of his trinkets which stood here and there all over his desk. Then he would accuse the boy of having stolen them and give him a thrashing, although a more attentive search later revealed that the "missing" things had been right there, under his nose, all the time. Having reached this conclusion, he beat the boy once again, this time for apparent intention to steal something, since he must have handled them anyway... Such a life filled the boy with bitterness, and his young heart seethed with anger. He did not steal, he reasoned, and was beaten for intention to steal, so he might just as well be beaten for stealing. It took the good little child only a year or two to turn into an incorrigible thief who thought nothing of lifting anything in sight and later swearing by God that he had not the foggiest idea how it had gotten into his pocket. Somebody else must have put it there to see him punished... He was beaten all the same, and quite severely at that, but it did not help. As he grew up, he became even more daring and rapacious. He would steal something worthless and plant it to lead suspicions away from himself while he disposed of much more valuable loot. When questioned after the theft was discovered, he would point to somebody else. Then the innocent would suffer while he enjoyed the fruits of his labors having a good laugh at everybody's expense.

The most hard-boiled of criminals is never made happy by a life of crime. Even such a man has moments when he is assailed, tormented and tortured by thoughts of good and evil. Human conscience never dies even in the most wicked soul. Nor did it die in the soul of Timish Lushnya. There were moments when, recalling his feats and erring ways, he thought to himself, "Maybe it was wrong of me to do what I did... Maybe I will have to answer for this in the other world, if not in this..." Then he felt frightened, depressed and ashamed all at the same time. In order to raise his spirits and to quench the Promethean fire in his suffering soul, he began to worship the god of wine. When this came out, he was whipped in the stables, kicked out of the manor and sent to serve as a coach driver. This happened about two years before the emancipation decree. He was around twenty at the time.

Compared to the master's chambers, the stables were somewhat freer. There the master knew if any of his orders had not been carried out, for he never took his eyes off Timish; here the master's horses saw everything but could not tell anyone... It had been impossible to slip out of the anteroom, whereas the stables offered

such a possibility at least during the night. Lushnya began to hang about the village tavern. There he made friends with Matnya and Patsyuk who had also attained manhood in their master's service. Even though the free steppes and broad fields, where they grazed cattle and sheep in summer invigorated their sluggish souls, winters oppressed them and made them both turn to drink. Both became heavy drinkers, loafers and thieves. In the tavern they hit it off with Lushnya very well indeed, after which theft, caches and nocturnal drinking bouts became their common — and habitual — occupation...

Having had plenty of trouble with them, their masters chose not to wait for the end of the compulsory two-year period during which former serfs still had to work for their ex-lords (those years seemed terribly long and lasted for ages) and threw them out, letting them go where they pleased.

Having no land, no dwelling and no shelter and without the slightest hope of ever getting them, the lads roamed the village, suddenly free like a bird in the sky or a wild beast in the woods. They had nowhere to go and no shelter against the cold and the rain. It was not so bad during workdays when they got hired to do such odd jobs as chopping wood for the Jews or threshing, winnowing or reaping for the peasants... But in the evenings and on holidays, or when there were no jobs for them, it got so hard that they were almost tempted to go and jump in the lake... There was no shelter for them, no place to rest or to sleep. The village had two places open for everybody. One was the street, the other was the tavern. The street was a dangerous place, though. Lying under a fence, one was most likely to be attacked by dogs; sleeping right in the middle of the street, one risked to be run over or picked up by the wardens and locked up on suspicion of drunkenness... That left only the tavern, which offered shelter, warmth and company. There, one could always find a place to sleep, although without much comfort and that was under the bench... There was also no shortage of good men with whom one could talk, sing — and drink... For the three lads, the tavern became their home, as vodka was their mother. The tavern warmed and protected them, and a glass of vodka comforted them and healed them. The place was never empty; there was always somebody around. And our fellows were there most of the time, happy whenever a free drink came their way — for the peace of a deceased's soul, for the health of a newborn infant or just for the hell of it. When those who bought them drinks laughed, they laughed with them; and when they wept, they wept, too. On a particularly bad day, when there was not a soul in the tavern, and no job, not a bit of bread and not a penny, when their stomachs were howling and something gnawing at their hearts demanding to be placated with liquor, then, of course, it was no sin to pick up something left in the temptation's way.

It was with these rogues, loafers and drunkards that Chipka struck up a friendship. Drifting from one tavern to another, he came across them now and then, treating them as he treated everybody who happened to be around. They immediately wormed themselves into his confidence. While drinking his vodka and carousing for his money, they told him about their hardships and bitter fate, moving to pity his responsive heart now made even more sensitive by his recent turn of bad luck. Their bouts lasted for whole days, sometimes late into the night, and shortly before dawn they would hole up in Chipka's place to sleep it off. Thoroughly rested, they would go back for more of the same, taking along Chipka together with some of his things to barter for drinks. This went on from day to day.

* * *

As she watched this dissolute life, Motrya only wept at first and tried to persuade Chipka to change his ways; later she began scolding and shaming him; next she would run about her yard and up and down the street, wailing:

"Oh, goodness! That's the end of me! It's all up with me now! I might as well jump from the bridge..."

Passers-by asked her what had happened and pitied her.

"There's nothing else I can do," she told everybody, weeping. "He was so good and gentle — but then it all changed all of a sudden! It's going to kill me, because I just can't bear to see it. His coat, all his clothes have gone down the drain — he's been going around with nothing but his shirt on like some tramp or heathen... He's sold our third sheep already. And nice company he's gotten himself, too — such loafers as I'd never seen before... My God! What am I to do now, poor me?"

"Try talking to him, shaming him," the villagers advised her.

"Did I try to bring him to his senses! Did I beg him!" she shouted through tears. "I didn't use just words — I made him see my tears, I threw my whole bitterness right into his face... A lot of good it did me, too. He's like a brick wall!..."

"You should probably go to the *volost* office then. Let them keep him in the lock-up for a week or so. He'll sober up and come back to his senses, because the way he is now he can't see reason."

Motrya followed this advice and went to complain to the office. They grabbed him when he was very drunk and dragged him to the lock-up. There he passed out almost at once.

Toward the evening, his pals missed him. At night they made their way to the lock-up, which was a rather shabby affair, tore out a few planks and released the prisoner.

Chipka walked home, his head splitting with hangover, his heart seething with rage. Lushnya, walking behind, added fuel to the flames:

“What kind of mother is that? What mother would complain about her own son? Who’d call her mother after that? Come and lock up my son, she says, because he’s been making trouble! Who’s ever heard of such a thing?!”

Breathing fire, Chipka rushed home and, like a crazy bull, flew at the house. Bang! — and a window was smashed to bits. Bang! — and another was broken, then a third one. Bang — and the door was torn off its hinges.

Horrified, Motrya crawled into the corner on the stove. Chipka stormed inside, hollering:

“Where’s the old witch? Did she suddenly wish to get married or what?... Or did she decide to take a lover? And her son must be locked up to get him out of the way!”

Those venomous words deeply hurt the mother’s heart. Like a wounded turtledove that thrashes about and cooes softly and moans in pain, Motrya trembled in her corner on the stove and bitterly spoke to her son in a low voice:

“You don’t fear God, Chipka. You just don’t know what you are saying... I wish I were dead, I —” Bitter tears flooded her face.

“What about me? Do you think it’s any easier for me? Maybe my heart is going to burst from all that pain... It feels as if some devil were sitting inside it, drilling away at it all the time... Then you try to make it worse still!”

“Why do you drink then, son? Does it make you feel better? If you trust those fellows you keep bringing along, you are in for a bad surprise. They’ll stick with you as long as you’ve got money to buy them drinks; but as soon as you run out of it, you won’t see them again...”

“That’s a lie!” Petro Patsyuk interrupted her.

“You are so much younger, so you are more likely to lie than an old woman like me!...”

“What kind of mother is that, who reports her own son?” Lushnya supported Chipka. “Some mother! No decent man would say a kind word for her... You should’ve covered up for him... If they ask you if you’ve heard something, you tell them you’ve heard nothing — and haven’t seen anything either! What did you tell them instead? My son is this and that and please come over and lock him up! Is that what a mother should’ve done?”

“D’you hear what people say?” Chipka shouted. “Do you hear?”

“People?!” Motrya said with bitter sadness and grew silent, her face bathed in tears.

But Chipka did not stop shouting at his mother for a long time. Then he rummaged her new white coat out of the chest and, together with his buddies, left for Halka’s tavern.

It was already late fall. Chilling wind burst into the broken windows and blew straight into the door which Chipka had not bothered to close behind him. Shivering, she climbed down from

the stove to shut the door. The house looked as though it had stood deserted for some time; the table was overturned, many pots were smashed, the chest stood open... Motrya darted to the chest — and her heart sank. Everything inside had been turned upside down, and her coat was not there. Dismayed, she sank to her knees.

“Oh, Lord! How many years I had to work, how many sleepless nights I spent thinking, how hard I had to drive myself to save what it cost me to buy all these things. And now my own child is squandering it all on drink...”

Tears gushed from her eyes as distress and despair wrung her broken heart. With great difficulty, she struggled to her feet.

“Almighty God!” she prayed lifting her hands up to the sky. “He was my only delight and my only hope, but now he, too, has deceived me! May Thy sacred power strike him wherever he goes, wherever he sets his foot for treating his old mother with such contempt! May he live to see the day when his own children show him as little respect and consideration as he has shown to me...”

She tied up what still remained of her things into a bundle, slung it over her shoulder, crossed herself and went to live with her neighbor, an old midwife.

With her departure, there was no one left to restrain Chipka. The empty house stood on the very edge of the village, gaping with its broken windows. Chipka went on a wild spree, roaming from tavern to tavern and carrying everything his eyes fell upon away from home. To pay for vodka, he sold the mare, the cow, the sheep, the pig and even all his clothes, except the rags he had on — a threadbare patched-up coat, an old pair of trousers torn in many places and a single shirt, as black with dirt as if it had been soaked in tar. Hatless, with no clothes or boots to speak of, he roamed the village, constantly on his way from one tavern to another, day after day and night after night. Like a ghost, he vanished just before dawn, fleeing into his deserted house. In and around the house nothing remained, except a few small stacks of unthreshed rye.

“Why don’t you do something with this rye?” Lushnya asked him once. “Sell it to some Jew and you’ll at least get some money. Otherwise it’ll just rot away.”

“That’s right,” said Chipka.

* * *

The next day the lads went out in search of a buyer. Chipka wanted to sell to a local peasant but did not find anybody. Lushnya and Patsyuk made the round of moneyed Jews. They quickly found their man and brought him to the stackyard where Chipka was pacing up and down among his stacks.

“Chipka!” Lushnya called from the street. “Here’s your buyer.”

"A Jew?"

"Right."

"I won't sell to a Jew."

"Come on! What does it matter to you as long as he pays?"

"I said I'm not selling to a Jew."

"What would you pay for a stack, Ovram?" Lushnya started to bargain, paying no attention to Chipka.

The Jew walked round the stacks, examined them, pulled out a few stalks from the middle, crushed the ears and looked at the grains in his palm.

"How much d'you want?" he asked.

"What about a ruble a stack?" Lushnya asked.

Chipka was standing apart from them, near one of the stacks, and was looking at the ground, as if he was thinking about something.

"What?" the Jew cried out. "For this manure?"

"And what do you say?"

"Fifty... and a half copecks — not more."

"Go to hell!" Chipka snapped at him and walked away toward the house. Lushnya and Patsyuk stayed in the stackyard with the Jew.

"That won't do, Ovram," said Lushnya. "You can't buy such rye anywhere at such a price."

"This here rye is better than you think," Patsyuk put in. "It's been grown by a true farmer. We know how carefully everything was done — from sowing to stacking. It may be a little wet on top, but the rest is as dry as gunpowder. Just look!" He pulled a bunch of stalks out of the stack.

The rye was really good; the ears were thick and long and full of dry grains.

"Take this and have a look. See how good it is?"

Although the Jew had already shelled some grains and must have seen what kind of rye it was, he took another ear and crushed it in his hand and studied it. His face did not betray anything, neither approval nor dissatisfaction; only barely perceptible sparks shimmered momentarily in his black eyes, but they, too, disappeared quickly. He scratched his beard.

"Don't be so stingy, Ovram," Lushnya insisted. "We'll thresh it, too, and do everything that still needs to be done."

"That's not because I'm stingy. There's no reason why I should pay more than it's worth."

"Can't you see? What about the grain? Look: the grains are all the same — full and clean. Why, I'd eat them unground." Lushnya actually put some grains into his mouth and began chewing them.

"But certainly not a ruble a stack!"

"No, not a ruble," Lushnya agreed. "He'll let you have it cheaper."

"Where's the owner then? Why doesn't he come and bargain himself?"

"He's gone inside... to drink some water maybe. Run and get him, Petro."

"Chipka!" Patsyuk shouted, walking toward the house.

"What's the matter?" Chipka asked from inside.

"Come over to strike a deal, will you?"

"I told you I wouldn't sell to a Jew."

"Why?"

There was no reply. Patsyuk waited for some time, but Chipka did not appear.

"Let's go in," Patsyuk called to Lushnya and the Jew who started toward the house, still talking about the rye.

"Don't be stingy, Ovram," Lushnya repeated. "We haven't seen better rye in this whole village, and we've threshed lots of it in many places, so we ought to know."

"There's nothing special about it. It's the same as everywhere."

"No, it isn't! It's the land that matters. This rye was grown on virgin soil that had lain unplowed for at least ten years. It comes from really fat land," Lushnya exerted himself. They almost reached the house.

Chipka was sitting inside in brooding silence. Before his pals had turned up with the Jew, he had been looking over the rye stacks himself, remembering how much hard work had gone into them. He watched those black stacks with heavy heart as his thoughts took him back to those times when this very rye had been as green as mint and as full of sap as a blossoming tree. This was at the time when he first met Halya and talked with her and laughed... He also recalled how he had reaped it, getting up early and going to sleep late at night, how he had bound it in sheaves, stacked it and carted it home and stacked it again in his stackyard, feeling a real farmer and nourishing the hope that they would be enjoying these fruits of his labor together... Now the future looked as black as this rye, once so green and golden. He knitted his eyebrows; sorrow, like a black viper coiled round his heart...

No, he would not sell it, he decided. Better let it rot before his eyes.

Lushnya and the Jew were approaching the door. Chipka rushed to the threshold and snapped, with grim finality:

"What are you leading him here for? I'm not selling."

They were struck dumb.

"If he isn't selling," the Jew fumed, "why have you brought me here at all? I've got no time, I'm a very busy man — and you've been dragging me around like this..." He hurried away.

Chipka again disappeared in the house. Dejectedly, Lushnya and Patsyuk followed him inside.

"Are you out of your mind, Chipka?" Lushnya asked after a

while. "You must be crazy to send away such a buyer... Are you sure you'll find somebody else?"

"I'm not selling, I said."

"Why not? Or do you prefer it to rot? You are like that dog —"

Chipka shot him a furious glance, and Lushnya bit his tongue. At this moment Matnya burst into the room.

"Hurray for us, brothers! Look what I've got!" he shouted, holding up a bottle of vodka with both hands. "Now we can have some fun."

"Where did you get it?" asked Patsyuk, beaming with joy.

"Let's say I found it."

"But where?"

"At the tavern."

"Then how did you —"

"Here's how." Matnya showed them how he had stolen the bottle.

This took their minds off the rye.

"D'you mean you just pinched it or snatched it from somebody?" Patsyuk insisted.

"Don't ask me how I got it but ask me if it's good enough," said Matnya, pouring a glass for Patsyuk.

The latter praised the vodka. Matnya turned to Chipka.

"Here's some for you, brother. Taste it. It's so good it melts on your tongue."

Chipka drank, and Lushnya followed suit. The vodka loosened their tongues, and they started the usual palaver.

Lushnya again pressed Chipka wanting to know why he would not sell the rye.

"No Jew will buy it from me," Chipka declared.

"To whom will you sell it then?"

"To no one."

"It's a shame. You'll lose it for nothing, and we won't get a single drink out of it. Sell it, brother! We could then carouse the real way!"

"I just don't feel like it," Chipka muttered, already in his cups. "I wish I could tell you, Timish, how I don't want to sell it."

"But what d'you need it for? It'll rot anyway!..."

"All right then. Tomorrow I'll go to Hritsko. If he doesn't buy it, I'll give it to him free."

"My goodness!" Lushnya exclaimed. "Then you'd better give it to me. I'll know what to do with it. What does Hritsko need it for anyway? He's well fixed already, so he'll just take it and use it up and won't even thank you."

"No, I won't sell it to anyone else... That wouldn't be a proper thing to do."

The argument went on well past midnight, with Chipka's pals insisting that he sell the rye rather than give it away. Chipka would not budge.

"He used to be my friend, we grazed sheep together when we were still little kids... That'll be my gift to him to help him start farming on his own. Let him benefit honestly from my work, if it's had to turn out this way!"

XVII Confession and Repentance

Early next morning, Chipka went to Hritsko. The new house, white and dainty, looked quite attractive behind pear trees bared by the fall and a row of branchy willows. The wattle-fenced yard was spacious and clean; several strawstacks stood in the stack-yard at the back; to the left of the house there were some vegetable patches, and to the right stood a barn, a pen and a cellar. Close by the gate was a new well frame of freshly squared logs, and a new high crane rose over the street.

Chipka went into the yard. A big, black, shaggy dog flew out at him from behind the pen. He backed to the fence and began to pull a rod out of it. Attracted by the barking, a girlish-looking young woman, short and prettily dressed, ran out of the house and shouted at the dog. Whining, the dog retreated to the kitchen garden. Chipka came up to the woman and greeted her:

"Good morning to you."

"Good morning."

"Can I see Hritsko?"

"No, he is not at home."

"Where is he?"

"Out at the brewery."

"How long has he been working there?"

"Not so long. About a week... No, it was some two weeks ago when the Jew came over to hire him."

"Does he come home often?"

"He always comes to sleep at home on Fridays... But something must have happened there yesterday, because he didn't show up. That means he must be over today. What do you want to see him about?"

"I'd like to talk to him... I want to sell him my rye."

"I'm not sure about that," she said, thinking. "Come back later, toward dinnertime, he might be here."

"All right. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

Chipka walked home, and the woman went back inside.

Hritsko really was not at home. In the fall, he had finished laying in his grain store, spoken with Khristya and gone to work in the brewery. But now he no longer laid himself flat out as he had done only a year before. He had already achieved his purpose and did not have to work himself to death. But the Jew paid well,

so instead of getting moldy from sitting around at home, he could just as well work a week or two, provided he did it without too much sweat or haste.

He came home less than an hour after Chipka had left.

"Why didn't you come yesterday?" Khristya asked him at once.

"Something happened that I don't really know how to begin telling you about."

"Something terrible?"

"No, not exactly terrible, thank God. But it wasn't too good either."

"But what was it, for God's sake? Tell me at last!" Khristya pressed him, frightened.

"Our boss Ovrarn was robbed. So they kept us down there until today."

"You almost made me fear it was something worse. Who did it?"

"God knows... Some masked men, he says. They tied up everybody before anyone could understand what was going on and cleaned out the house."

"Who could they be?"

"He thinks they were maybe soldiers, because they spoke Russian. Frankly speaking, I'm really sorry for Ovrarn."

"Oh, come on! He's only a Jew — big deal! He'd gotten all that money by fleecing us all anyway."

"No, Khristya. Jews aren't all the same. Some of them are bad enough, of course, but Ovrarn is a good man, I should say, even though he's a Jew. I'll say that for him: he was always ready to help a fellow out with a loan when it came to paying taxes or when money was badly needed for something else... Of course, he wanted all of it back — in work if not in cash. Now, too, nearly all his hands in the brewery are those working out what they owe him. But he's a good Jew. All his neighbors down there feel pity for him."

"They are all nice — when they sleep. But as soon as a Jew opens his eyes, he starts trying to cheat you out of something or to spin his web all around you so tight that you'll never break free... He'd lend you a ruble only to make you work out ten... All of them are tarred with the same brush. Wait! I forgot to tell you that Chipka was here to speak to you."

"Chipka?"

"That fellow who's been running about the village like a madman."

"Yes, I know. What did he want?"

"He asked you if you would buy his rye."

"What rye?" Hritsko asked wonderingly.

"I don't know. He only said rye. But I've been wondering what rye he could be selling and why you should buy any more rye if, thank God, we've got enough of our own."

"What did you tell him?"

"I just told him to come back later when you were at home."

"And what did he say?"

"He said he would come — and just went away."

"Hm," mused Hritsko. "The fellow must've been raving mad. The drink must've gotten him."

The conversation about Chipka broke off. Hritsko started asking the usual questions: if everything at home was all right, what Khristya had been doing and if she felt well. Khristya answered his questions and asked her own: what they had been told, what the brewery hands had been questioned about and why they had not let him go home the day before. Then she asked her husband:

"Isn't it time for dinner? Driving here all the way you must have gotten tired and hungry. Let's eat, and then you may rest a little."

"I really got quite hungry... And I'd run out of bread, so I borrowed a chunk from a fellow and had a bite. Now I don't even seem to be —"

They were interrupted by barking. Khristya looked out the window.

"There he comes again."

Hritsko also looked outside.

"Oh, Lord, how ragged and shabby he is!"

"Shall I tell him you aren't in, so that we might eat first?" asked Khristya, looking at her husband.

"No, let him come in. It wouldn't be proper to make him walk here for a third time. We were friends with him, you know, back at the time we were herdsboys with him together. A bit strange he was, but a good pal all the same. And now look what's become of him!"

The door creaked as Chipka entered the passage. The dog barked furiously, almost biting the door posts in its rage. Khristya rose to open the room door.

"You've got some dog there!" Chipka called to her. "Next time I'd better bring something heavy along. Hello!"

"Hello. You go right in, and I'll turn the latch, because it's so tight that only we know how to go about it."

She darted to the other door, opened it, shouted at the dog, shut it again and turned the latch.

"Has Hritsko already come back?" Chipka asked, waiting for her in the passage.

"He's in there. Why don't you go in?"

Timidly, Chipka stepped into the room and paused by the threshold. He felt shy and somewhat scared. Hritsko was the first to speak.

"Hello, Chipka!"

"Hello, Hritsko. Am I glad to see you, brother! You've changed

rather a lot, I'd say. It's been hard to recognize you since you got married."

"What's so different about me?"

"Everything... You've grown that stubble and seem a bit old, too."

"You can't really mean it," Khristya chirped. "He's not all that old — not yet. That's only because he hasn't shaved."

"It could be... But still, Hritsko, you used to look a lot younger."

"That's what a young wife does to a fellow," Hritsko laughed.

"I wish we could all of us remain so old forever," said Chipka with a smile.

"You, too, Chipka, have changed... You don't look like yourself anymore. Why are you so grim?"

"I'm in trouble, brother," replied Chipka with a sigh, taking a seat at the table by Hritsko's side. "Trouble has never made anyone feel better."

"What's your trouble?"

"It's a long story, Hritsko," Chipka said, sighing again, and cast a glance about the room.

The large room, neatly whitewashed, light, cozy and cheerful, radiated a pleasant warmth which he felt all over him. Suddenly, he was at his ease, as though those walls were understanding and sympathetic. His heart turned light, and his thoughts took him back to the steppes of his boyhood, painting old Ulas crippled by age, and swift Hritsko riding a ram and himself climbing trees to get at the sparrows' nests. "Still alive! Still alive!" His ears rang with the chirping of those birds. He smiled painfully and looked up at Khristya, and his thoughts carried him to the fields of green rye where he had first met Halya. He felt nostalgia for his past which had kept his hopes alive, and he had a sudden urge to confide them to somebody, to bare his soul... Tears welled up in his eyes and made him afraid he would burst out crying, so he let his eyes rove between Hritsko and Khristya... And they looked so happy, kind and friendly that his self-consciousness and his whole shame for his errant ways suddenly evaporated. He felt a strong desire to talk to them frankly and openheartedly, as friend to friend. With his head low on his chest and his eyes downcast, he began steering the conversation toward himself.

"It's a long story, like I said," he started. "A whole day would not be enough to tell you everything... As they say, it's pretty hard to get trouble off your back once it's clung to you..."

"Who's to blame for your troubles?" asked Khristya, staring at him. "Aren't you yourself to blame more than anyone else?"

Although at first Chipka felt piqued by her rebuke, he did not let it show either in his eyes or in his face. He even liked that question which sounded so straightforward as it escaped the woman's lips.

"Sure, it's also been my fault, in a way," he answered, thinking. "Then there've been other people, too..."

"Why do you blame people?" Khristya continued to draw him out.

Chipka stirred uneasily. He had not expected to be asked to make a full confession. He paused, looking at his feet, as if trying to decide whether he should go ahead with it. At last he spoke with difficulty, as if the words had stuck to his tongue and it gave him pain to get them out:

"It's because of their injustice..."

Hritsko saw with what bitterness and anguish Chipka had uttered these words and shot a glance to Khristya.

"Enough of your chattering!" he said to her. "Better get the dinner ready so that we might eat together. Have you had your dinner yet, Chipka?"

"I don't even remember when I last saw a real meal," Chipka admitted ruefully.

Hritsko and Khristya were moved to pity by his tone, and his whole appearance was so dismal that one could not help feeling sorry for him. Hritsko quickly moved to the head of the table, motioning to Chipka to sit next to him. Khristya hurried to fetch the bread and the pots and then went to the stove. She promptly filled a big bowl with borsch, placed it in the middle of the table, got some spoons out of the cupboard, put one before each of them and was about to take her seat when Hritsko spoke to her:

"I guess we shouldn't sit down to eat without anything to drink. Don't we have some vodka in the pantry? Chipka and I haven't seen each other for such a long time that his visit calls for a drink. Let's have a glass each. And then, to tell you the truth, my bones have been aching a bit, so a drink is probably what I need."

Khristya went out to the pantry, brought a bottle of vodka, put it between them and sat down.

"Pour us some, Khristya," Hritsko told her.

She filled the single glass for him. Hritsko took it, turned to Chipka and said:

"May the Lord give us all that we desire!"

"May He grant us that!" Chipka echoed.

Then Khristya refilled the glass, and Hritsko put it before Chipka who drank in his turn.

Finally, Hritsko himself poured the glass half full and moved it over to Khristya, saying:

"Here's some for you, too."

Khristya took a sip, shook her head and started to eat the borsch.

The men followed suit. It seemed to Chipka that he had never tasted better vodka or more delicious borsch. After the borsch, Khristya served noodles boiled in milk. Chipka ate with such

relish as though no food had passed his lips for at least three days. Everything tasted so good and the hosts looked so sincere and cordial that he even cheered up a little. This dissolved the gloom on his face and smoothed down the wrinkles on his forehead, which had been coming and receding like waves. His intelligent dark eyes brightened up and shone almost merrily as he began his confession.

“So you wanted to know why the people are also to blame for my running wild like this,” he said to Khristya. “But they are to blame for everything — from little, petty things down to the biggest, really important matters... Just look how they live together! Do they live like human beings, brothers, like God ordered them to live? Not at all! Give them half a chance — and they’ll jump at one another’s throats and will wipe one another off the face of the Earth!...”

Hritsko grinned.

“Why should it worry you, Chipka, for God’s sake? It’s no skin off your nose, one way or another...”

“And why shouldn’t it worry me?” Chipka cried heatedly. “Where’s justice then? What’s happened to that justice which is supposed to be our law of life? Who has stolen it from us? Why did it run away, tell me?”

“If there’s no justice,” said Hritsko, “you’d better live the way everybody does.”

“But what if they don’t let me? What am I to do then?”

“It only seems to you!”

“No, Hritsko! No, brother. Don’t you say such things, because it really hurts me to hear them...”

“You’re just inventing things, Chipka, and worrying your head over nothing! We just happen to live in a different age, and the people have now changed, too.”

“But what am I to do if I can’t get along with them? Is it all my fault? And I’m even patient, too... Just listen what kind of justice they have. You know my land, don’t you?”

“Sure.”

“Did you hear that I’ve lost it? Do you know about it? It’s the same land that the commune said was my own, my property. But now I’ve come across some smart fellows who’ve turned the commune’s will around. They’ve just taken my land away from me and given it to God knows whom, God knows for what... most likely for him to sell it and clear out and go back to wherever he came from... You may ask me how he managed it. He just sweetened the court people and they fixed a decision: it’s not your land, Chipka! It was yours but no more!”

“Why didn’t you go to the court to talk to Chizhik?” Hritsko asked. “They say he helps sometimes.”

“I went to him. A lot of good it did me, too. He offered to help — for fifty rubles.”

“What did you tell him?”

“But where could I get that kind of money? That’s the justice we’ve got in this world! A fellow comes out of nowhere and some money changes hands and he gets the right court decision, and if I want that decision to be in my favor, I must simply outbid him. But if there had been some justice, nothing of this would have happened and the land would still belong to me... And if I had still owned that land, I wouldn’t have turned into what I am now... Don’t I hear what people are saying behind my back? Don’t I know what they think about me? I sure do. But let them say and think what they want, because everybody’s free to do so... Only not everybody can see what’s going on in another fellow’s soul, his heart... But take a good look and strain your eyes a little — and you’ll see what’s going on in there, what terrible suffering sometimes torments that soul and tears it apart... But they just don’t have the guts to take a close look — and they aren’t made to see such things. So I’m a loafer, a drunkard and a tramp... But maybe I’m better than they are, only my fate is miserable... It’s a long story, like I said, although a simple one... All right, I’m a loafer, because I can’t get my hands to do any work, and I’m also a drunk, because only vodka helps me to forget... What else can help me, tell me?”

As these words gushed forth from Chipka’s mouth, Hritsko and Khristya listened in silence, exchanging glances. Only Khristya sighed deeply every now and then.

The dinner was over. Chipka thanked God and his hosts.

“There’s one other thing, Hritsko,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“Do you know why I’ve come to see you in the first place?”

“Tell me.”

“I wanted to ask you if you’d be willing to buy that rye that I still have in my stackyard. I’ve no desire to thresh it myself and don’t want to sell it to a Jew... Buy it from me, brother.”

“But I don’t need it, Chipka. I’ve finished working on my own and I can tell that it’ll be enough.”

“Maybe Chipka’s rye is better, and we might keep it to be sown,” Khristya put in softly.

“Besides, we are short on cash right now,” Hritsko complained.

“You may pay me when you can,” Chipka reassured him. “I’d hate to see my work get into the hands of a Jew. That damned lot would have no respect for good grain. Most likely, they’d make vodka out of it. But I’m sure that you’ll make better use of it, like the good farmer that you are.”

“No, Chipka, I won’t buy it, thank you.”

Chipka fell to thinking; his eyes dimmed and drooped... But some thought then flitted across his mind, and his eyes sparkled again, and he said, firmly and almost merrily:

"If you aren't buying it, take it free!"

"How can I do such a thing? Just think: you've only got that rye left, and I'm still not exactly poor, thank God!..."

"But it'll rot, Hritsko, or I'll just sell it for a song to get drunk... Take it, brother, for the sake of all my work that's gone into it! You're a good man, I've known you since my childhood. Do you remember those sparrows? And old Ulas? Take it! I really like you, and your wife, too... I went into your house, and that was like stepping into a paradise... You've greeted me like your brother and warmed my heart and soul... Take it, Hritsko, please."

"As far as I'm concerned, I can take your rye if you really want me to," Hritsko said, as if reluctantly. "Only there's something I want to tell you. You have an old mother whom you've treated in a really bad way, and she's earning her bread by working for strangers, poor thing..."

"Mother... mother," Chipka muttered, knitting his brows. "Don't speak about her. It's hard to tell which of us is more to blame..."

Hritsko's reproach stung Chipka to the quick. He grew silent and lowered his gaze, as if he did not dare to look Hritsko in the eye. He thought a little, then said good-bye and left in a hurry.

"You can come and take it tomorrow while you rest from work," he called from the passage.

"All right. I might still drive over today, if the wagon is in order."

After Chipka had gone away, Hritsko lay down on the bench to rest, putting a rolled coat under his head. Khristya washed the earthenware and the spoons, tidied the room up and sat on the bed of boards by the stove to spin yarn. The room became completely, almost oppressively, silent, except for the whirr of the spindle and Khristya's occasional sighs... She was still under the impression of their conversation with Chipka. Thoughts assailed her and enveloped her like a blue mist, and she abandoned herself to them and let them do what they wanted with her and carry her wherever they wished... Now Chipka no longer seemed to be such a loafer and a good-for-nothing as everybody had been saying he was and as she herself had considered him to be until that day. Wronged from her early childhood, her orphan's heart felt that Chipka was none of those things. It also told her that he was neither a loafer, nor an evil person but a victim of evil and injustice. He had a kind heart, and his soul was pure... He had been drinking, of course, but it was his suffering that made him drunk — and he had said that himself. And then how could anyone stay away from drink living amidst such people every one of whom was constantly trying to rob or cheat somebody else? There was that bitter hostility among them rather than brotherly love...

"Chipka was right," she said aloud, awaking Hritsko from his nap.

"Right about what?" he asked, yawning.

"When he said that there is no justice and that people don't live after God's laws."

"Aw, come on! He's just a drunken fool who doesn't know what he blabbers about. You must be silly to pay attention to all that nonsense."

"Why shouldn't I listen to him if that's really so?"

"What do you mean?"

"Everything... Take me, for example. If everybody had been just and fair, would I have had to suffer from all that misery and poverty when I was left an orphan? Would I have been robbed of what my parents left me? If they had been honest, they would've taken good care of my property instead of letting a poor orphan knock about in strange homes where I might well have spent the rest of my life if you hadn't come along..."

"Self comes first, you know..."

"That's just it! They only care for their own good and don't even think about orphans and unlucky ones!... Orphans can go and jump in the lake..."

"How can you expect anyone to look after somebody else's property for nothing?" Hritsko asked.

Khristya started, as if pricked with a needle. She looked at him with frightened eyes; it had never occurred to her before that he could say such a thing...

"Does that mean you would have done the same?" she asked him directly.

Somewhat embarrassed, Hritsko thought for a while and said:

"Well, if I hadn't done it, plenty of others would... And then what exactly are you trying to pin on me?" he asked in a harsher tone, giving her a sharp look.

Khristya sat there with a painful expression on her pale, sad face, her stare fixed on his eyes. Her head was tilted a little to one side, a thread froze in one hand and a clew of yarn in the other. It could be seen by her expression that although she was looking Hritsko right in the eye, she did not really see him, for her thoughts had taken her somewhere far, far away...

Hritsko understood this, and his heart throbbed painfully.

"Khristya!" he shouted.

She started, dropping the clew. Hurriedly, she jumped to her feet to pick it up.

"What's the matter with you? Is it because you've fallen in love with Chipka's bare feet?"

Khristya's hitherto pale face suddenly began to glow — either because she was stooping, or because Hritsko's well-aimed question sent blood rushing into her head.

"Did you scare me, my goodness!" she chirped merrily, taking breath and smiling to Hritsko to cover up her recent gloom.

Hritsko looked at her intently. The color had already drained

from her face; and only her slightly quickened breathing and a shy timid expression of her shining eyes told him that his question may have been not too wide off the mark. Yet he did not say anything. Letting his feet down from the bench, he patted his pockets looking for his pipe. Having found it, he cleaned it unhurriedly, stretching himself and yawning, and then started to knock out the ashes against the bench.

"I'll go have a smoke and take a look at the wagon to see if the axles are still good enough," he said, holding the pipe in his teeth and working up some tobacco with his fingers. "Tomorrow after lunch I'll probably go to bring that rye..."

He went out, leaving her alone in the room. She shrugged.

"Really, what's the matter with me today?" she asked herself aloud. A while later, she started singing a melancholy song. In her voice sounded tearful sadness that filled the room and enveloped her as she poured out her sorrow and her hand wound the thread.

* * *

As soon as Hritsko had finished his lunch after the Sunday church service, he harnessed his pair of oxen, borrowed another pair from a neighbor and drove to Chipka's place.

Chipka's untended kitchen garden, threadbare fence, crooked gate and peeling house with broken windows struck him very unpleasantly and insulted his proprietary nature. He viewed all that poverty with reproach and pity.

"My God! How low has the fellow fallen!" he said aloud. "I hope he knows what he's doing..."

Hritsko pulled in by the house. The door was shut and latched from inside. He went to look behind the house and glanced at the stackyard but saw only the dark shapes of the rye stacks. Coming up to a window, he peered through the broken pane. Three men lay asleep on the plank bed; Chipka was sleeping on a bench.

"Chipka!" Hritsko called.

"Who's there?" asked Lushnya, jerking awake.

"Would you please wake up Chipka?"

"What do you need him for?" asked Lushnya, stretching himself.

"I've come to take the rye."

Lushnya gave Chipka a kick.

"Chipka!"

"What's the matter?"

"A fellow has come for the rye."

"Oh, yes," Chipka muttered and quickly jumped to his feet.

"Hello, Hritsko."

"Hello... So that's how you camp here?!"

"As you see."

"Why don't you at least replace the panes? Cold weather is coming."

"A fine lad like him has got his hot blood to keep him warm," Lushnya answered for Chipka.

Chipka went into the passage to unlatch the door. Lushnya shook the other two men.

"Get up, brothers, to count the money!"

"What money?"

"Chipka has sold the rye."

"To whom?"

"To Hritsko Chuprunenko."

"For how much?"

"I don't know."

Patsyuk and Matnya sat up, rubbing their eyes and yawning.

"I must've gotten too little sleep, because my head is splitting," Matnya muttered and lay down again.

"Is that because your mug has swollen like a barrel?" Lushnya taunted him.

At that moment Chipka came in.

"Come on, brothers, let's go and help Hritsko to load the rye," he said to them.

"Of course!" Lushnya cried out. "Do you hear, Yakim? Get up and come with us. And then we can have some real fun at night!"

Patsyuk did not need to be told twice, and Matnya sat up again. After some more eye-rubbing and stretching, he reluctantly got to his feet, and the four of them made for the stacks.

Two of them carried sheaves of rye, and the other two stacked them on the wagons. They loaded both wagons, pressed the sheaves with long poles and tied them up in the proper way. Hritsko drove away.

"For how much have you sold it, Chipka?" asked Lushnya.

"For nothing."

"What?!" they shouted in chorus.

"I just... gave it to him."

Chipka's pals drooped their heads and remained silent. Lushnya was the first to find his voice.

"Aw, damn it!" he cursed grimly.

"And the Jew was willing to buy it — but he wouldn't sell it to him," Patsyuk said glumly through clenched teeth.

"Because he's a Jew!" Chipka retorted sharply.

"Well, I never!" Matnya bleated, scratching the back of his head. "Who said we'll have real fun tonight? Like hell we will! You shouldn't have waked me up. Why did you have to interrupt my sleep anyway?"

"The Jew was offering a good price," Lushnya started again, "but this fellow is one of our own peasants who like so much getting something for nothing... How lovely!"

"It sure is nice!" Patsyuk threw in, bitingly.

"Aw!" Matnya yawned, stretching himself. "Just what did you wake me up for?"

Chipka glowered at his buddies, his face growing pale.

"I see you are angry with me, brothers," he spoke to them, restraining himself. "I had to do it. That's all! I wouldn't have sold it to the Jew for any price but I've given it to a good friend free."

"Just what are we to you?" Lushnya demanded, giving free rein to his irritation. "Aren't we your good friends anymore? Then why haven't you given it to us? We would've sold it ourselves."

"To the Jew?"

"We would've found somebody..."

"A friend," Chipka went on, "will use my grain in an honest way and will remember me with a kind word. A Jew wouldn't."

"A lot of good that kind word will do you, too," Patsyuk sneered.

"Yes, it will," Chipka snapped sternly. Then, lowering his voice, he added, "At least I can be sure that my work will not be wasted and that a decent man will put it to good use."

"To hell with it all!... Isn't it wonderful? Real fun indeed!..." muttered Matnya, squatting, his puffy cheeks between his hands.

"We never expected such a thing from you, Chipka," Lushnya complained.

"What thing?"

"Such a thing as you've done with this rye... There it goes down the drain!"

Three of them now squatted down in the stackyard, their eyes glaring wolfishly. Only Chipka was standing with his back against the remainder of a stack, casting grim glances now at his pals, now at the unloaded stacks, now at the street — to see if Hritsko was coming back.

Before long, Hritsko drove up for a second time.

"You've surely fooled us, Uncle," Lushnya said to him.

"How?"

"You should've told us you were getting all this rye for free."

"Should I? Hm... Never look a gift horse in the mouth, they say..."

"You ought to hire us to thresh it — at a ruble a stack," Patsyuk joked.

Everybody, including Hritsko, laughed, only Chipka remained impassive.

"Enough of this palaver, brothers," he spoke to his buddies. "Let's help Hritsko to finish loading the rye, because time doesn't wait."

"He's bought it cheap enough to load it himself," Lushnya said with bitterness.

"Timish!" Chipka shouted, glowering at him. "It's either get to work or get out of my place! I won't ask you twice."

Lushnya sighed but nevertheless stood up and clambered onto a stack. The other two followed his example and also began to work. Yet their heart was no longer in it. Somehow, they loaded the wagons and fastened the sheaves securely in place. Hritsko again drove home. Lushnya walked after him.

"Uncle!"

"Yes?"

"You might at least pay us something for the loading... We've been slaving for you till our backs ache. Don't we deserve a little something?"

"Just what do you have in mind?"

"Five rubles would be fine."

"D'you think I can find that money on a garbage heap?"

"Haven't you just gotten a lot of rye for nothing? There've been more than thirty stacks."

Hritsko did not speak.

"Well, at least three rubles for the three of us! The rye, is a gift, of course — it's all up to Chipka..."

"All right... I'll bring it when I come back for a third load. Only I'll be asking you to help me thresh it."

"Thresh it?" Lushnya cried merrily. "Done! That'll be easy enough. If only the Lord sends us good weather, the four of us can do it in a day."

"Then I'll also treat you to a couple of drinks," Hritsko added.

"Fine, Uncle! Fine!"

Hritsko drove on, and Lushnya went back to the rest of the bunch in much higher spirits. In his joy, he jostled Matnya, who had made himself a bed of sheaves on the ground, with another sheaf as a blanket, and was dozing off.

"Don't push!" Matnya growled. "My side already hurts badly enough from all that work."

"Never fear," said Patsyuk. "It'll be all right — unless it rots through from drink."

"Do you mean that vodka we'll get for the rye?"

"Maybe..." Lushnya put in.

Chipka was not listening. He was walking among the remaining stacks, raking in stalks scattered during the loading.

Lushnya gave his buddies a broad wink, as if telling them to cheer up.

"Will we play around?" they asked in low voices.

Lushnya nodded.

"How much?" Matnya asked.

"Three rubles."

"Too little," said Patsyuk.

"Beggars can't be choosers," Lushnya reminded him.

Hritsko came for a third time, brought the money and loaded the rest of the rye.

When the wagons were ready, Lushnya said:

"We're ready for those drinks you promised, Uncle."

"Let's drop in on Halka then and have a round."

Hritsko called Chipka, and they all went to the tavern. There Hritsko bought a gill of vodka for each of them, including himself. Then he carried the rye home, flushed not so much by the drink as by the gift.

The bunch stayed in the tavern with every intention of making a night of it.

XVIII

The First Step

All this time, Motrya had been living with the old midwife, earning her bread by spinning other people's hemp and wool.

The realization that in the twilight of her life she was compelled to make her living by such odd jobs filled her heart and soul with bitterness and resentment. At least, before they had had a place of their own; and their incomes, although low, had been sufficient to live on. Now she had to live in a strange house, doing her best to be acceptable company and adjusting herself to its owner's wishes and whims. The days were more or less easy to while away; but when night came, thoughts would pester her worse than a tax collector. All too often, she would weep the whole night through. She felt sorry for Chipka, because she had loved him and had brought him up, spending many a sleepless night, long in winter, short in summer, always getting up early and going to bed late. It was for him and him alone that she had been doing all that... But look what he had done to her!

Her mind would often go back to that accursed night when he had hurled drunken insults in her face. When such memories caught her at table, she lost all taste for food. Then she would spend another sleepless night, weeping into her pillow, wishing she had never given birth to him and thinking she should have killed him immediately after he had been born rather than let him grow up to abuse her in such a way. She confounded the moment when she had conceived him and cursed the joy she had experienced when she had felt something stirring under her heart. Hadn't she been praying to the Lord? What mortal sin had she committed against Him to be punished in such a cruel way, rejected by her own child?

"I can't see why you should be tormenting yourself so much, Motrya," the midwife told her. "I'd understand that if he were a decent fellow, but such a good-for-nothing isn't really worth it. There he was today, dashing about all over people's plots as if he were possessed or something — no hat, no boots, just a shirt on, ragged like a tramp... He scared Ostapiy's children to death. They

were playing in their yard just when the devil brought him along. They say he came running across their plot like a mad dog... The children yelled, and he went after them and grabbed little Parasya — she's just past three — and carried her along... God knows what he picked her up for... All that drink has done him in — he must have seen little men dancing on their heads. I myself saw him tearing along the street, but I didn't pay much attention. Run, fellow, run, I thought, till you break your neck! So I just went on, past the Ostapiys' house. Then suddenly I heard somebody running after me calling me. I turned round — and that was Khimka Ostapiy, looking awful. 'What's the matter, honey?' I asked. 'Please, Granny, for God's sake,' she says, weeping terribly, 'I'll do anything for you, if only you'll come back with me to help my dear Parasya!' What's happened to her, I ask? And she weeps and says, 'Oh, Lord, it's that rogue, that drunkard — may he burn in hell! He frightened my little girl to death... He just ran into our yard and snatched her, as though he had wanted to get away with her... I can't understand why they let him run about loose at all!' So I agreed to go with her. I went in, and there was that poor child lying on the bed, writhing and thrashing about and yelling as if she were in a fit, God forbid! I made the sign of the cross over her and whispered some magic words, and she got a little better. Then I conjured all her fright away, and it poured clean out of her, like molten wax!... Well, I wouldn't wail and weep over such a villain! I would have simply put him out of my mind."

"But how can I help wailing and weeping if I have to listen to such things about him? If I'd had ten children, it would've been simpler for me, because a flock is never without a black sheep. But I've got only him and nobody but him! I cared a lot for him and raised him, driving myself hard and setting my hopes on him... And now I'm all alone, sheltering under other people's roofs... Do you think that's easy? And what will the people say? Just what kind of mother is she, they might say, if she's let her son fall so low and why hasn't she kept him from doing that? Oh, God, my Lord, there's just one thing I'm begging Thee for — and that's my death! Send it soon to me... Why does death keep snatching good people away? Why doesn't it come to me? Then I'd close my eyes and turn my back on him and let him do what he pleases — I'd see and hear none of it!"

"Come on, Motrya, you're talking nonsense! What will the people say? Let them say what they want! No devil will help him if he's made that way. If there'd been some good left in him, you wouldn't have had to leave your own house!"

Motrya was unable to continue the conversation. She just sat there, shedding bitter tears of sorrow...

Meanwhile, Chipka had been drinking every single day, as though he had made up his mind never to sober up... He now hit the very bottom; there was nothing left either in the yard or inside the house, and his face was swollen from constant drinking and sleepless nights.

The money to buy drinks had lasted only as long as there was something left to sell. But all changed after Hritsko had carried away his last stack of rye. Without money, Halka, the Jewish tavern keeper, flatly refused to give him even a gill. "Pay me first" was her only answer.

So it was about money that Chipka was thinking as he lay in his house after Hritsko had taken his rye. He was suffering from terrible thirst and tormented by hangover. Money! If only he had had money... He would not have been rolling and tossing as he was now, not knowing what to do with himself. For money he would have given his land—everything! Then he would have snapped his fingers and would have had anything he wanted—even her! But this was not to be...

His thoughts turned to the not-too-remote past. Before him unrolled a green field; he was walking about it, looking, glad that his rye had sprouted so well and was so luxuriant and flowering...

And then she flew out of that rye, like a scared quail... Flashy like a peafowl, as light as a butterfly, she was also merry like the morning sun... He enjoyed looking at her, and it was so nice to see her smile at him with her full rosy lips and to feel upon him her gay, black velvety eyes... He had been happy then! But no more! Now he was lying sprawled on the unswept floor of an empty house, ragged and shabby like a vagabond... And what had he been doing lately? Where were his mare, sheep and cow? What had he done with the clothes which his mother had had made? And where was his mother? Where had she found shelter in her old age? Without her, the house stood like an orphan begging by the road, its window panes broken, its room unheated, its walls gray and peeling... But winter was near, and cold was pressing inside... Cold and hunger! The thirst of hangover burned his heart...

"Oh, damn fool! What have I done to myself!" In despair, Chipka seized himself by his unkempt mop of hair. Wisps of hair fell to the ground, and sparks flashed in his eyes. He bit his lips so hard that droplets of blood rolled down from them...

The autumn sun was sinking into the clouds. Leaving for the night, it flooded the earth and the clouds with fiery red light. The west glowed red, like blood, and the setting sun gazed with its red eyes through the broken panes of Chipka's house... Chipka was rolling on a litter of straw on the earthen floor.

At this moment his pals entered the room. Seeing Chipka, Lushnya burst into laughter. Patsyuk and Matnya paused by the threshold, amazed by the scene.

"Chipka!" Lushnya shouted. "Have you gone crazy or what? Why the hell are you rolling and tearing out your hair?"

Chipka was startled by a sudden burst of laughter.

"Dear brother!" he spoke in a thin voice, like a little child. "Get me at least one small glass, one drop, or I'll die! I'm all burning, choking... Give me something to drink... drink!"

"Take this and drink some, fool!" Lushnya snapped, giving him a quart-sized bottle of vodka.

Trembling, Chipka snatched it avidly with both hands. Tilting the bottle to his thirst-burned, bleeding lips, he guzzled the vodka like water.

Seeing this, Matnya, too, began to tremble. Then he rushed to Chipka to take the bottle away from him.

"To hell with him! I tell you: he won't leave a drop for us, damn devil!"

Matnya clutched at the bottle, but Chipka did not let it go, begging:

"Some more, dear brother... at least a little more... I need it — to wash my soul clean..."

"Go to hell! A real robber you are!..."

Snatching the bottle from Chipka's hands, Matnya clung to it like a leech clings to a human body... Matnya simply did not know how to leave vodka for anybody else. When given a glass, he gulped it down as if it were medicine; if he got a gill, he poured it down his throat without pausing for breath; if a pint or a quart got into his hands, he swilled its contents until he had to take a breath and then, having gulped some air, continued until the bottle was empty...

So Lushnya and Patsyuk fell on Matnya and wrested the bottle from him, almost breaking it. There were screams and guffaws... The sun had set; night was descending upon the earth in its robes of black clouds, covering everything with its veil of darkness... And in that dark house, they were yelling and guffawing like ghosts of dead men, their eyes burning drunkenly...

The vodka had its effect on Chipka; blood rushed into his head and the fire of thirst stopped burning his heart. Merrily, he sprang to his feet and shouted:

"Let's go to the tavern, brothers! To the Jew!"

"Not to him," said Lushnya. "The Jew won't give us anything on trust."

"He'll be a dirty swine if he doesn't! I've let him have all my animals for a song. Doesn't it mean anything to him? That son of Judas mustn't hang himself over a lousy gill!..."

"Whether he hangs himself or not, he won't give us anything without money," said Patsyuk in a hollow voice, drawing out his

words. "It's much better to pick up something left in the temptation's way..."

"To steal?" Chipka demanded sternly, casting a sidelong glance at Patsyuk and then shifting his gaze to Lushnya and Matnya, as if asking them whether they found the proposal acceptable. Lushnya did not make him wait long for an answer.

"Right!" he said. "Rather than crawl to the damn Jew and beg him, we might just as well get a little something with our own hands and then warm ourselves a little..."

"That's a good one about warming ourselves," Matnya caught up, "because we'll soon get numb from this cold."

Chipka stood there as if in a trance, his head swarming with thoughts. To steal? Stealing must be easy enough. You just came and took somebody else's thing and you had it. What else was there to it? Nothing, except that the owner would discover the loss and rush to catch the thief and heap curses upon him. He, too, had been robbed — of his land, his happiness, his fate... May those who had done it never see the light of the sun again! He sighed. Damn them! Suddenly, he shouted:

"Come on, brothers! Let's go out and have a good time together... Maybe the Jew will trust us with a couple of drinks or maybe some nice fellow will come along and treat us... Hoo-oo! I feel real bad... and I want to have fun... and to fight and to hit somebody... hoo-oo!..."

He balled his hand into a fist and waved it around, spinning on his feet... His pals hastily jumped aside to avoid being struck by Chipka's fist.

"You go to hell, damn fool!" yelled Lushnya when Chipka's hand grazed his shoulder. "You might as well have struck me with a crowbar! You ought to go outside and thrash the house as long as you want to keep it up!..."

"Take care!" Chipka hollered. "I'll kill you! I'll squash you like a fly!" And spinning on one foot, he made his hands go round and round, like the wings of a windmill...

His buddies exchanged winks and fell on him all at once. One of them grabbed his hands, another his feet, and the third one seized him by the waist. With great difficulty, they pressed him down to the floor. Din and crazy laughter escaped from the broken windows and filled the sleepy yard... Awakened dogs barked fiercely.

"How long are we going to stick here in the middle of the night?" asked Lushnya when the laughter died away. "We'd better get moving."

"That's right, let's go," Patsyuk and Matnya said in chorus.

"I'll tell you, Timish, where we should go," Patsyuk spoke after a pause. "To our lord! He's a good man, even though he's a landlord... Back at the time when we were serving in his household, he used to give us this and that... I bet he still won't refuse us what

we'll ask him for... By the way, his barns are now crammed full for the winter..."

"Only take care not to get hanged on a beam in one of those barns," Chipka put in, casting him a sharp glance.

"Never fear," said Patsyuk. "I know them inside out. I won't stumble."

"They are quite shabby, those barns," Lushnya added through clenched teeth. "A night should be enough to fix them..."

"Then the Jew might stand us some vodka, maybe even a whole quart," Matnya summed it up.

The room grew silent. They squatted around Chipka and did not speak. Completely exhausted, Chipka lay on the floor like a log, breathing heavily... His panting was the only sound that scared away the somber somnolence thickening all around them. For some reason, he recalled Porokh and his story. The landlords' entire war against justice unfolded before his vision. Why, it all made sense, Chipka thought. One only had to look at what the lords had been doing all along... It was probably all right for them to do it, too... Then why would it be wrong for common folks to do the same? Only there was something disgusting about it... They would call him a thief... Oh, Lord, was there any justice left at all?

"Chipka," Lushnya broke the silence.

"What?"

"Let's go."

"Where?"

"To the lord."

"What for?"

"Just to pay him a visit."

"All right..."

* * *

Outside, it was dark night; thick clouds blotted out the sky, the moon was nowhere to be seen, and no stars were shining overhead. Impenetrable darkness had enveloped the earth, and they could not see anything, as though they were totally blind. There was also pin-drop silence; they could hear neither a human voice, nor the barking of a dog — nothing except the occasional sound of a dry twig snapping under their heavy feet.

They passed a side street, then another. At the third street, in the middle of the village, Lushnya separated from them.

"Wait here," he told them in a low voice.

Two men stopped, but Chipka plodded on, as though he had not heard. Lushnya went straight to a house. That was the Jew's tavern. Apparently, everybody in the house was already asleep, for no lights showed in the windows. Lushnya knocked at one of them.

"Hershko! Hershko! Open up!"

"Who's there?" a voice asked from inside.

"Good people... open the door."

"What good people can there be at this time of night? What do you want?" The owner's voice now came through sufficiently clear to be recognizable.

"You want to buy some wheat?"

"What wheat?" Hershko asked promptly, opening the small ventilation pane set in the window. Patsyuk and Matnya came nearer.

"Who are you? Where does this wheat come from?" asked the Jew, seeing three shapes looming just outside the window.

"That's something you don't really need to know. Better tell us how much you'd pay for a sack."

"Ah, that's you, Timish! Come in then. And who are the other two?"

"Friends."

"Come on in — let's talk it over inside."

Lushnya looked around but did not see Chipka.

"Where's Chipka?" he asked.

"There he's wandering like a ghost," said Matnya pointing at a black shape swaying in the darkness.

"Run and call him, Petro!" Lushnya ordered.

Patsyuk ran toward the black shape and soon came back with Chipka.

Presently, the cracked pane lighted up from inside; the inner door squeaked, the bolt of the outer door clanged, the tavern opened up — and swallowed them all.

Even before the lads had had time to take their seats, half a quart of vodka, half a loaf and a bowl of pickled cucumbers appeared before them as if conjured up from the air. The bunch immediately attacked the food and the vodka... Within less than an hour both were disposed of...

"Now, what about that wheat?" the Jew asked.

"You don't have to ask about it," Lushnya told him. "We'll get it for you."

"I know... Such a smart Cossack will get anything straight from hell!"

"You're quite right there... So what will you pay us for a sack?"

"Well... seventy copecks..."

"You swine!" shouted Chipka. "Seventy copecks for a whole sack of good wheat?!"

"Well, what do you want of me? I know nothing about that wheat but I can guess... For all I know, it might be even... well... God forbid!..." The Jew scratched his long, red, tangled beard.

Wide-eyed with astonishment, Chipka stared now at the Jew, now at his buddies, as if trying to find out what wheat they all had in mind.

"All right," Lushnya hesitated. "I guess we can trust you to be fair with us, Hershko..." He rose from the table, found his hat, apparently preparing to leave.

"When am I to expect you, Timish?" asked the Jew.

"Well..." Lushnya dropped his voice. "I'll be over before daylight..."

"Well, you'd better!.. You've drunk up a whole half quart."

"What if we have? That was never meant to be a treat, was it? I'll pay for the vodka if I don't get you the wheat."

"It's not the money, really... I'm not so stingy."

"Good. Expect me just before dawn then. Come on, boys!"

They all got to their feet, pulled on their hats and, lighting their pipes, went out of the tavern. Chattering gaily, they walked down the street together. Only Chipka was smoking in silence. The glowing pipes lighted up his pals, and he could see that their faces were burning with happy excitement. Eyeing them intensely, he wondered what was to come next.

As Chipka's pipe flared up, Lushnya noticed his grim expression.

"Why are you looking so sour, Chipka?" he asked. "What are you brooding over?"

"Who's brooding?" Chipka demanded angrily.

"Never mind."

The conversation broke off. The four lads grew silent, as did everything around them. Deep slumber had overwhelmed the entire village; neither a soul, nor a light could be seen anywhere. Everybody was sleeping, tired by the day's work... Only a few dogs were up and awake here and there... As they went through one dark street after another, hostile barking broke out in their wake... Now they were walking on in silence; three of them in front followed by Chipka who was placing one foot in front of the other almost reluctantly, like a bear that forced itself to pursue a Gypsy... In his heart there was a vague premonition, an unpleasant chilling sensation rather than plain fear... That chill spread throughout his body... Questions crept in: where was he going?... why?... what made him follow them?... But his mind deceived itself and dragged him on and on... Slowly, he was plodding on after them, lacking the will power to stay behind and to break with the "brothers," misled by his own servile mind, suppressing the terrible presentiment...

Presently, they reached the landlord's estate and stopped. Chipka walked on past them...

"Chipka, come with us!" Lushnya called to him.

"What?!"

"Let's go and take what belongs to us by right..."

He stopped, thinking...

"Let's go!" he said in a strangely hollow voice...

XIX

The Slippery Road

Have you ever gone down a high hill on a sled? At first, it is terrifying to look down the slope, let alone go down it... Then, when you straddle the sled, you try to imagine how far down you will have to go, and your hair stands on end... But the sled is already sliding down... and down... and your heart is frozen with horror, and your forehead is bathed in cold sweat... Presently, you reach the point where the really steep part begins — and after that you have no more time to feel fear... You just drop down, and it takes your breath away... Then some beastly joy fills you, and you only want to go faster and faster! The same succession of sensations was experienced by Chipka, when he came to visit the landlord and got inside his grain store. Having finished his business there, he got back out — and bumped smack into the night watchman. It was neck or nothing! On that slippery road, many a fellow came to his end in such a situation. But Chipka was not accustomed to making way for anybody and he made no exception for the watchman, leaving him there groaning — and barely alive.

Now Chipka was asleep. His conscience, placated with vodka, was certainly giving him no trouble; fear was something totally unknown to him; but he was simply tired after lugging sacks of wheat and was now sleeping in his den as if after hard work... The sun had risen already, and people were scurrying about the village; but sleep still wouldn't release him from its firm embrace that in the morning seemed even stronger... The village was buzzing with rumors about the robbery and what had happened to the watchman. The people stirred up, asking the usual questions; who? how?

"I bet it was none other than those rogues!" many a villager said, pointing toward Chipka's house. "They've been carousing every day, but I wonder where they get the money. It was clear at first — they drank with what that bastard got for his animals. But he's sold clean out and thrown out his mother, so there's only stealing left for him to keep it up!"

Before long, the supposition found its way inside the *volost* office. The officials there told one another that there may well be something to it and rushed to raid Chipka's place.

Coming to his yard, they first walked all over his kitchen garden, checking his barn and pen to see if something was hidden there. The *volost* chief even poked the manure left after the mare and the cow with his cane. Having failed to discover anything, they turned their steps toward the house. The door was bolted. The chief rattled the door, but it was to no avail. Then he went to a window, peered through the broken pane and saw Chipka snoring away on the plank bed.

"Hey, you!" the chief shouted. "Open the door! Do you hear? Chipka or whatever your name is! Open up!"

Hearing an unfamiliar voice in his sleep, Chipka stirred, rolled over to the other side, moaned and fell asleep again.

One of the wardens turned the corner of the house, went to the window which was nearest to the bed, put his stick through the gaping hole in the pane and poked Chipka's side with it. Chipka jerked awake.

"Who in the hell is pushing me?" he asked in a sleepy voice.

"Open the door, you thief!" the chief hollered. "And hurry up, because I'll order to break it down — that'll be even worse for you!"

"What kind of bird are you?" Chipka demanded, rubbing his eyes. "You touch that door and I'll show you!"

"Smash the door!" shouted the chief. "Tie up the robber!"

Chipka appeared to be stung by such words.

"Go ahead," he said. "Then don't forget to count your teeth."

"Why aren't you opening, you bandit? Did you break into the lord's barn during the night? Was it you who hit the watchman? Killer!"

"What lord are you talking about? What watchman?" Chipka asked innocently, yawning and stretching himself.

"You want to know what lord? Are you trying to tell us you don't know who our lord is?... Thief!... Open the door! We've come to search your place..."

"To search my place? All right... I don't mind. Come in and go ahead!" said Chipka, rising from the bed.

Soon the bolt clanged, and the chief with five wardens entered the room.

"Search every corner... turn everything upside down!" the chief ordered.

Chipka stood with his back to the door frame, silently watching them. The wardens peered into every nook and cranny, looked under the stove and under the bed, climbed on the stove and turned over the straw on the floor... Nothing!

"Take him to the office!" the chief commanded after the search. "Only tie him up first to keep him from running away."

"No, I'll never let you do that!" Chipka snapped at the chief. "What d'you want to tie me up for anyway?"

The wardens approached Chipka, rope in hand. His eyes blazed up.

"Stay away, good men," he told the wardens, brushing off the rope with one hand. "Just why do you want to tie me up, I ask you?" — this to the chief.

"Because you are a thief and a rogue! Last night you broke into the lord's barn and almost killed a man there..."

"Who saw it?"

"Everybody says so."

"Who everybody?"

"The whole village is saying that it's been you with Lushnya, Patsyuk and Matnya... There are just four of you around here who've been drinking and making trouble every day..."

"It's quite true that we've been drinking, but those who call us troublemakers are liars!"

"Where do you get the money to drink?"

"That's none of your business... Don't you see? This here house used to be full of things, and now there's nothing left."

"Well, I'm certainly not going to waste any more time talking to you... Grab him! Tie him up and take him to the office. From there you'll go to the jail in town where they'll talk to you some more..."

"Just make sure you don't get hurt, fellows," Chipka told the wardens. "Don't listen to this old fool. I'll come with you if I have to. He's wrong if he thinks that being a *volost* chief makes him such a big shot!"

If eyes could kill, the chief's stare would have reduced Chipka to ashes, but it only came up against the younger man's burning gaze.

"Lasso him!" the chief fumed, pushing the wardens toward Chipka. "Tie up this crazy bull!"

"Well, fellows!" said Chipka, glaring menacingly at them and balling his fists. "You try it and I'll break your necks, as God is my witness!" He turned again to the chief. "What are you trying to tie me up for? Tell me. Who saw me stealing or killing? If you want to take me to the office, just say so and I'll come with you. If you think I'm scared by that office of yours, that's just ridiculous. Let's go... Come on!"

He took his hat, threw on the torn coat which had been spread on the bed and went out before any of them. The chief and the wardens followed after him.

At the office, Chipka found the rest of the bunch who had been brought by the clerk and other wardens. Having rounded them up, the chief talked it over with the clerk and ordered that all four of them be locked up until the district police chief arrived.

* * *

On that fateful day, Motrya woke up when dawn was just beginning to break. The whole village was still sleeping when she was already up and awake.

"Well, I can't sleep at all," she complained to the midwife. "This night was really bad, just terrible! My dreams were awful, too. Then there's that weight sitting heavy on my heart..."

"It all comes from thinking too much," the midwife tried to explain it away.

Motrya prayed, washed her face and sat down to spin, gloomy and grim-faced.

An hour or two later, when the sun had risen, a neighbor, Khivrya Dmitrenko, came into the room.

"Have you heard the news?" she asked after greeting them.

"What news?"

"The lord's place was robbed last night. Quite a lot was taken, and the watchman was badly hurt... Nobody can tell if he'll live till the evening..."

"Oh, Lord!" Motrya whispered, sighing.

"And your boy, Motrya, was led to the office — or was it he who led them? Because he was going in front, and the chief and some wardens were walking behind, and he was scolding them something terrible all the time!..."

As Motrya heard this, she went white, stuck the spindle into the tow and stared at the woman with murky eyes full of pity, sadness and fear. Then, unable to hold back her tears any longer, she burst out crying.

"Oh, my son, my child!" she groaned. "Rather than hear this, I should've buried you with my own hands!..."

"Don't take it to heart, Motrya," the midwife spoke. "That doesn't yet mean he did it. Don't people accuse one another for no reason at all?"

But Motrya continued weeping, far from being reassured by these words. Then she rose to her feet, put on her old sheepskin coat and, stooping and barefoot, went out of the house.

"Where are you going, Motrya?" the midwife asked.

But Motrya left without a word. Unhappiness makes one speechless and deaf.

The neighbor, who was still a young woman, smiled painfully, exchanged glances with the midwife, but did not say anything either... The room became as silent and gloomy as a cellar... The midwife's granddaughter Khristya, a short, rather plain girl of seventeen, sighed heavily for some reason, and that sigh seemed to hang in the air... Each of them sat there, lost in her own thoughts, her head bowed, her eyes downcast...

"That's what a true mother is like!" the midwife said in a hollow voice after a long pause. "She's abused by her own son and thrown out of her house — and still she's sorry for him!"

Neither her neighbor, nor her granddaughter said anything to that, but both seemed to grow even gloomier.

Motrya walked all the way to the office, but Chipka was no longer there, since he had been taken to the village lock-up. Hunched and humped like an owl, she wandered around the lock-up, glancing at its small barred windows and weeping bitterly. If only she could catch a glimpse of him! If she could have a word with him, she would have known if all those accusations were true.

She begged the guard to let her talk to her son. The guard refused to do it.

"The chief ordered us not to let anyone near them till the district chief gets over here, let alone talk to them," he explained. "Just for a minute, my dear!" Motrya implored him.

"I can't do that, woman — the chief has even taken the key."

She roamed around the building for some time, cried a little more — and went away, gloomier than she had been when she had come there. Bitter tears were choking her; she was angry with the chief, the lord and even the guard; she was angry with the whole world — with the lords who were oppressing peasants and with the peasants who were trying hard to become lords... Her motherly heart was seething curses; she was mentally heaping on all and everybody. In the heart of a mother, wrath can be neither suppressed, nor checked...

* * *

Chipka and his buddies could not care less. There they were, in the lock-up, cracking jokes.

"At last we've found a good place to catch up on our sleep! It's so quiet and safe here... We can sleep here forever — there's even a man outside to make sure no one disturbs us..."

"Get me at least half a pail of vodka," said Matnya, "and I'll never want to leave. I'd have a little drink every now and then and a couple of dumplings to go with it and I'd sleep for the rest of the time..."

"Where would you get it all?" asked Patsyuk.

"The chief would bring it. He's been making people grease his palm, so it would be only fair if he shared it with us."

"You'll freeze and starve to death waiting for him to do it," Lushnya put in.

"It's really cold here. It would be nice if we could warm ourselves with you know what," Matnya insisted.

"We can push you some — if that's what you mean."

"No, not that. I wish we had some vodka... That would make us hot!"

"Give me a girl every time," said Lushnya.

"I'd agree to keep you company then," Patsyuk laughed.

"There's one thing I want to tell you, brothers," said Chipka who had not been listening to their banter. "The first night we get out of here we should clean out the chief's place. But we must do better than we did over at the estate — the whole works! The bastard needs to be reminded that he's only Savka — a peasant like us, who was quite poor before he started out overseeing serfs. Now he puts on airs, as if he were a big lord."

"You're right, by God!" they said in chorus. "We won't leave a thing behind... Let's visit the clerk, too, once we are at it."

"He wanted to tie me up — how do you like that?" Chipka fumed. "I'll tie you up, you son of a bitch, I say to him, so tight that you'll spend the rest of your life trying to get untied!"

"Did you really say that?"

"I swear by God I did. Because he had no right to tie me up. Let him prove first that I was there... He also threatened me with jail. We'll see, I said, who'll get in there first: this innocent poor fellow or you who've gotten rich stealing from orphans."

"What did he say to that one?" asked Lushnya.

"Not a word, lousy dog, as if he hadn't heard."

"Now tell us how you handled the watchman," said Patsyuk. "He's also a hefty fellow."

Chipka told them at some length how he had gotten into the barn, how he had stumbled on the watchman and had struggled with him until the man had gone limp, groaning.

"So you did a pretty rough job on him, right?" asked Lushnya.

"I'm sure he'll know he's been through a good pair of hands. He yelled at first, but when I squeezed him a little harder, he could only groan..."

"I guess the fellow's as good as dead," Patsyuk remarked.

"He should've stayed away from trouble," Matnya answered for Chipka.

"That's right," Lushnya said with finality and sighed.

There were no more questions. Chipka did not speak either. Soon they fell asleep.

The following day, the district police chief arrived, sent for Chipka and questioned him.

"I don't know anything at all," Chipka kept saying. "As a matter of fact, I did not leave the house for four days."

His pals were called and told the same story: they knew nothing and had never heard it before. So they were locked up again, and the chief went away, ordering them to be guarded still closer lest they should escape.

The lads spent another three days in the lock-up. As long as they were fed, it was just fine with them. They just lay around, slept a lot and spun all sorts of yarns with a certain dose of more or less true accounts of their own adventures. Only Matnya was grim-faced.

"There's really nothing to worry about, Yakim," they reassured him. "Even if the whole village gets together and says we did it, we'll only have to keep saying we weren't there and know nothing — and that's all!"

"Oh, boys, that's not what I'm worrying about at all! It's just that I last tasted vodka almost four days ago, and my mouth's watering something terrible..."

The true cause of Matnya's chagrin made them howl with laughter, but he just grumbled:

"Why the hell are you laughing? I don't see anything funny

about that. My ears have also swollen. They're now as big as dumplings, by God! That's no reason to laugh!"

Chipka was splitting his sides shouting:

"Oh, no! Oh! That's a good one — ears have swollen! Like dumplings, he says!... Ha-ha-ha! Oh! Let me catch my breath, please... or I'll die laughing!... Oh! Oh-ho-ho!"

Matnya turned away from the rest of them, pulled his hat low on his eyes and sprawled himself on the floor, face down.

The bunch spent a whole week in custody until an investigator came from town and released them.

"Mind you, boys, don't forget!" shouted Chipka on the street as he turned toward his house.

"All right!... We won't!" they shouted back, disappearing round a bend of the street which led straight to the tavern.

Next morning, the news flashed through the village that during the night some white-shirted monsters, one-eyed, black-bearded and hooked-nosed, had gotten into the *volost* chief's bedroom, which he never let anyone enter, bound him hand and foot, covered him with a sheepskin coat and made away with a huge amount of money.

All over the village, people buzzed with excitement, and there was no end of rumors and theories. The event set tongues wagging — both the men's blunt tongues and the much sharper ones of the women.

"The Lord Himself must have punished that chief for our tears!" a woman declaimed amidst a crowd of her neighbors. "Last year my husband asked to be enrolled for resettlement — and he refused! Serves him right! I wish they'd do the same to the clerk... He took five rubles... almost snatched it away from us... our last money! He told us he'd put our names on that roll and that we'd be moved over there at government expense and given some thirty *desyatinas* of land — and where are we now? He didn't lift a finger to enroll us and we've lost our money for nothing, may he never get another turn of good luck!"

The morning after this conversation took place it became known that the clerk, too, had been robbed! His hands were tied to his feet, and such a huge heap of coats and pillows was piled up on top of him that he was drenched in sweat and as red as a lobster when he was rescued.

"I would've choked to death, if I'd lain like this for another half hour," he admitted.

"Who did it?" they asked him.

"The devil knows! They were maybe Tartars, because I couldn't understand a word of their speech, and kept laughing all the time, and stank like hell!"

"How nice!" the chief told him. "Now we can't make fun of each other... Only there're a couple of things that I find pretty strange. Three fellows cleaned my place, and the same number

robbed yours. Those who jumped me looked so terrible that I nearly passed out when I saw them, and you're talking about some Turks or Tartars... There must be something behind all that. I think I can guess but I don't feel like talking about it yet... Come with me to the office."

They walked together and did a lot of talking on the way, either deciding what they should do, or just complaining to each other about their losses. The villagers followed them with their eyes and went on about the two robberies. Again, everybody pointed to Chipka and his bunch.

Intensive search and questioning yielded no results. The wives of the chief and the clerk even traveled to another village to consult a Gypsy fortune-teller, who, for a fee of half a ruble apiece, muttered some nonsense about a black-haired one and a fair-haired one but did not elaborate. Chipka's place was searched all over again to no avail. The loot had vanished!

On the forthcoming Sunday, the chief invited the priest, had him read the right kind of prayer and sprinkle his house with holy water — and after that no longer bothered to bolt the doors, day or night.

* * *

Chipka had set on fire the quiet paradise of Hritsko's home and left it smouldering...

In her lifetime, Khristya had certainly experienced a good deal of suffering and want caused by human injustice, which had frequently cut her to the quick: All too often, she asked herself why nobody ever seemed to try to be just... How wonderful it would be if people were fair and just toward one another! Then why weren't they? But her thoughts broke against the harsh facts of life as waves break against a rocky shore. Her heart had ached as she had searched her soul, not entirely sure whether all her questions really made sense. Then, all of a sudden, a drunkard and a loafer came along and shouted the very same things... His questions were not prompted by fleeting female feelings, nor did he express them in a feeble and faltering voice; they were a cry from the heart of a forceful rebel. Hritsko, her good Hritsko, had never said anything like that or given any indication that he harbored similar thoughts. Why?... For all that Chipka was saying was true... God knew how true! But Hritsko had kept silent... Something was wrong... or missing... Such were the thoughts which had been haunting Khristya.

She shuddered as she recalled Chipka's sharp stare and bold face, for she was afraid of him...

Her attitude had also changed. In her, that gentle affection that helps a wife win the daily battle with her husband, no matter

how domineering, became cool and almost insincere. Hritsko could not help noticing how half-heartedly, almost reluctantly Khristya snuggled against him.

Sometimes, Hritsko, as a young man, was in a playful mood. But his advances to Khristya looked just pitiful. She would then smile at him in a painful sort of way, as if through tears, suddenly tongue-tied; and he would get hot and cold all over.

“What’s happened to you, Khristya?”

“Has anything happened to me?”

“You’ve become a bit strange... sad and silent, like you miss something... Or are you angry with me?”

“What reason can I have to be angry with anybody, for God’s sake? And if I don’t look too happy, that’s because I can’t remain a little girl forever. We didn’t get married just to laugh and play around... There are plenty of things to think about... and then —”

“And then what?” He looked at her — and guessed. “But it won’t be coming for a long time. Don’t cross that bridge till you get to it!” He smiled.

“Of course, men don’t care much about it...”

“Why do you have to be so grim?”

“Because... We are orphans, both of us... Neither of us has parents. You know how it was with me... If I’d had them, they would have taken care of everything... But when one remains all alone, God forbid, strangers mop up the house clean...” She wept.

“You’ve gotten around to mourning for your parents a bit late, I’d say! Let their souls rest in peace with saints and all, but we’ve got no reason to grieve...”

This was the time when Khristya was beginning to feel herself a mother, with all the thoughts, fears, sadness and tears of motherhood. In vain did Hritsko try to reassure her and cheer her up. Khristya sulked, brooded and sometimes wept bitterly when she thought nobody was looking. As one thought led to another, her gloom grew, widened and deepened. Hritsko’s words of consolation were powerless to stop it.

Losing his patience, Hritsko began to scold Khristya for being so grim-faced. This, however, failed to make her any more cheerful. Then he, too, turned sad and began to brood... Watching Khristya surreptitiously, he noticed that she was crying to hide her tears from him, as if she were ashamed of them. Hritsko’s worried heart guessed the truth. Yet he kept silent, not daring to touch the fire which was smouldering under his roof... It might yet go out of its own accord, he thought, or, maybe, she would put it out with her tears. But these thoughts would not let him have a moment’s peace. He recalled how eagerly Khristya had offered to help him with the rye Chipka had given them, how she had praised it and how she had urged him to leave some of that “good rye” for seeds...

As Hritsko looked at the morose Khristya, his thoughts kept turning back to that fateful day when Chipka had bared his heart in their house. He was right in suspecting that Chipka's fiery words had made a profound impact on Khristya and that when he had shouted, with glowing eyes, "Where's justice then? What's happened to it?" — his stern, yet attractive, image had kindled a spark in her compassionate feminine heart. He now saw it all with his eyes and felt it with his heart — and yet he was afraid to name it... On that ill-fated day he had realized that Chipka was indeed an unusual man. He had known already then that Chipka was right and had mentally agreed with what he was saying, even though he had contradicted him... Chipka's words had burst into his soul like a whirlwind, stirring his thoughts and awakening his feelings. Hritsko also knew that Chipka could win anybody's heart — and he was afraid. He feared for Khristya, his good, beloved Khristya whom he did not want to lose... Often in the dead of night he lay wide awake, racking his brains and straining his memory, trying to think of something that would put Chipka in the wrong. But hard as he tried, this only added to his tortures.

Then suddenly Chipka was on everybody's tongue! Delighted, Hritsko avidly listened to all the rumors and hurried to tell Khristya.

"Have you heard about our justice-lover?" he exclaimed as he rushed into his house the day after the estate robbery.

"Whom do you mean?"

"Chipka, of course! You heard him here shoot off his mouth about justice — and look what's come of it!"

"Has he done something?"

"He's robbed the lord... and almost killed the watchman, too! For all I know, the poor fellow may have died already..."

"Oh, no!" Khristya cried out, staring at him with murky eyes. She was dazed and pale.

"By God, it's true! They've locked him up... That's the kind of man he is. Just think: he's come to robbery and murder!"

"Mother of God, what has become of this world?" Khristya gasped, crossing herself. "Even when he was here, it was already clear that he was heading for trouble."

For Hritsko such words were sweeter than honey. After this he started saying even worse things about Chipka, as though he were a bitter enemy rather than an old friend.

When Chipka was released, Hritsko hastened to tell Khristya that the rogue had gotten himself off the hook, having apparently lied his way out of detention. And when word got around about what had happened to the *volost* chief and the clerk, Hritsko was again the first to break the news to Khristya, swearing by God that Chipka had been involved in both robberies.

"Deep in my heart I felt something bad was going to happen

even when we talked to him here," said Khristya in reply to his accusations. "I say, Hritsko. We really ought to give him back his rye. I'm not sure he won't come at night and kill us."

"What are you saying, for God's sake!" Hritsko protested. "No, Khristya, he's not as bad as to kill you for taking what he himself has given you."

"Not even when he's drunk and needs money?"

"Then he'd be more likely to insist that we pay him... And if he does that, I'll just tell him to take back his rye instead. But I don't think it'll happen."

Hritsko felt greatly relieved after this conversation. He thought his fears would never return, not after all his efforts to tarnish Chipka's image.

Khristya, however, did not become any happier. If anything, she clung even more to her thought: if such a man as Chipka did such things, what should one think about others?

XX Freedom

For a free man, freedom is a magic word, but for a slave it is something infinitely sweet and intoxicating. Like spirits or a potion, it blurs and blunts all his perceptions, thoughts and hopes, until he becomes deaf and blind to everything except that one word which alone shines for him and warms him along the dark way of his obscure existence...

As soon as this word was pronounced, the people of Piski stirred and seethed like boiling water.

"Knock off, brothers! Freedom! Freedom!" shouted the serfs, abandoning work and setting out for the tavern to celebrate what they called "Freedom's wedding."

"You've gotten it all wrong!" the Cossacks teased them. "Before you're set free you'll have to work out another two years."

Arguments and quarrels flared up. The serfs cursed the Cossacks, the masters and the priests. In the two years that followed there was hardly anybody in the world whom they did not denounce as their sworn enemy. However, having run out of curses and shouted themselves hoarse, the serfs went back to work. Which was work in name only: every one of them tried to do less, to gain more and to cheat the lord at every turn.

Watching it all, the masters moaned, sighed and furtively talked things over among themselves. Meanwhile, the serfs asked one another in low voices, "Are we going to get paid for these two years or not?"

But work they did, in one way or another. Presently, the most hectic season came. What with plowing, haymaking, harvesting,

carting and threshing, they had no time to catch their breath, let alone talk.

Christmas was approaching. The solemn holiday worried every household with its age-old cares. One family slaughtered pigs whose frantic squeals could be heard all over the village, while another was getting ready to go to a fair in town to sell grain and to buy things for the holiday: incense to be burned at supper on Christmas Eve, fish for the festive dinner and salt for everyday needs. In a third house, women got down to plastering and white-washing, disrupting the quiet daily routine.

Only Chipka and his bunch were without a care in the world. Plugging the broken windows with rags or old foot cloths, he would throw some rotten straw into the stove and let it smoulder and smoke in there, pretending it heated the room. Actually, they cared little for warmth or food. It was the Jew's vodka that helped them to keep warm, and for food they munched dry bread with salt, also from the Jew. When one of them managed to remove a hen or a rooster from a neighbor's perch, they would pluck and gut it, roast it on a spit and feast on it. Although Chipka had seen worse things, he sometimes grew sick of such life and such company. But then he would just drown his disgust in vodka — and keep silent. And when he could no longer go without a hot meal, he went down into his crumbling cellar, gathered some last year's turnips left in the corners, peeled them and made himself a kind of soup. And that was all.

His fellow villagers shook their heads as they looked on.

"That's hopeless," they were telling one another. "Such a fellow will never mend his ways. Nothing short of death will make him stop it... He just might get out of it if it hadn't been for his cronies... But let them wait: as soon as the next draft is on we'll at least get rid of those chicken thieves."

Finally, the holidays arrived. The happy villagers visited one another and celebrated now at the tavern, now in their homes. Chipka and his buddies practically lived in the tavern, inviting men to join them and treating them to drinks.

The men of the village, who — to tell the truth — never declined a treat, welcomed the occasion and drank gleefully, praising the good boys. A few young women, attracted by the merrymaking and the gathering, also drifted in. The Jew must have expected this, for he had lined up a band. The musicians were fiddling and piping away, while drunken men were capering around women almost on their heads. The women stood there, watching, until one of them, unable to resist the temptation any longer, started to glide sideways in small steps. Then another lady, slightly tipsy already, lifted her skirt a little and cavorted about the room like a kite chasing chickens. There were squeals of laughter, shouts and din. Every now and then, Chipka shouted to the Jew to order one thing or another. Lushnya was dancing away at a breakneck

tempo the musicians found impossible to match, while Patsyuk was clucking his tongue in imitation of a balalaika. Only Matnya sat in a corner, dozing, his face swollen and red, his eyes drunken and sleepy. He would wake up, down a drink, bellow like a bull and grow quiet again, going back to sleep.

The carousing was in full swing. They forgot all about the holiday, God and their homes, drinking from early morning late into the night and from sunset to daybreak. Then the village wives, who had not seen their husbands at home for more than two days, kicked up such a fuss, as though the village had been struck by divine punishment or decimated by fire.

"What a calamity!" they wailed. "It's sheer madness! There's never been anything like this before... The Lord's given us this holiday to go to church and pray to Him — he's been praying in the tavern! The Lord's sent him this holiday to spend quietly at home with wife and children — and he's been sticking there with drunkards and loafers! I must really go to the priest and ask him to order this sot to do penance for all that drinking."

Sure enough, several women gathered and went to complain — although not to the priest but to his wife who offered them drinks and promised to tell her husband as soon as he awoke from his nap. The good women went home only to find that their husbands were not yet there... Meanwhile, the merry crowd at the tavern had captured the deacon who was so old and feeble that sometimes during a fast he could not even chant his "Hallelujah" in the proper way. Now, having downed a glass or two of the invigorating poison, he perked up a little. Suddenly, he again felt hale and hearty, warbling with women in a voice so loud and high as if he were a young girl. A drink later he hitched up his cassock, grabbed a plump, ruddy-faced wench and broke into a wild dance, his beard and braid swirling. He sweated all over and was even working up a lather. The men were rolling with laughter, while the girls were swirling around the deacon to get him worked up even more; when one of them became exhausted, another one took her place.

"We can't just keep on dancing all the time," a girl shouted, laughing. "What about taking us for a ride?"

"Well, I never," said the deacon, his hands on his hips. "Did you hear what those sinful creatures want? How d'you like that? All right, get a sled. You might never get another chance like this."

A sled appeared out of nowhere. The deacon was helped outside and harnessed, and girls piled on. Bending low with the effort, the deacon somehow managed to drag the sled along, while the girls sang away and shouted, as if it were a wedding. Suddenly, a young woman dashed to the deacon.

"There's no room for me there," she complained. "Let me mount you so that I, too, can have my ride!"

“Get on, daughter of the devil,” the deacon cried, arching his back. She jumped on; the old man reeled under her weight and fell, the woman sprawled on top of him. The girls jumped off the sled and tumbled over them, pushing one another... The men yelled, “Pile up! The pile’s too low! Make it higher!” More and more girls threw themselves onto the human heap, until the deacon was nearly crushed to death. He was barely breathing when they finally rescued him... The laughter and clamor were deafening. The village went crazy!

The revelry loosened the tongues, awakened the sluggish, smothered souls and stirred up smouldering grievances. It also reminded the people of Piski of those two years...

“How come, brothers?” a serf brought it up. “Have we been working these two years for nothing?”

“Sure!”

“But why? Didn’t the Czar make us free to live where we want and to do as we please? Sure, he did not want those greedy swine to feel they were being left out in the cold, so he told us, ‘Work another two years, good people, so that they can get used to the thought that you won’t be around anymore.’ But I wonder how our master figured it out. Did he really expect us to work these two years for nothing at all? Why, if I’d gotten hired, I would’ve made at least a hundred rubles... And what will I get from the master?”

“Nothing. As soon as you’re through working, he’ll just kick you off the estate...”

“Like hell I’ll go! Let him pay me off the proper way. We know their tricks. It is enough that they drove our grandfathers and fathers like slaves and have been wringing us dry for so long! Let them at least pay me for those two years!”

“They’ll pay you a lot — get your pocket ready!” laughed another peasant who was somewhat more sober.

“Why are you giggling?... Of course he’ll pay me! I’ll just go and tell him I want to get paid, and he’ll give me —”

“A slap...”

“Why a slap? What about Pobivanka? Didn’t their lord pay his men? Didn’t he give them houses and land? That’s because all of them to a man demanded their money — and he settled up. Then why wouldn’t our master pay us if his own brother in Pobivanka did it? Ah! If only we weren’t so stupid! We’ve been keeping our mouths shut as if we didn’t care... Let him give us our money! That’s what all of us should demand: give us our money!”

“That’s just talk!”

“You’re a fool if you say that!”

“Look who’s talking! You’re just drunk and don’t know what you’re blabbering...”

“What’s wrong in it?” the serf demanded drunkenly. “You tell me.”

"You'll know what if somebody hears you and whispers a word to the master... Do I have to explain to you what a powerful man he is?... You'll be in big trouble!"

"Nothing will happen to me! He won't dare to do anything to me, because I only speak the truth! You really are a fool..."

"Don't call me a fool, because you may still turn out an even bigger fool..."

"Maybe you want to hit me? Do you? Come on, go ahead!"

"May your own troubles hit you — not me! Get away from me, drunken devil!"

"No, you hit me, son of a bitch!... Just try!..."

And the serf offered his face. His opponent backed away, raising both hands to protect himself in case the other man, well in his cups, suddenly tried to punch him... People came running from all sides and pressed around them, curious to see what would happen next.

"Hit me, I tell you!" the first man screamed, suddenly landing a blow on the other's nose. His victim struck back, fists and curses flew, and a din went up. Not without difficulty, the onlookers dragged the two peasants apart and drew them back inside so that they could make it up over drinks. That was necessary to keep *him* from finding out what started the brawl. Nobody, however, could quite make up his mind as to which man was right... They all agreed that it would be nice to get that money; yet they were also afraid of *him*... What if *he* refused to pay and made it even worse for them?

The vodka carried the day, though. The more they argued, the more they became convinced by the first serf's reasoning; the other fellow's objections were dismissed as mere lack of guts. The village buzzed like a swarm of bees; the brave and the timid clustered together, talked things over, shouted and argued... Invariably, all of them ended up in the Jew's tavern.

* * *

Epiphany came and went, and now it was time to go back to work. Yet the villagers did not hurry to plunge into work; day after day, they gathered at the tavern or at some other place, and then the word "payoff" was tossed back and forth... Once they caught a peasant from Pobivanka and questioned him. Had their master really given them their houses and lots without compensation? The man confirmed it!...

"Aha!" they shouted in chorus. "That means our master is trying to cheat us! Let him just wait!"

At daybreak, when the sky was only beginning to pale, they gathered at the *volost* office and, taking the chief and his clerks along with them, set out for Krasnohorka to see the lord.

They arrived at the estate and stood at the porch, jamming the yard; a lackey was sent to tell the master and promised a tip if he was quick about it.

Vasil Semenovich, still in bed, was woken by the noise of footsteps and voices. He rang for the lackey and asked him what was going on. The lackey told him. His Lordship sprang up as though pricked with a needle, ordered that his clothes be brought at once, gulped down a glass of tea and disregarding his hand-wringing wife who implored him not to go out, burst out of the house, angry and red-faced.

He guessed that something important had brought to him practically the entire Piski commune and hoped to browbeat them with his display of courage.

"What do you need, people of Piski?" he asked in a stern, although restrained, voice.

The peasants took off their hats and bowed.

"We've come to talk to you, Sir..."

"What about?"

"Money, Sir..."

"What money?" the landowner cried out, glowering at them.

"Our pay for the past two years, Sir..."

"Fools! You were to work them out anyway..."

Those in front kept silent, bowing.

"How do you mean?" a voice asked from the middle of the crowd. "We were also supposed to get paid for this work..."

"No pay!... The law says so."

"What law?" shouted the same voice. "You've made that law for yourself!..."

"Who's talking there?" the master demanded. "Come over here and we'll have a chat together."

"Like hell I will! Just pay us!"

"Who's that man, you sons of bitches?" the lord screamed. "Who dares to rebel?" He rushed to the front row.

"We aren't rebelling, Sir," the front ones said, bowing again. "We've only come to ask for our pay..."

"What pay? For what? I'll show you!..." He began cursing them in earnest.

"Shut up! Enough!... We aren't scared!" — again from the middle.

"Who's that, you damn rabble? Show me that scoundrel who's shooting off his mouth! Get him at once! Get him here — or I'll have all of you locked up... sent to Siberia!"

"Go easier on it!... not so fast!... don't get jumpy! A quick fellow you are! Out with the money!"

"Tell me who's shouting there!..." Vasil Semenovich pressed the front ranks.

But the men in front did not answer and only edged closer together, bowing again and again...

"Aha!" fumed the landowner. "So you refuse to give up a rioter, do you? You want to have a rebellion, eh? You just wait... I'll teach you to rebel!" Burning with anger, he ran back into his chambers.

The crowd grew quiet for a moment. Then — as though the men had plucked up their spirits — came a deep rumble which grew louder and louder until it erupted into clamor.

"Why, he threatens us!... Does he think he can frighten us?... No more!... We want our money!... Give us the money!!! our pay!!!"

The shouts and clamor rang out from all sides without letup, filling the whole yard and penetrating the walls of the manor as a terrible, wild roar. Vasil Semenovitch grew as white as chalk. He was annoyed and enraged; he wanted to shout, to swear, to strike somebody — but his strongest emotion was fear. It was fear that had driven him inside and now would not let him out. His wife looked ghostly, nervously pacing around. Anxiety tied their tongues; they kept wandering from one room to another, casting furtive sidelong glances at the windows which gave onto the yard, as though they were trying to hide their fears from each other.

The crowd stayed in the yard for the rest of the day, shouting and chanting, and did not break up until the evening. The villagers spent the whole day on their feet, and it was only the nightfall that finally drove them away.

But not even the night could keep Vasil Semenovitch from fleeing. Shortly after the last of the peasants was gone, he ordered his horses to be harnessed and a certain heavy chest to be brought down from his bedroom, upon which he and his wife drove off to Hetmanske...

At daybreak, the police commissioner and arbitrator Krivinsky, who had been commissioner when the office had been elective, were already out of bed and on their feet. A messenger was sent to the village of Kotolupivka with instructions for Larchenko, the rural police chief, to hurry to Piski where a riot had broken out. It was as if Larchenko were suddenly hit on his head from behind; he stood there, completely dazed, his squinting eyes staring blankly under his feet... There, on the board floor, his imagination painted a picture of a fuming, foot-stamping Vasil Semenovitch bawling him out for allowing such a thing as a peasant riot to happen in his district... Larchenko's thoughts were confused; now he mentally said good-bye to Kotolupivka... and even saw the local villagers crossing themselves as he was leaving, now his memory brought back to him that happy day when at a banquet he had recited a poem of his own composition extolling Vasil Semenovitch's virtues... But the sled was waiting at the porch, and there was no time to lose. Larchenko jumped on and sped to Piski as fast as the horses could carry him.

The arbitrator was already installed at the Piski *volost* office. He had arrived early in the morning and immediately called a general meeting of the local serf commune. The peasants were still gathering. Before long, however, the whole village turned out, some to attend the meeting, others driven by sheer curiosity.

Emerging from the office, the arbitrator and the police chief hollered at the gathered peasants, then threatened them, then cursed them — and finally jumped and screamed at the top of their voices until foam flew from their mouths.

To all of which the serfs shouted back:

“You won’t scare us!... Pay us off!... Don’t jump, squinting dog!...”

Neither the police officer, nor the arbitrator could get anywhere, and, having shouted themselves hoarse in vain, they drove away.

After they were gone, the villagers sent Vasil Derkach to Krasnohorka to nose out if the master was at home and to see what was going on there.

Derkach soon returned.

“He’s not there,” he said. “Last night he packed up some things and went away with the lady... He didn’t say where they were going.”

“Aha, that means justice is on our side! He wouldn’t be scared without good reason...”

“Hold on, brothers! Don’t let them cheat us out of what belongs to us by right!” shouted the serfs as they were leaving for their homes. Much to the Cossacks’ amazement and the Jews’ disappointment, very few of them came to the tavern that night.

But early next morning, the police commissioner himself flew to Piski, accompanied by Larchenko and the district attorney — a real “special committee.” The arbitrator was also on hand. Soon after them, plenty of soldiers marched into the village...

The serfs bunched together like a flock of sheep in the rain or in cold weather. None of them spoke. Only deep sighs and a kind of low drone could be heard from the crowd. The soldiers marched past them on either side and linked up to close the ring.

Krivinsky, acting in his capacity of arbitrator, came forward and questioned the peasants why they were rioting.

“We aren’t rioting, mister... We’re just asking for our money...”

“Your money?!”

“That’s right,” somebody in the thick of the crowd called out. “Surely, we haven’t been working for nothing!”

“Who was that?” Krivinsky bellowed. “I want him here at once.”

The serfs stirred, pressing still closer together and taking hold of one another’s belts...

“Bring him here!” the official fumed. “Tell me who shouted down there!”

Not a whisper came from the crowd. Losing his patience, Krivinsky started heaping curses on them.

"Don't overdo this thing!" another shout rose from the middle. "Now it's up to you, Ivan Petrovich," said Krivinsky, turning to the commissioner.

"Birch them!" the latter snapped at the soldiers as if in reply. Some soldiers rushed to a man at the front of the crowd.

"Don't let them grab me, brothers!... What right do they have to beat us?..."

The crowd pressed against the soldiers; the soldiers pushed them back. A clamor went up, and a tussle began... Hearing the commotion, people came running, as though there was a house on fire to gape at. Men pressed forward until they were right behind the soldiers, and women climbed fences for a better view... In all that crush, old Ulas could not keep his feet and fell... Some soldiers picked him up...

Chipka saw all this. The scene made his blood boil and stung his heart. He rushed about among the Cossacks, shouting:

"Let's stop this outrage, brothers! Save the old man! Come on, brothers! Timish, Petro! Yakim! Get everybody down here! Don't let them do this to us!..."

But as soon as his buddies realized that things were getting rough, they cleared out, and he only saw them tearing away through the village...

Chipka cursed them swearing profanely, then shouted to them, imploring them to return. He rushed to all sides, now darting to the soldiers, now running back to the onlookers. His eye fell on Hritsko.

"Hritsko, brother! Don't you see? They're out for the blood of innocent people!... Look what they've done to old Ulas — and he was barely alive when they got him!... Let's stop them!..."

Without a word, Hritsko darted away from Chipka, leaped across into somebody's kitchen garden and hid behind the fence.

Chipka again rushed to the serfs... That was when they grabbed him.

"I'm a free man!" he yelled. "I'm a Cossack!"

"All the more reason why you should know better than to make trouble," the commissioner roared. "Put him down!"

Chipka thrashed about for quite a while — but they flogged him even longer...

He did not cry out or groan even once. When he got up, he looked awful. His red, bloodshot eyes burned like those of a wild beast, and his face was deadly pale, as if after a grave sickness. He let those terrible eyes rove about the crowd, glared fiercely at the officials and the soldiers — and ran home at a jog trot...

He was seized by an inhuman fury. His heart screamed, and his soul was on fire. "Confounded killers!" he cried, tossing and turning on his hard board bed. "There's not a court that would punish them and no laws to keep them in check!..." His body ached as if it were covered with burns... He clenched his teeth. "And they..."

those three?! They aren't worth a kind word... a tiny speck of dirt!... Damn scoundrels!... All this pain would be too good for them, even a prison... They should be tortured, burned alive, cut to pieces with a blunt knife!..." The pain was so terrible that he bit his nails and fingers...

"You've been a fool to stick with them!... You've made yourself believe that they, too, are human — but they are just loafers and drunkards! They've only been guzzling your vodka and putting you up to all sorts of wrong things... There's not been a grain of good in all of them. Their hearts, like that of Herod, are full of evil... and all they can do is put you in a tough spot and then cut and run... They just look out for somebody who'd do their dirty work and thrive on other people's tears and blood... Then they'll wag their tongues and brag about it in broad daylight, baring their teeth and having a good laugh... Dogs!... Sons of bitches!... For hearts they've got poisonous snakes in their chests... Wherever they set their stinking feet they bring trouble, suffering, blood and tears... And you trusted them?! Fool!!!" He gritted his teeth.

Suddenly, he sprang up and, without bothering to put his hat on, ran straight to the tavern. There he poured down the vodka as if it were plain water. He simply tilted the bottle to his lips and guzzled about half a quart — but it did not burn his mouth and left his head clear... Like a drop of water that falls onto live coals, hisses and is no more, that vodka burned out and evaporated at once...

He flung the empty bottle onto the table, ran home and clambered onto the stove. Now his head swam, his temples pounded, and his ears rang... He drifted away and dropped off...

* * *

Having spent quite a long time on his feet in a strange kitchen garden and satisfied his curiosity with the spectacle of serfs being flogged, Hritsko grew chilly and trudged home.

"The damn rabble are getting a fine hiding!" was the first thing he said to Khristya.

"Good heavens!" she sighed. "They must have beaten some of those poor serfs to death, because the cries that were coming from over there sounded as if somebody were dying."

"Serves them right! The rascals had it coming to them!"

"Tell me one thing: why do you hate them so much? Aren't they people like the rest of us?"

"A fellow can't live in peace because of that confounded lot!" Hritsko exploded. "It's impossible to leave a thing lying around. Unless you lock everything up, they'll rob you clean in no time at all!... I worked in the barn not too long ago and was stupid enough to leave augers there stuck behind a beam... Who'd care

to look there, I thought? Today I went to get them — and they were gone! It's almost as if they'd never been there!..."

"It may have been somebody else..."

"Who? Who else would've taken them? A Cossack? He wouldn't need them, because he's a thrifty, hard-working man and he's got such things already. And those ragged loafers, the masters' scum, don't care what they steal as long as they can get drunk in the end... That's what that swine took my augers for, too — not for himself but just to get some vodka! May he choke on that vodka!"

"But how else can a serf get a couple of drinks?" Khristya laughed. "He doesn't own a thing: all he has belongs to his master..."

"They'll never own anything anyway," Hritsko interrupted her, "because they'll squander everything on drink! Under their masters they've just learned to steal and to drink instead of taking good care of the masters' property... Suddenly they're to get land and freedom... They ought to be chained instead!"

Khristya had had enough of Hritsko's unfairness and swearing. Now she lost her patience.

"Just what kind of man are you, Hritsko, for God's sake? What would you be saying if you were made a serf?"

"So what?" He goggled at her, hurt by her sticking up for the criminals who had carried away his augers. "I surely wouldn't be stealing, would I? I'd sooner let my hands wither away!"

"Don't be so sure, Hritsko! Anybody may go wrong who is only scolded day after day and called a drunkard and a thief. That drives a fellow to drink, you know. He'd start stealing, too, if he's got no money to buy drinks with... That's what slavery is all about!" Khristya summed it up gloomily.

"Slavery! What slavery? All they do is drink and make trouble — is that slavery? That's what they've got this hiding for today... A fine hiding it was, too! And Chipka, you know, came running toward me when the soldiers got down to working on them, and he was white and shaking... 'Brother Hritsko!' he yells to me. 'Let's go and fight to defend them. Come on — let's go!' To hell with you, I told myself — and got away from him in a hurry... So I jumped into Ostap's lot and lay low behind the fence, watching... And he kept rushing about the common calling everybody to put up a fight... Then they got him and worked him up nicely — he'll remember it as long as he lives! He walked away like he was drunk or something..."

Khristya only sighed and did not say anything.

Hritsko finished smoking his pipe by the stove and reached for his hat.

"Where are you going?" Khristya asked. "Dinner is ready."

"I'll only water the livestock," he said, going outside.

"Make hastel!" she called after him and rushed to lay the table.

XXI

A Dream Come True

Chipka was having a dream — and reliving his past. It all looked very much like one of his recent sprees. The tavern was flooded with bright, almost dazzling, light; the musicians were snapping and scraping away; heels were chipping away at the earthen floor; there were yells and songs and a hundred voices chattering all at the same time — crazy debauchery! But the black cloud of night was drawing near. Barely visible in the almost impenetrable dark of that cloud were the black outlines of the master's storehouses and of the estate backyard... There were three shadows bent under some weights — men carrying something on their backs... Suddenly, they broke and ran, disappearing in an orchard of bare trees... Then something flashed — and he could see two men rolling on the ground, struggling... The one on top was as ferocious as a beast and as fast as wind... Chipka strained his eyes. "But that's me... me!" he cried out. And the man under him was, of course, the watchman... the master's watchman... He was as pale as death and breathing heavily... his hands and feet jerking painfully... Chipka could hear the watchman's blood gurgling in his liver — and saw it gushing in a black stream from the man's throat and nose... Presently, the man opened his eyes which momentarily lighted up with a spark of life... Did those eyes express reproach? Did they curse him? No, that spark was the man's soul departing from his body... and his eyes were already glazing over... And the night was spreading wider and engulfed him, until it blotted out the vision of the merry revelry... Chipka thrashed about and woke up. He let out a long drawn-out moan, turned over to the other side and fell asleep again.

The visions came back. The night was dark and stupid, mute and deaf. He stood there, in the midst of a kingdom of sleep: drunken men and women scattered about like logs, dead asleep... Above him, a star flared up in the sky; it burned like a candle, illuminating the drunken scene below... He looked to the right. The darkness trembled and swayed, and out of it emerged two shadowy figures — ghastly, pallid, their broken bones sticking out... They hobbled along, their feet twisting loosely to all sides... Now they shook their heads reproachfully at him, pointing to the sleeping drunks with their hands... Chipka seemed to recognize his mother and old Ulas... He shuddered, fidgeted — and turned away.

In a short while, the darkness trembled to the left of Chipka, and another two figures appeared from it. One was fat, paunchy and red-faced; the other, following behind the first, was thin, lean and bent, with a quill sticking behind his ear... Coming closer, they surveyed the mess, looked Chipka straight in the eye — and

broke into sobs: "So that's what our money is being squandered on!" Suddenly, they fell on one of the sleeping drunks, tore his clothes off and sank their teeth into his throat. There was a gurgling sound as they sucked the man's blood from his live body... Their eyes filled with that blood, burned, glowed like those of a cat... Chipka shuddered — and turned away.

Now he looked up and saw yet another shadow hovering there, in that bright light. This one was a girl — fresh and pure like a fine summer morning, her dark eyes merry and gentle... "What's that?... My dear Halya! Come to me, my lovely gray dove!" he begged, raising his hands toward her. The shadow trembled, her serene face darkened, and tears glistened in her eyes... "What have you done?!" a horrified voice demanded of him. "Look to your right!" Chipka looked there — and flinched... A man was rolling on the ground, moaning in a voice that was hardly human... "What have you done?!" the voice above him reproached him again. "Look to your left!" Reluctantly, Chipka turned his gaze... Two black figures were sucking blood from sleeping people, breaking their bones, twisting their arms and legs, licking their bleeding bodies. "Look down!" the voice called. He did... All about him spread the kingdom of sleep: upturned pale faces, protruding eyes, bluish ribbons of smoke rising from gaping mouths... All those human shapes were slowly burning, like smouldering coals... "This is what you have done!" the voice thundered. "Why did you kill an innocent man? Why did you make his children orphans and his wife a widow? Was it the watchman's fault that he was sent to guard his master's property and look out for thieves?... And what have you done with those human leeches? And why?? They were full and fat and were quietly living out the rest of their lives, having sucked their fill of human blood; you again made them hungry by squeezing all the blood they had sucked over long years out of them... Well, to make up for what they lost, they've now become a hundred times as rapacious and greedy as they used to be... Like hungry dogs pouncing upon a piece of bread, they now fall on the hungry and the homeless, the drunken and the sober, those who are asleep and those who are awake, on orphans and on beggars... Do you see them sucking blood from human veins?... Do you? Why can they do that? That's because you've made these people drunk and helpless and set them on fire with vodka. Criminal! Scum!..." Exhausted, Chipka dropped on his knees, folded his hands and prostrated himself on the ground... But the voice raged all about him, like a storm, shouting again and again, "What have you done, you wicked rascal?!" Chipka pressed himself to the ground, as if trying to hide; yet the voice penetrated his every bone and every sinew, freezing them with horror and burning them with the fire of anguish... This was more than he could stand. He sprang up — as violently as a rabid dog that rages and trembles and fears water, but then sees it

and goes blank and attacks everything in sight. "Go away, confounded creature!" he shouted. "May you be consumed by fire and your ashes scattered by the wind!... What are you to me? Wife? Sister?? Mother?? I only saw you two or three times in the fields where you were scampering about like a goat... Then why do you barge in here? Why do you stick your nose into these things? All that you've been reproaching me with had been worrying me even before you came around... There's something that makes me turn away from good and urges me to do wrong... I've been running away from something — but I can't escape from it... I've been trying to hide — but I've found no place to hide in... And all this time I've been drowning myself deeper and deeper in drink... Get away! Leave me in peace!..." His loud shouting made the shadow tremble, and it went up and rose higher, still higher... The sky roared, flashed and thundered... An arrow of fire struck close by; everything about him crashed and burst into flames... All around him, things were burning, crackling, breaking and falling; there were cries, clamor and appeals for help... All voices merged into a single voice that was full of inexpressible grief; desperate wails were coming from all sides... The fire was consuming it all — now devouring it with its ferocious flames, now licking it with its sharp tongues... It would lick something and instantly turn it into black cinders; then it would lick it once again — and the cinders would turn white and turn into aches... And then the ashes would be picked up by the mighty wave of fire and, with a sputter, carried up high into the air... The fire had grown and spread... Now it was all about Chipka, and its long tongues were touching his body and licking his face... Suddenly he realized that those were not flames but waves of human blood surging all around him... "Ah!" he screamed, giving a violent start.

It was already evening. The sun, sinking behind the hill, painted the sky crimson red, as though it had drunk too much of the blood which had been shed during the day. Subdued by the punishment and depressed by the amazing spectacle, the village had quieted down, and no more shouts could be heard anywhere. Columns of smoke rose from chimneys high into the sky, as though carrying the peasants' curses, prayers and tears... Stoves were burning to prepare food for supper, and shadows were flitting back and forth in front of them, momentarily screening the fire from view. The frost was getting harder, the stars were shimmering, and there was that blood-red glow in the west...

Chipka sprang to his feet — and felt red-hot needles swarming, like so many tiny lightnings, in all his sinews and bones. Then they all rushed to his head and flooded it with fire... His body was burning; the dream and the reality were mixed up in his thoughts; his heart was aching, sinking, seething with inexpressible fury... He went outside to cool himself. A fresh wind

bathed his hot face and tickled his nostrils, bringing tears to his eyes... He glanced at the glow in the west and immediately shut his eyes, for he found it unfriendly and irritating. Another red glow was burning on the opposite side of the sky: that was a full moon, the "Cossack sun," going up.

Chipka went to stand in the middle of the yard and looked about. Everything was silent and still. He started pacing up and down, between the house and the stackyard. His heart was heavy — as heavy as it had never been before... The pain of his body reached his heart, adding to its own agony; his head was on fire; his thoughts were in confusion, threatening him with unbelievable punishment and frightening him with echoes of laughter... He would be willing to ask for forgiveness to crawl at people's feet, to implore them with tears in his eyes, if only he could forget what had happened in the past! Yet the past loomed before his eyes like a horrible monster, and, like a nightmare, constantly changed its guises in his mind. It reached him now as constrained, hollow laughter, now as caustic casual jokes, now as reproaches that had so often been flung in his face... This torture wore him down. If he had never been born or had been killed, it would have been better than having to go through all this!

His soul longed to pour out his troubles to somebody, and his heart was overflowing with tears that needed to be emptied on someone's bosom. Yet there was not a soul around him! Wringing his hands, Chipka cast a grim glance at the sunset and sadly trudged toward the house. He was a pathetic and eerie sight, a sorrowful figure clearly outlined in black between two glows — that of the sun and that of the moon. He was like an apparition, like a sinful soul burdened with grave transgressions, now trying in vain to repent; for instead of a prayer his lips were whispering bitter curses, as he was going over his sins...

In the middle of the room lit by the moonlight, which burst in through the windows and ran across the floor in broad stripes, hiding under the bed, Chipka stood on his knees and prayed — muttering imprecations. His eyes moist with tears, he devoutly bowed his head, again and again...

Seeing the battle which had broken out in Piski, Chipka's bunch — Patsyuk, Lushnya and Matnya — had lost no time in beating a hasty retreat. They ran on and on, keeping well away from the streets, and did not stop running until they reached the hamlet of Krutiy Yar, where they holed up in the tavern of Ovrām, their Jewish friend of long standing... There they spent the rest of the day and their last money, drinking and telling everybody who cared to listen about the dramatic events in Piski. When dusk had fallen, they were still there.

"Well, brothers," said Lushnya. "What about going back to Piski to see what's going on there? I wonder if they grabbed our Chipka, because he really got a bit too rash... When trouble

began, he should've gotten the hell away instead of yelling for help!..."

"You may go if you like," Patsyuk and Matnya told him. "We'd rather stay here..."

"Let's go together and pay Chipka a visit," Lushnya insisted. "Even though he's a bit strange, he's still — I must say it for him — a fine fellow and a real pal. He'd never give a friend away!"

"I'm not going even if you torture me," Matnya declared. "What if the soldiers catch us down there and rough us up?..."

"I'm staying with Yakim here," Patsyuk sided with him.

Lushnya scratched his head. He also knew that it would be dangerous to return to Piski now, yet his conscience was tormented by the realization that they had abandoned a friend in trouble.

"What shall we tell him then?" he continued. "He might want to know where we've been all this time..."

"Tell him?" said Matnya. "We don't have to tell him anything. He's got no right to interrogate us."

"We'll have to think of something, because it really doesn't look too nice," Patsyuk reasoned. "I just wonder why we didn't take him along... And now he may not even be in Piski — the soldiers might have taken him someplace else..."

Patsyuk's remorse so amazed the other two that they were left speechless and found nothing else to say...

"All right, brothers," said Lushnya after a while. "You stay here and I'll go and have a look." And he went.

Reaching the top of the hill, he looked down at the broad expanse and, as if through a mist, saw Piski flooded with moonlight. Among the dark shadows of the naked willows, the small church shone white with its walls, casting around its single glittering eye — the gilded dome with a cross; not far away, the manor house loomed like a high hill and seemed to glare angrily at the entire village... In the village, not everybody was yet asleep. Here and there light showed in the windows, but everything was still: there was no din of human voices, and only the dogs' hollow barking came from there. It was quiet and cold; the frost raged, making him shiver all the time so that the stars seemed to dance in the sky; the snow crunched underfoot... To get a little warmer, Lushnya walked at a faster pace. Before long, he was at Chipka's house.

The house seemed empty and abandoned, standing all alone on the edge of the village, peeling and black. Only the remaining panes shone in the moonlight; looking at them from a distance, one might think there was light inside. Lushnya came nearer. The house was dark and silent. He reached the window which gave onto the fields stretching away outside the village and peered inside.

There did not seem to be anybody on the bed. He was about to go round the corner to the door, when he seemed to see a shadow flit across the room. He again pressed his face to the glass and strained his eyes. Moonlight was pouring in through the opposite windows, stretched across the room in long bars and disappeared under the bed... Chipka, brightly lit by the moon, was kneeling in the middle of the room, apparently praying... His clear shadow now bent down, now straightened up; tears glistened in his eyes...

"Chipka!" called Lushnya.

Chipka sprang up and timidly hid behind the stove. Lushnya burst into laughter. The guffaw let forth by his mighty chest sounded like peals of thunder in the silence of night, echoed and reverberated, shook the panes and filled the room... Chipka felt so ashamed that he wished the earth could swallow him up... He had been surprised with tears in his eyes, weeping like a little child! But Lushnya kept on laughing, making the panes groan.

"Chipka! Chipka!" Lushnya shouted, still laughing. "What kind of prayer was it that got you whimpering?"

Chipka recognized the voice. That laughter mocking at his prayers and his tears, the betrayal and the jeer suddenly rushed into his head and stung his heart.

"I'll kill you!" he growled and, grasping a big, heavy stamper, flew barefoot out of the house.

Fortunately, Lushnya heard the soft patter of Chipka's bare feet, turned toward the sound and jumped aside the moment Chipka hurled the stamper at him.

"I'll kill you!" roared Chipka, darting to pick up the stamper.

Lushnya took to his feet. He was quite far away when Chipka had recovered the stamper.

"Get the hell away and stay away!" Chipka yelled at the top of his voice. "I'll finish you off if I see you anywhere near my place..."

"Are you sure you haven't gone crazy?" shouted Lushnya, stopping a safe distance off. "What are you going to kill us for?"

"It's because of you that I made a fool of myself and got that workout!... Beat it! You just cut and ran and got drunk, and now you turn up here to laugh at me, too! It's not the first time either... Back at the estate you dragged me into that thing and left me to handle it all alone... Now you've done it again! Pals and buddies! Dogs — that's what you are! Get away!" Chipka flung the stamper on the ground, went inside and bolted the door behind him.

Lushnya stood there for some time and then went back to the window.

"Chipka!... Chipka!"

Chipka, lying on the bed, kept silent.

"Well, you don't have to get mad... First listen to me. Do you

really think we wouldn't have tried to help you? We surely would! As soon as we saw you out there, we rushed down the street together to shout for help... I ran to Sidir's smithy to get a hammer... Suddenly I heard Petro and Yakim yelling behind me... I looked back and saw they had been grabbed by foremen who were twisting their arms... There was also some chief hanging around... I flew back to help them fight, but those foremen tied me up, me too... What do you think we could do?... We tried to lie ourselves out of it, saying we'd gotten scared and were simply running away... But the chief ordered us to be locked up... We were let out only a short time ago. Petro and Yakim went to Krutiy Yar, and I've come here to pick you up... But you've suddenly decided you want us dead!" Lushnya concluded on a note of bitterness.

"I've heard such yarns before," Chipka snorted, tossing his head. "I know you too well..." However, his anger had somewhat abated.

"Don't you believe me? I'll be damned if I lie! May this sacred earth swallow me up if that's not true!" Lushnya swore.

Chipka did not speak, but his heart was calming down. He wondered whether Lushnya was lying or telling the truth.

Lushnya was lying, of course, but he was also afraid that Chipka might see through him. Gathering that Chipka must have been lashed, he decided to play on this to win the fellow's sympathy.

"What makes you think we didn't make a try to save you? Of course, we've been told how they roughed you up. Our hearts blew when we heard it... But what was there to be done, if we were locked up?..."

"Why the hell didn't you try to smash the lock-up to pieces?" asked Chipka half-heartedly.

"Come on! Forget it! They lined up as many as ten fellows to guard the three of us, all giants to a man — as big as bulls and as tall as the bell tower."

"Where are Petro and Yakim then?" asked Chipka absentmindedly. "Did you say they stayed in the lock-up?"

"Haven't I told you? They've gone to Krutiy Yar to take a walk, because this place isn't safe enough... They've sent me here to fetch you..."

"I'm not going!" Chipka snapped.

"Me too, I'd rather let them walk there without me," Lushnya played the fool.

Chipka said nothing more. For a while, both of them kept silent. Lushnya was the first to speak:

"Please let me in to warm myself, because I got so cold in that damned hole that I shivered something terrible and my liver rattled inside me..." He shook and knocked his teeth together, pretending he was really freezing.

Chipka believed Lushnya, feeling pity for his friend. He jumped down from the bed and quickly unbolted the door.

Lushnya came in, carrying the stamper which Chipka had left outside.

"I see it's hardly better in here than out in the woods," he remarked. "Don't you have some vodka to heat the blood?"

"Not a drop! Climb onto the stove if you want."

Lushnya clambered onto the stove and silently lay down, without undressing. Chipka went back to the bed.

Lushnya lay there, happy that the unpleasant problem had come to a satisfactory solution. Only one thing worried him: he would have to get to Petro and Yakim before Chipka and coach them to avoid any contradictions. He really began to fear Chipka. It would not be nice if he was shown to be a liar, he thought to himself.

Chipka was also awake and silent. The day's vortex of events was still wheeling and whirling before his vision... In the middle of a moonlit night, when his entire body was throbbing with pain, those experiences assumed a nightmarish quality, making him toss and turn, keeping the pain unabated and the memories undimmed... He lay there as if enveloped in flames... His soul was burning and yearning — for revenge; his heart was clamoring — for retribution; his mind was seething — with wrath.

"Timish!"

"What?"

"Are you sleeping?"

"No."

Chipka fell silent.

"I'm not sure if I... should tell you about something..." he hesitantly began after a brief pause.

"What is it? Go ahead."

"Today I slept... and had a dream..."

Chipka spoke falteringly and somewhat reluctantly, drawing out every word; his thoughts raced ahead of his tongue.

"Well? What did you dream about?"

"I cried... I prayed to God — but nothing helped!"

"But what was it about? Tell me!" Lushnya urged him.

"I spent a long time... thinking..." Chipka slowly dragged words out of himself.

"What did you think about?"

"Did you see that outrage today?" Chipka cried out, as if with some effort. "Did you?..."

"Even if I didn't see it all, I've heard enough about it," Lushnya replied.

But Chipka did not listen; words poured out of him like flood waters that had just burst a dam.

"Well, they'll have hell to pay for that! For all those tears, for the blood of those innocent people... they'll suffer for the rest of their lives... and burn in hell till Doomsday!"

"Who'll make them pay?" Lushnya interrupted him.

"I! I'll make them pay!" Chipka shouted, propping up his head with his hands. "I'll show them that I'd better be left alone!... As long as they didn't touch me, I treated them like everybody else did... Now they've done this to me and they'd better look out and take care!..."

"What can you do to them? There're so many of them — and you're all alone."

"Alone! Are there few misfits like you and I and Petro and Yakim — without home or shelter, roaming the world, not knowing where to go and what to do with themselves? There're plenty of us right now, and there'll be many more when everybody's through with the masters... So what about us? Aren't we human beings? Must we starve in the gutter forever? Wouldn't we lie around on soft beds like them, if we were as well fixed as they are? I bet we would be no worse than they are — or even better!... But trouble is they've laid their hands on everything and put us in harness and keep telling us, 'You keep plowing, and I'll just sit around and eat up all you earn!...' But when this plowman who's been sweating day after day opens his mouth and humbly says that he, too, wants to live and needs to eat, and asks to be paid at least for the last two years of his work, they yell straight away, 'Rioters!... Rogues!...' There's force behind them, too... They can get the village crawling with soldiers and beat us up, and trample us down before gaping crowds... Is this justice? Is it? No, Timish! All right, let them have it their way... What they won't give us of their own free will we'll make them give us by force! They let loose those bullies on us and put us to shame in broad daylight and called us names, just because we begged them for a little something with tears in our eyes... All right! The dark night will show what is theirs and what is mine!"

Lushnya had been listening with bated breath, afraid to stir or to breathe. He was stunned. Never before had he heard anyone saying such things, let alone in such a loud voice and with such conviction.

But Chipka was not yet through; he only paused for breath.

"Is that right, Timish?"

"Yes," Lushnya mumbled.

"From today there'll be no more drinking or fooling around! Let's become decent fellows like everybody else... We'll get hired — we can work as well as anybody... But we won't forget that other thing! If they can fool us, we'll just have to learn to fool them! Let's show those godless rascals what justice is. If it exists, let it be equal for all; if there's none, there must be none for nobody!"

"That's right, Chipka!... By God, that's right!" spoke Lushnya, delighted by the prospect of equal justice. "Why, brother, I'm ready to get into the master's place even tonight and tell him what justice is all about."

"It's not just this master, Timish, not he alone... There are plenty of them breathing down our necks, wanting to have a free ride on our backs!.. The master is like any other lord — he only cares for himself... But if those above him had been fairer, we'd be having different lords now... Whoever is in charge up there should have found out why the people were suffering and from what and told the lords frankly: we can't do it this way, because it'll be unjust!.. But no! Dog doesn't eat dog... A lord can always grease your hand and he's got what to grease it with, because he's been skinning his serfs... And where can a serf get any money?... There're others, Timish, too! The masters and their higher-ups are one and the same breed... Then there are also our priests! They're supposed to speak to God for us, they see all the injustice — and they don't breathe a word!... And if they wouldn't put in a word for us, who else would care to do it?... Why, even the Jew, the tavern keeper, is against us — cheating us, turning us into drunken sots, wringing from us the last pennies we still got to our names... He makes us steal — and he'll also be the first to betray us... Everybody's out to get us, Timish, everybody! Even well-to-do peasants are against us... To them we are just drunkards, thieves and loafers... It's a wonder that we're still alive at all... It's amazing that all those decent fellows haven't killed us off yet... If the sky had suddenly come down on our shoulders, it would've been an easier burden than all those lies and the rotten deal we've been getting from everybody... Don't let us be fools then!... There're four of us. Let us cut out drinking like I said. What's the use of us having carried some stuff from the estate, the chief's and the clerk's? The Jew has laid his hands on all of it — and we've gotten beaten up, too! No! Better let's become like everybody else and get jobs... We'll be working by the day, and mother-night will tell us all we need to know and show us where we can find our money... All right?"

"All right, Chipka! It's time we stopped loafing around. Tomorrow I'll get hired and tell Petro and Yakim to do the same. Let's earn some money."

"And I'll make it up with my mother and take her back here to live with me... The people will be saying I've gone straight, which will suit me fine... There'll be money, too... Money is a powerful thing, brother! It's like they say: gold can break through a wall... With money there's nothing you can't do. D'you think they would've birched me if I'd been rich? They wouldn't have touched my land either... I would've tossed some fifty coins to that court scribe, just like that vagabond did... And I would have told that fellow, 'Keep off my land!' And I wouldn't have lost that land, and then God knows how things might've turned... I would've married, for all I know, and now I'd probably be living quietly and happily, getting along fine with everybody and raising children like Hritsko and others... Instead, even my mother — my own mother who

brought me into the world — has turned into an enemy! If you think that's been easy, you're wrong. My heart bleeds when I think about it. It's all because of that land! Even though land in itself is not all that important... No! Land is... well, just land. But because of land I've lost my happiness, my chance and... her, too... I wish you'd seen her, Timish, and known what kind of girl she is! I dreamed about her today... There she was, hovering above my head like an angel, like a saint..."

"Who she?" asked Lushnya, not understanding Chipka's raving.

"Halya!... My dear girl... the best in the world..."

"What Halya?" Lushnya asked again.

Chipka came to his senses.

"Well, never mind," he said and fell silent.

"Have you fallen for somebody that you don't want to talk about?" Lushnya pressed him.

Without saying a word, Chipka sighed — carefully and softly so that Lushnya would not hear. For quite a while, both of them kept silent.

"What's the matter with you, Chipka? Are you sick?"

"I'm all right... I only hurt all over... Those sons of bitches lashed me right through the skin... It feels like I was badly burned."

"You ought to go to the medicine woman and get some ointment or herbs."

"It's going to heal without that. There'll be some scars, but it's all right. They'll help me to remember, in case I ever begin to forget!"

They kept on talking for a long time before falling asleep. And when they finally did fall asleep, roosters were crowing for the second time, the stars dimmed in the dark sky, the fading Pleiades shimmered whitely in the north, and the bright moon began to pale as it sank behind the hill.

XXII

Learning the Lesson

The night before that fateful day, Motrya and the midwife, her landlady, had felt rather unwell and complained about the confounded frost which had lingered on for days on end. They shivered even on the stove. The landlady's granddaughter kept darting out into the passage, letting the cold in. The girl seemed strangely restless.

"Why do you make that door creak all the time?" the midwife asked her.

Apparently, the girl was not listening, because instead of answering she chattered rapidly:

"Our girls are already gathering out on the street!... How silly! Fancy singing away like that in this cold! They'll get their lips frozen, that's for sure!"

"They must be going to a gathering somewhere inside," Motrya spoke from the stove.

"No, they are going to meet just on the street. Today, Priska has told me, too, to come out."

"Everything is upside down these days," Motrya sighed. "What street gatherings can there be now, in the middle of the winter? That's good only in summer, when it's warm enough."

"That's exactly what I told Priska, Auntie. But she just laughed, silly girl, and kept telling me to join them. Some boys from the ravine hamlets are coming over today... Vasil Kovalenko will also be there... He's so good-looking, she said, that there isn't another one like him in the whole world — as pretty as a picture!"

"That singing — it must be your girls coming," the midwife said. "Why, they are young, of course... Songs and fun — that's all they care for."

"I can also hear the boys singing," the girl twittered. "Fine singing, too! Our boys from around here don't even know such songs, so it must be those lads from the ravines..."

She inserted a pot into the stove with oven prongs, raked up some embers around it and covered it with a lid.

"I'll go out and listen till the soup here begins to boil," she said and darted out of the house.

Motrya and the midwife exchanged glances.

Some time later, the girl burst back inside, stamped her bare feet, now as red as a goose's, and blew on her hands.

"What cold, may the devil take it! It's freezing something terrible!... Hoo... Hoo!... (blowing on her hands). The boys are singing so nicely, and the girls, too!... If it hadn't been for this cold and supper, I would've also run over there!"

"Barefoot?..." asked Motrya, whether reproachfully or simply reminding.

"No, I would've put something on..."

"So you simply don't want to skip supper?" the midwife laughed. "That's some girl!"

"Well, I don't really care much for supper — even though I now have to make it for everybody. I just don't feel like going."

"You are like the beggar who didn't feel like taking that coin," the midwife joked.

"No, I really don't want to go! Because it seems there's also fighting going on over there... Do you hear that boom! boom! It might be our boys having it out with the hamlet boys to make them stay away from our street."

"Maybe some drunken serfs have started a brawl," the midwife suggested.

Motrya sighed heavily. Drunken? Who else could have made

them drunk if not *he*? Her heart ached. She had felt gloomy during the whole evening; neither the girl's merry twittering, nor the midwife's jokes had changed that mood.

"Somehow, I feel so uneasy," she complained to the midwife. "There's something gnawing at my heart..." And she lay down to sleep early.

She was unable to sleep though. Her thoughts and coughing would not let her fall asleep. She would close her eyes only to open them again a moment later, because her mind would fill up with visions of drunken scenes. Then she would turn to the other side and burrow her face into the pillow — and cough would well up in her throat and tickle it and suffocate her... She would sit up and cough, her head buried in her hands. She would sit there until the coughing fit let up and subsided. Why was death so slow in coming, she asked herself? What was it waiting for? From death her thoughts switched to him, her son... and then back to death. It was almost dawn when she at last fell asleep. When day broke, she did not get up.

In the morning, wild clamor and din reached the house. That was the echo of the soldiery's atrocities.

"Good heavens, you can't imagine what's going on on the common!" a woman neighbor shouted instead of greetings as she burst into the room. "The soldiers are standing in a ring around the serfs and grabbing them one by one and flogging them... The serfs are crying and begging... Lots of people have turned out to watch that fight — so many the earth is groaning under their weight... But some chief or officer out there barked at them, 'Why are you standing here, you swine? Get away!' And then they all rushed off, every man for himself... Some ran down the road, others jumped fences and tore straight across kitchen gardens and fields in that deep snow. Oh, Lord, that was something terrible, I tell you!"

"Did you see my son there?" Motrya asked timidly.

"I did. He was running about, trying to gather the men to save —"

"Was he drunk?" the midwife interrupted her.

"God knows. I only saw him as he rushed to everybody, yelling, 'Let's do something! Let's stop it!' Then the soldiers got him..."

"And... what did they do with him?..." Motrya cried out in a frightened voice.

"I don't know — didn't see anything. I've heard that he, too, was beaten... The soldiers lashed him so badly, they say, that he bled all over."

Motrya's grim face darkened even more. Her head drooped sadly, and bitter tears rolled from her faded, murky eyes down the deep furrows which age and worry had cut in her haggard face.

The midwife had many more questions for the neighbor who

spent quite a long time answering them. But Motrya did not hear the rest of it. Her heart ached, and she was in a kind of daze, her vision dimmed by tears. So he had been beaten, flogged in public, for everybody to see, she thought as tears streamed down her cheeks. On top of all their ill fortune and want and foolishness there was now this shame — and gossip! Now there would be plenty of giggling behind her back to put up with and vicious jokes... Her son had been locked up, they would be saying... He had killed a man... True or not, many would believe it. He had also robbed the chief, and the clerk, too... Who else? It was also he who had been debauching people and putting them up to all sorts of evil things... Of course! He'd been making trouble for everybody, all the time! And now her son had been publicly flogged and tortured, as if he were some thug, God forbid! But his flesh was also her flesh. When he was beaten, she, too, suffered pain. Especially if, like they said, this flogging had left him with raw, bleeding wounds... Oh, Lord! Once people went after somebody they didn't like, they never stopped till they bit him to death and tore him to pieces! It was he, a drunkard and a rogue, who was blamed for every bit of trouble that sprang up and every thing that got stolen... But even if he really deserved their punishment, they shouldn't have done it to him in broad daylight, before all and everybody. All those masters and lords were heartless and inhuman. A common man was like an animal to them... You can beat him and batter him — and he won't break or bend!... Lord! Where is Thy divine justice?

She was angry with all and everybody and the whole world, particularly those lords who had had her son beaten up. Who had given them the right to humiliate her son?... She was angry with the soldiers who had lashed him in such a cruel, cold-blooded way, and with the villagers, who, far from defending him or pleading for him, had laughed watching it all... In every person she now saw her bitter enemy. In the neighbor's chattering she heard leering mockery at her maternal anguish and unhappiness, and the elderly midwife's quiet voice seemed to contain derisive notes... They were strangers, of course... They felt no pain — why should they care? These thoughts passed through her mind as bitter tears rolled and streamed down her face. And she cursed her fate and the people and her beloved child — her son for whom she felt so much pity. That was a cry from a deeply wounded heart — something that only a mother could understand. For only a mother could love and hate her child at the same time, pity him and curse him, want to see and hear him and refuse to look at him or listen to him.

* * *

The next day Chipka awoke when the sun was already quite high in the sky. He called Lushnya. But Lushnya was already gone. Having waited till Chipka fell asleep, he had quietly climbed down from the stove, slipped out of the house and set out straight for the hamlet of Krutiy Yar.

"How's Chipka?" his pals asked him at once.

"Not so bad. Everything's all right... Only mind you: he must not know where we've been. I told him we'd ended up in the lock-up."

Then he told them how Chipka had almost killed him and how he, Lushnya, had lied his way out of it. He also told them about his conversation with Chipka and Chipka's plan, advising them to accept it. Patsyuk agreed at once, but Matnya was not sure.

"You get hired," he protested, "and you won't even have time for a drink."

However, Lushnya and Patsyuk talked him into accepting Chipka's proposal. Finally, he, too, agreed to get a job, although not with a free peasant but rather at some Jew's distillery or brewery. Which was fine with all three of them. They spent the rest of the day drinking and in the morning walked to Pobivanka and got hired at the Jew's distillery there.

* * *

Chipka waited until the sun had climbed high enough, put on his coat and went to the house where his mother had been staying. In the yard he met the midwife.

"How do you do?" he greeted her.

"Good morning."

"Is my mother living with you?"

"She is... Why do you ask?"

"It's just that I'd like to see her if I may."

"Come along then." She wondered why he had turned up and became frightened. Swiftly, she ran into the house.

"Motrya! Motrya!"

"What's happened?"

"Your son is coming."

Without saying a word, Motrya trembled. Her face turned white as she kept on going hot and cold.

"Why?" the midwife's granddaughter voiced Motrya's question.

"I don't know," the midwife answered.

Here Chipka entered the room.

"Good morning to you again, good woman, and to you, Mother," he said.

"Good morning, Chipka," the midwife replied.

Motrya turned away, her vision clouded by tears.

None of them spoke. Chipka felt ill at ease. Fumbling with his hat, he said timidly:

"I've come to you, Mother..."

Motrya did not reply, and Chipka found nothing else to say. There was tension in the air, and the ceiling seemed to weigh heavily upon them.

"Why have you come to me?" asked Motrya slowly, still not looking at him.

"I want to... to say I'm sorry... I was a fool then and drunk, too... I know I insulted you and hurt you deeply... God's now punished me for that... Forgive me! Don't be angry with me!"

Motrya was unable to restrain herself anymore. Tears gushed from her bleary eyes and, like so many peas, rolled down her face and dropped to the floor. Relief, regrets and reproach spoke in her soul all at the same time. She was relieved and glad that her son had yielded to her, that he had realized what great damage he had done to himself through his foolishness and lazy will and that he had admitted his guilt to her, his mother whom he had hurt so badly. But at the same time, the humiliation she had suffered loomed, like a black cloud, before her eyes and gripped her heart as in a vice, demanding to be poured out in bitter recriminations. Her face bathed in tears, she began to shame him.

"So now you've come running back to your mother, now that there's no one left to comfort you?! But back then she wasn't good enough for you, and you called her names!... Don't you feel any shame? Don't you see what a grave sin it was?.. You made me seek shelter in a strange home in my old age... and accept my daily bread from strangers... and listen to such things about you... Was your mother your enemy or what? She was just like any other mother!... She would've cut off her fingers if only that could make her son's life easier! But you just bristled up at once and cursed her!... Now that they've taught you a thing or two, you suddenly need your mother and run to her... Those soldiers must be pretty good teachers, don't you think? Suddenly you are as meek as a lamb... But then to every word that I said you yelled ten and kicked up a row each time I cried!... I'll tell you this, son: if I'd been strong enough to teach you as good a lesson as those soldiers have, I wouldn't have let you jump up like a silly puppy and tell off your aged mother who'd spent so many sleepless nights caring for you and gone hungry so often to feed you!... I wouldn't have let you hurt my heart the way you did!..."

"There's no need to remember it now, Mother. Forgive me... and forget! It was all long ago. What can one expect from a drunk man? Drink makes one half-witted. A drunk can't even fix a candle in church the right way... Don't you know?"

Motrya was silent, wiping away her tears with the sleeve of her blouse. Then the midwife expressed her strong disapproval of such an outrageous behavior. Chipka stood at the doorway, his

head low on his chest. Motrya glanced at him — and her heart immediately switched to pity.

“They must’ve beaten you pretty hard, son, because you don’t seem to have a single unbroken bone left,” she remarked, looking pityingly at his pale, sickly face. “Your face has gotten so scrawny and livid!..”

“My back’s hurting like it’s been badly burned,” Chipka complained. “They surely beat the hell out of me.”

“May Heaven punish them for all this cruelty!”

“We heard it all,” the midwife cut in. “Those shouts carried all the way here. That sounded like dead people groaning in their graves...”

“They must have lashed you till you bled,” Motrya went on.

“They did, too...” said Chipka.

She made a wry face. There was a brief silence.

“You should have changed your shirt,” she said after a while.

“Maybe you don’t have another one?...”

“Yes, I have... I just haven’t changed.”

“Why? It’ll stick to your back when the blood cakes, and then you’ll try to get it off and it’ll bleed again and hurt!”

“It’ll heal all right.”

“Oh, come on!” the midwife smiled. “It’ll heal! Take a seat, there’s no need to stand.”

Chipka sat down next to his mother. Motrya looked at him, fighting back tears. The girl, the midwife’s granddaughter, stood by the stove, her back to the fire, and sadly gazed now at the son, now at the mother, now at her grandmother, biting her nails.

“Where shall we live, son?” asked Motrya, the previous conversation having come to an end.

“I’d rather you stayed on here till the end of the winter: I’ll pay what it’ll cost...”

“What in heavens are you talking about, Chipka?” asked the midwife. “Why should you pay anything? Certainly, my house will remain in one piece if Motrya stays in it over the winter. So let her stay. Meanwhile, you get some money and fix your place, and then in spring you can move back, when it’s warm and green.”

“Thank you for your kindness, Granny,” said Chipka, bowing to the midwife. “That’s what I’m going to do, too. I’ll go and get hired at the distillery till the spring, and —”

“Don’t do that, son,” Motrya interrupted him. “Don’t work for an unchristened Jew!.. They’ve cheated you out of all your property. Better get a job at a stackyard somewhere and earn a little grain... We’ll have to eat something when the spring comes... Then we might get some land, and we’ll need grain to sow it.”

“All right, Mother. I’ll do as you say. They say that there is still plenty of unthreshed grain left over at the Krutiy Yar estate. The German who runs that place is hiring hands, they say. Those who want can get paid in money, and the rest get a share of the

grain... So now I'll get hired for grain and when I've earned enough of it, I'll ask to be paid in cash."

"That's right. Do it this way, son."

At this they parted.

Before the day was over, Chipka sat out for Krutiy Yar. In the morning, he got a flail and got to work threshing in a barn. He worked at it so hard that bits of straw flew a good couple of yards into the air. It was amazing that he had enough strength and will left in him for this. But he was a fine worker, clever with his hands. Even the German praised him and held him up as an example for the others:

"Chipka work gut... like ox!"

"Well, I never!" laughed one Piski Cossack talking to another. "There's nothing like the soldiers' way of teaching things. Suddenly our big chieftain is over in Krutiy Yar working a flail. The rod is a mighty strange thing indeed! Good heavens! These serfs threw such a wild party over Christmas that the earth shook and went completely crazy after the holidays!..."

Chipka did not hear such talk, although Motrya certainly did. But she closed her ears, cursing the masters, the soldiers and all who thought this was a laughing matter. While Chipka was on the job, Motrya, still staying with the midwife, grew restless. Every day she went to visit her house. How long she had suffered from worry and want under its roof, spending countless days of hunger and cold! How often her fate had betrayed her and wrecked her hopes, smashing, scattering and drowning them in the fathomless abyss of bitterness! As she sat in that deserted, dilapidated dwelling, Motrya would start to recall everything that her failing memory still retained in her mind. She would brood there in solitude, weep and go away, only to come back again the following day. She even felt ill if a day passed without her seeing her home. By night she thought only about her house and wished that this harsh winter would end soon and the snow melt away and the fields turn green again... Then they would get to work, repair their house and move back in. Such hopes kept her alive.

* * *

Then came Shrovetide. The sun now rose much higher, heralding the arrival of spring, and could at least warm one side of an ox, as they say. The snow became softer, and the ice turned gray and crumbly. The earth around the house had already thawed out, and children tumbled outside to play with red soldier bugs that sunned themselves along the walls. The air smelled of spring.

The serfs were extremely happy to have lived to see this spring — their first spring of freedom, when they would no longer have to slave for their masters.

"Come along, let's drink to freedom!" they shouted, heading for the tavern.

When the Shrovetide celebrations were over, the arbitrator arrived to enforce new regulations and to distribute land. This frightened the serfs who suspected that along with the land some other kind of bondage might be imposed upon them. The way some of them figured it out, this actually meant the return to serfdom, since the masters would surely demand regular payments for the new allotments and drive them to work, as before.

"We don't want any land — not now! We'll wait till the time is right!" buzzed the peasants, hoping that the time would come when the land would be given to them free, without any charge. They believed that the land was meant to be a gift from the czar who had made them free and that all these payments had been invented by the lords. They also hoped that sooner or later the truth would come out and were willing to wait until then.

Riots and disturbances flared up again — and not in Piski alone. Shouts about the "right time" could be heard throughout Ukraine. Coming from her villages and hamlets, they echoed in the district towns. This happened everywhere where the ignorant, work-weary serfs, whose opinions had not interested anybody for ages and who had been just an ox to plow his masters' land and make them richer, now cast off his chains and had his first taste of freedom.

The only way to deal with this spirit of freedom was, of course, to quell it by force. More soldiers got busy marching from village to village, from one *volost* to another, and beating this "right time" nonsense out of the natives. Now they did their military service just by thrashing peasants — sometimes their own fathers and brothers — tying them up and taking them to town jails. Most of those who ended up there simply disappeared. Only a few surfaced now and then — some in Siberian exile, others in prisons...

But Chipka was now too busy to care much for that kind of news. Day after day, he and his mother worked on repairing their house. He tore the roof down completely, ripped the plaster off the walls both inside and on the outside, replaced rotten planks with new ones, rigged up new rafters and roofed the house with fresh thatch. Meanwhile, Motrya was busy with the women hired to do the plastering. Every morning, they roused the village with their laughter and singing which carried far and wide.

On Easter the house already stood fresh and dainty like a young girl, its walls straight, high and as white as snow. Every morning and every evening, an elderly woman, with smiling eyes and slightly bent, could be seen coming out of it. Quickly, she walked to a rick which stood in the kitchen garden, spread a cloth on the ground, piled it high with straw, and, with some effort, carried the heavy bale inside to stoke the stove. This was Motrya.

She seemed to have become younger since she had moved back into her home to make a fresh start.

Chipka worked about the house so hard that his mop of hair was nearly always drenched with sweat. His days were filled with hectic activity. Having put the house into shape, he cleaned up and repaired the cellar, wove a new wattle fence around the lot and made a real plank gate. On St. Nicholas Day he bought several lambs. Now he needed a place to keep them in, so he began building a sheepfold.

In summer the village haymakers chose Chipka to be their foreman. That work brought him some fifteen haycocks. Then the rye turned yellow, and it was time to reap it. Chipka showed that he could wield a sickle as well as a scythe. One moment you saw a bunch of tall rye or good-eared wheat bend down under his hand, and before you could wink a hefty, handsome sheaf lay on the ground in his wake.

Motrya was so overjoyed that she ran out of words praising her son to neighbors.

"He surely played the fool long enough, but now he has slipped back into the right track. The devil will probably let him be now, so he's bound to settle down. It's a shame though he isn't married, because without a wife he might still get slack and lazy."

This was what the villagers were telling one another. And many an elderly mother with a marriageable daughter privately took Chipka into consideration and warmly greeted the young man whenever she met him. Also, many a village girl teased Chipka with her jokes. But he was deaf and dumb and did not seem to notice either the mothers' cordiality or their daughters' overtures. He had other things on his mind. More than once, while working, he folded his arms on his chest and fell to thinking. "So what good will it do me?" he would suddenly ask himself aloud and start, as if frightened by the sound of his voice, and go back to work...

Their property, however, continued to grow all the time. Soon the harvest time was over, and the air began to smell of fall. The peasants had less work to do.

Now trouble boiled up again. The lords tried to collect land redemption payments. The serfs refused to pay — only to see their cattle valued and sold off. Chipka bought a cow from one such debtor and also wanted to buy a horse but failed to find one to his liking.

Life changed, friends changed. Chipka was now hand in glove with Hritsko. Quite often they walked to work and returned home together. On Saturdays, Chipka and his mother visited Hritsko and Khristya or received them at home. Hritsko had even forgotten about that smouldering fire which Chipka had once set going under his roof. In any case, Khristya had other matters to think about now that she had a child on her hands.

Khristya took quite a fancy to Motrya. "She is as kind to me as if she were my own mother," she would say to her husband. On a Saturday or the night before some holiday, she would often drop in on Motrya to have a chat and amuse herself. Motrya, too, went to see the young woman from time to time and looked after Khristya's little Vasilko when she was out working all day long.

"Why don't you get Chipka married?" Khristya asked her once.

"I wish I could. Many a time I've told him he should marry, but he just doesn't want to."

"He might have somebody in mind, only he doesn't dare tell you."

"Who knows? He doesn't tell me. And I can no longer bear to see him living alone, like some vagabond. A wife would cheer him up a little. She'd also make it easier for me. I'm old already and no longer what I used to be, so a daughter-in-law could give me a hand with the chores. I've been telling him all this and I also pointed to you two. 'Just look at them,' I said. 'They went and married and have been living happy ever since. Why don't you do the same?' But he wouldn't listen to that!" Motrya sighed deeply.

"I almost wish I hadn't married, Mother," Khristya laughed. "I'd make a good match for your son."

"Would you, now? He must be very hard to please, and that's why he doesn't marry."

Finding Chipka in particularly low spirits, Hritsko, too, advised him:

"You really ought to marry, Chipka."

"Will I feel better if I do?"

"Sure. A wife would smile to you and give you advice and take care of you..."

"To hell with it!" Chipka said in a hollow voice — and became still gloomier. He certainly needed no one to tell him that. He saw Hritsko's happiness... But far from warming his own life, it only added to his pain. His sadness deepened all the time, and soon he often stayed out all night long.

On such nights, Motrya impatiently waited for him... Most likely, he had gone somewhere to have a good time, she thought, not wanting her to see him at it... Well, he was still a bachelor, of course. Or maybe he had found himself a girl... She would consider this possibility, hoping this was the true reason, and go to sleep, her fears allayed. She told no one, not even Khristya, about this. Nor did she ask Chipka anything.

She dared to do it only once. On that occasion Chipka came home after daybreak, looking grim and pale.

"Where have you been, son?" she asked him, watching his face.

"Never mind," he replied gloomily and went out to do some work.

Motrya shrugged. Could it be that he had gotten mixed up with some loose woman and was ashamed of telling her?

Meanwhile, Piski was full of rumors about crime in the vicinity. The German manager in Krutiy Yar had been made to part with some money; the Pobivanka Jew had been robbed blind; some men had tried to break into the Krasnohorka estate but had been driven off; a monk and a nun had been found tied together under a tree in the Bairaki forest and were said to have lost a great deal of money; finally, a church had been robbed in Rozbishakivka. These tales clamored, rang like the tocsin and spread far and wide. Everybody got into a panic, and as they went to bed, lots of people prayed and asked God to let them wake up safe and sound in the morning.

“These are really terrible times!” a certain elderly villager complained. “I guess the end of the world must be coming pretty soon... Such things can’t happen for no reason at all! Why didn’t we have anything like it when we were young? And our fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers never told us about such things either. There were Tartars then who buried towns and villages, killed people or drove them off to slavery. What about now? Somebody’s robbing churches already! Surely, those can’t be Tartars!... Who’s ever heard of such a thing?! Families are breaking up, too... A son thinks nothing of raising his hand against his father, a daughter has no respect for her mother, brothers fly at each other’s throats, sisters turn into bitter enemies, a wife brews poison for her husband... Everybody’s suddenly gone crazy! Also, there have never been so many tramps and whores!! There’re also plenty of single mothers with fatherless children and girls who aren’t too particular... If such a girl had married back in our time, gossip alone would’ve made her life sheer hell... And now a daughter goes to bed with a soldier — and her mother tucks them up... Aw, Lord, how can Thou still stand us at all?...”

Part Four

XXIII

Allies by Chance

It was a dark autumn night. There was no let up to the fine, drizzling rain. A heavy mist rose from the ground and enveloped everything in its damp veil, so much so, the human eye could not see through it. All around there was just silence, darkness and sadness, as in a realm of the dead. It was one of those nights when the weather made breathing difficult and life miserable. Then decent people took shelter in their dwellings as soon as dusk had fallen, and yellow circles of glimmering light appeared in the windows of squat peasant cottages. Yet every one of those inside had a feeling of gnawing uneasiness and tried to think of something that would cheer him or her up, at least a little... Some men mended their boots, others wove mittens, still others tried something else... For women and girls it was usually spinning or sewing. Children would just clamber onto the stove and doze away. The room would be warm and still but rather murky; for it would be lighted only by the faint, pea-sized flame of a primitive lamp placed on an upturned pot in the middle of the common bed of boards, the long-unsuffed wick barely burning... The whole room would be plunged in deep gloom, for the bad weather would make itself felt even inside. Even if no rainwater leaked through a shabby roof, the weather pressed against the windows; and, although no thick mist got in from outside, the weather still hovered inside in a kind of mute sadness, plunging people into gloom, filling their hearts with sorrow and lulling them to sleep. A girl would sing her favorite song, but then her voice would break and grow weaker and quieter, until finally the singing stopped and the needle froze in the unfinished embroidery... Her head would droop and sway — and then she would be asleep.

“What’s the matter with you, Marusya?” her mother would ask her. “Are you sleeping? That’s some girl!”

The daughter would start, open her eyes and hurriedly resume her work. But before she could finish a line of her pattern, she would see her mother’s head sink down over the hatchel. Then the spindle would drop from the woman’s hands and strike against the floor and wake her up.

“Pah! Why do I get so dozy, I wonder?” the mother would mutter in surprise.

“Weren’t you making fun of me not so long ago?” the daughter would exult.

“So I was but somehow I dropped off myself.”

“My work, too, keeps falling from my hands,” the father would break in. “I’d say we should eat supper now and then go to bed.”

In this way, more or less, such an evening would pass off indoors. But God help those whom such weather caught in travel! They would be chilled to the marrow and soaked to the skin, and they would be shivering all the time, as in a fever. It would be pitch-dark and eerie, and they would be dying to sleep; but they would be so cold and wet that their bones would ache. To make it worse, the road would be terribly muddy, and the horses would barely drag themselves along.

The whole day before that night was like that. When the dawn arrived, it did not greet the world with a single smile of sunshine but wrapped itself in a veil of bluish mist, hid behind a screen of jelly-thick fog and hung low over the black earth. Before long it gave way to a dull, cheerless day which lingered on until night began to fall. People moved like shadows in that mist, unable to see one another even at five paces; their voices did not carry far, as in good weather, but died in that steam only a short way off... Everybody felt heavy, sulky and sad.

Chipka, however, was strangely content and cheerful, as if in defiance of the people and nature itself. Over and over, he whistled a merry tune, puffing at his pipe. He worked in the barn making a trough for pigs and did not step into the house even once during the whole day. Dusk had already begun to fall when Motrya finally persuaded him to come and eat his dinner.

"What's so important about that trough that makes you skip your meals, son?"

"It's just that the day has been really fine, Mother," he grinned.

"Fine indeed! There hasn't been a soul out on the street."

Chipka ate his dinner and went back to his trough. He kept on working in the barn until nightfall. When he again came into the house after finishing his usual household chores, it was completely dark.

"I won't be having supper, Mother," he told her. Then he threw on a coat and quickly went out.

"Where are you going?" Motrya called after him.

But he was already gone.

She ate supper alone and lay down to rest.

Going out of the yard, Chipka made straight for the fields. About a mile outside the village, he cupped his hands around his mouth and hooted like an owl. The plaintive sound carried far across the fields but failed to produce either a response or an echo. Only some dogs began barking in the village.

He walked on. Some two hundred yards later he hooted again. A voice, also sounding like an owl, echoed a long way off. Chipka ran toward it straight across the plowed field. He hooted once more and got a similar response that now sounded nearer. Presently some dark shadows loomed ahead in the gray mist.

"Who's there?" a man's voice called to him.

"Owl!" Chipka shouted back.

The shadows stirred, drew nearer and grew in size.

Now Chipka could make out the outline of a human figure. Coming nearer, he recognized Lushnya, Matnya and Patsyuk. There were also five men whom he did not know.

"Good evening, mates!" Chipka greeted them.

"Hello."

"So what do you say, brothers? Where are we going fishing tonight?"

"Where we can hope to catch plenty," one of them said.

"We haven't decided yet," Lushnya explained. "These men here are for visiting Hershko in Stavishche, but I bet you'd rather try the Krasnohorka estate."

"Hershko would be fine," Chipka replied. "It's all the same to me."

"You got any tools?" one of the strangers asked him.

"Here's my tool!" Chipka held up a balled fist. "Those who taste it once won't be eager to get a second helping; and if I use it all the way on somebody, he won't get back to his feet..."

"You'd better go easy on that thing, smart Cossack," a tall stout man cautioned him.

Chipka had an impression he had heard that voice before, but he could not remember where.

"You don't know him yet," another fellow, who wore Russian-style clothes, said to the stout man. "When we were out walking the last time, he didn't recognize me in the dark and hit me on the head with that tool of his — and my eyes nearly jumped out of my head..."

"Well, that's the kind we need," said the stout man. "Only mind you — we play by the rules: all you get is split into equal shares; and if you get caught, you keep telling them you know nobody and nothing — even if they hang you!"

"Ha!" Chipka scoffed. "We've got another rule: if one gets caught, he dies. You get into the jail and strangle him, just to make sure."

"That's the boy for us!" everybody shouted, clapping their hands with devilish glee.

"Now let's get down to work... Come on!" the stout man called and started walking. The rest followed suit.

About two hundred yards away they bumped into two wagons, invisible in the dark. Another stranger stood there by the horses.

"Aw, what the hell! May the devil take you all!" he cursed them. "I waited and waited and even dropped off for a while, but you just seemed to have vanished into thin air... I should've gone home long ago..."

"Don't fret! We've been a long time, but we've gotten ourselves a real treasure," the stout man told him, pointing to Chipka.

"Big deal!" the stranger scoffed and, without so much as a glance at Chipka, jumped onto a wagon.

Following his example, the other men piled onto the two wagons. Then they quickly rolled across the fields, hoofs clattering and sending splashes of mud flying in all directions.

Shortly before dawn, the two wagons were coming back, driven toward the Hudzes' hamlet and laden with the "fishermen." Some of them were sprawled out, sleeping; others were sitting and swaying, dozing; two men were driving. As they reached the yard, the stout man jumped down and went to the house.

"Yavdokha! Yavdokha!" he called through a window. "Open up!"

"Why, that's Maxim!" Chipka thought to himself in amazement. So that was why the voice had sounded familiar... That surely explained why he had been getting richer, building up his hamlet every summer.

A light glimmered through a crack in the shutter, a door squeaked, a chain clanged behind the gate as dogs rushed to it. The gate opened. The wagons drove up to the porch and came to a halt.

"You go right in, mates," Maxim told them. "We'll have some supper. Sidir and I will unharness the horses."

"All right, let's unharness them," Sidir said in Russian, jumping down from the wagon.

The rest of them also clambered down and trooped into the dark passage and from there into the room where light showed. Chipka walked with the others feeling somewhat dazed; he was elated and gripped by fear... Maybe she had forgotten him and would not even recognize him... Or maybe...

Now they found themselves inside the house. The room was large and clean; the lime benches along the walls were scrubbed so thoroughly they were almost shiny; in a corner there were some icons in copper frames, and a number of glazed pictures hung on the walls. A candle was burning on a big table that stretched almost the entire length of the room.

"Good evening to you in your home!" everybody greeted Maxim's wife who stood in the middle of the room, holding some keys.

"Or rather good morning," she replied.

"Is it morning already?" one of them asked.

"It's going to be light soon," she said.

"Why, I'd say it's been just an hour since we left here."

"You must've been pretty busy then. Has your game been worth the candle?"

"Ask him!" the man in the Russian clothes pointed to Chipka. "We've now decided to make him our chieftain."

"Now who could this be?" asked Yavdokha, eyeing Chipka somewhat sceptically. "I may have seen him before."

"There's no need, Auntie, to gape at me as if I were a wolf or something," said Chipka, feeling ill at ease under her scrutinizing stare. "I'm made the same way as the rest."

"Could I have seen you some place?"

"You could... I don't know."

"Aren't you Varenik's son?"

"Maybe..."

"Who's Varenik's son?" asked Maxim, coming in with Sidir.

"This lad here." His wife pointed to Chipka.

"You must be wrong," Maxim said, grinning. "He's too hard for that. * Ax or Hammer would be a more fitting name. He took on that Russian who was staying overnight with Hershko and knocked him out cold with a single blow! That Russian fellow was like a bear, I tell you! When he grabbed me and squeezed me, my heart sank to my boots! I'm quite sure he would've killed me, if it hadn't been for this lad here. The boys would've brought back only my dead body — with most of the bones broken, though, because that bear of a fellow would surely have crushed them... So this lad has really saved me, thank him!"

"Did that Russian have any stuff on him to pay for all the trouble he gave us?" somebody asked.

"There's enough for all here," said Chipka, getting a heavy purse out of his pocket and throwing it on the table. "He had almost as much as the Jew!" He pulled out another purse, which he also threw on the table.

They pressed round the table.

"We'll have to divide it, brothers," Maxim Hudz spoke. "And now, old girl, see if we can offer the boys something to eat."

Yavdokha darted into another room. Before long the table was laden with all kinds of food: borshch, kasha, a roast pig. She must have been cooking all the while waiting for the guests to come back from the job.

Maxim, too, dived into the other room, and a cask half full of vodka appeared on the table.

The "brothers" sat down on the benches round the table. Maxim made a couple of rounds pouring drinks, and when he was through, only a funnel rattled on the bottom of the empty cask. Then all of them fell on the food as avidly as if they had gone hungry for at least three days... Yavdokha went into the other room.

"Do you know Varenichenko, ** Halya?" she asked her daughter.

"Varenichenko? No, I don't know him."

"He lives on the other side of Piski. He's the son of that Varenik who had two wives at the same time, so they say..."

"No, I don't remember."

"Come and have a look at him. He's really a handsome lad — broad shoulders, hair raven-black, and eyes brown, clear and sparkling!"

* Varenik (Ukr.) — a dumpling; a short fat person

** i. e. Varenik's son

The girl got out of bed, quickly put on a skirt, threw on a vest, seized a roast pig and went in.

"Have you, too, had enough sleep?" her father asked her. Halya did not reply. She placed the roast pig on the table, her eyes fixed on Chipka.

"Good morning, old friend!" she spoke, smiling gently at him.

"Good morning, Halya."

His heart throbbed; he was happy and glad to see that Halya still remembered him.

"How come you know him?" her father asked.

"He scared me once, nasty fellow, right there in the fields," she twittered merrily, pointing toward the place where Chipka had surprised her.

"How did he scare you?"

"That was simple: I was sitting plaiting a wreath, and he sneaked up on me..."

"Aha..." the father said. "Now go back to sleep, magpie."

"You bet I'm not going to stick here gaping at him!" the girl blurted out and darted out of the room.

You are my paradise, my happiness, Chipka thought. You haven't yet run away from me!

After the meal, they divided the booty. Every one of them packed away about three hundred rubles. Then they brought in some straw, spread it on the floor, covered it with clothes and lay down side by side.

* * *

Before long, they were all sleeping like logs. Only Chipka was still awake. He kept turning from side to side, as if something was biting him; he felt heavy and was suffocating. When he closed his eyelids, Halya's image appeared before him. She was not the slightest bit different from what she looked like in the flesh — just as pretty, gay, bold and pert. To think that she was the daughter of a bandit! Incredible and amazing! There was nothing strange about poor fellows like him — loafers and ruffians, often hungry, wearing rags, without a penny to their names, their hands empty, their feet bare, their mouths hungry — to rob and use their fists and stick their heads into all kinds of dangerous adventures... That was all right. But what about the old soldier? His house was a paradise, his wife was like a lady; his daughter, an only child, looked like an angel... The man also owned plenty of cattle and was really wealthy. So what about him?... Actually, he was a rascal and a robber, the same as Chipka and his kind! Why? What for? What made him do it? Amazing and incredible!

Chipka peered into the black gloom, straining his eyes and ears. Yet he saw nothing and heard nothing. It was quiet and sad. Suddenly, something thrashed about... His flesh crept, and his hair

stood on end. "Cock-a-doodle-doo!" a rooster crowed nearby and grew silent... Chipka spat and turned over to the other side. It again became quiet and sad... Then one of the "brothers" shouted in his sleep, "Stun him, mate!... Come on, come on... that's the way!... fine!..." That hollow cry carried across the room, sounding horrible and eerie, like a voice from a grave; it reached Chipka's ears and trailed off, as if swallowed by the darkness of night. The fellow must be dreaming of his recent experiences, Chipka thought with a shudder. And he was still wide awake, and it seemed sleep would never come... Should he go out for a smoke?

Quietly, he rose to his feet, groped for the door and tiptoed into the passage. It was pitch-dark there. It took him some time to find the outer door. It groaned and growled like a dog but would not open. Soon, however, it yielded under Chipka's strong hand and opened, scraping against the earthen floor.

He went out onto the porch. Thick, chilling rain splashed on his burning face. He spat.

"When will you stop at last, damn you?" he grumbled and backed into the passage, wiping his face with the sleeve of his coat. Pausing in the doorway, he dropped his hand into his pocket, took out his tobacco pouch and his pipe, filled the bowl, groped inside the pouch for the flint and steel and applied the tinder. He struck the steel against the flint — and bright sparks flew like tiny stars. The darkness brightened smilingly, seeing that speck of light. The tinder hissed. Chipka took it carefully, placed it in the bowl and pressed it down with his fingernail. He drew at the pipe once, did it again — and a faint glow lit up the passage. The thick smoke drifted upward in short wisps and curled above him, merging into darkness... The metal lid knocked against the bowl, and the steel clinked against the flint as it dropped into the pouch. Chipka tied up the string and thrust the pouch back into his pocket.

Leaving the door open a crack, he leaned against the doorjamb and blew the smoke outside, where it mixed with the rain and melted away in the night. The darkness was black and impenetrable; Chipka could not see beyond the doorjamb no matter how hard he screwed up and strained his sharp eyes to make out the old soldier's yard... Only bats sometimes flitted past.

It was then that he heard the squeaking of a door. Somebody's soft footsteps pattered in the passage. Chipka opened the bowl lid and dragged at the pipe. As the glow again lit up the passage, he was stunned by what he saw. Before him stood Halyal Wearing just her skirt and a thin blouse, slightly opened on her chest, with her loose braids snaking down her milky neck and to her shoulders that seemed to be chiseled out of white marble, she stood there like a mermaid, holding a small pitcher.

"Halyal!" he gasped softly.

"Have you been smoking here, bad boy?" she chattered, re-

cognizing him. "Why, you've filled up the whole passage with smoke! It's impossible to breathe in here!"

"Halya, my dear! Why have you come out barefoot? It's been raining, there's mud all over the place... You might dirty your little white feet."

"Why do you care? You never did before."

"Well, I really do now, Halya," he whispered softly, barely able to breathe.

"Oh, sure, you are all so kind and thoughtful — and at the same time you slash people's throats as calmly as if you were killing chickens," she spoke sternly.

Her tone expressed anger, reproach and disgust. "What about your father?" Chipka thought. "And you yourself?..." he almost said aloud, but his tongue refused to obey him, and emotion took his breath away.

"We slash no throats," he uttered with difficulty, catching his breath. "We just equalize the rich and the poor..."

"Equalize?! Step aside, let me rinse the pitcher..."

She pushed him away from the door, and he reeled back into the passage. Stepping out onto the porch, she dumped the water out of the pitcher, and the rain beat down against her face.

"Ugh!" she cried out, shivering. "How cold it is!" She darted back inside — and ran straight into Chipka who stood there, one of his hands on the doorjamb and the other one holding the door.

As soon as he felt her hot breasts against his chest, he put down his outspread arms and wrapped them around her body. The girl trembled, pushed forward... and then leaned her head against him.

"Halya, my dear girl!..." Chipka whispered, his heart hammering wildly in his chest. "Do you love me, my darling?" In the dark passage his eyes burned like those of a wild beast about to spring at its prey.

"Let me go..." she murmured, struggling. "Get off... go away!" But she pressed herself even closer to him.

Hardly realizing what he was doing, Chipka sank to the floor and seated the girl on his knees. Before she could quite understand what was happening to her, Halya snuggled against him. Her heart thrashed about like a fish in a net... Neither of them spoke. A minute passed... another... yet another...

"Where were you last summer?" she whispered. "You stopped coming to your field. Somebody else was coming instead of you. Is that your brother?"

"He's no brother to me, Halya. He's my enemy who almost separated us forever..."

"Well, I was wondering. I couldn't understand what had happened to you. I even thought you had died, maybe... Or married."

"Would you have been sorry for me... if I'd died? Would you?"

Instead of replying, she cuddled up to him.

"Halya!..." he called her in a low voice.

"What?"

"Do you love me, honey? Do you... do you really care for me?"

Her arms twisted like snakes around his neck and hugged it tightly; her lips brushed against his and then merged with them in a long, hot kiss... In his ecstasy, Chipka released his grip on her. The girl slipped out of his arms and ran away.

Chipka came to his senses. She had been there only a short while ago, he thought and groped all around him. Yet nothing stirred or rustled there. He rose from the floor. The passage was dark, empty and hushed. He searched it from top to bottom, but the girl was not there. It occurred to him that she had slipped out quite noiselessly, without so much as a squeak of the door. He strained his ears. The house was as silent as the grave. "She's gone!" he told himself aloud, bolted the outer door and quietly made his way back to the room where the drunk "brothers" were snoring away.

After that he tossed and turned on his pile of straw for a long time, listening to the throbbing of his heart, the patter of rain against the window panes, the crowing of roosters and the muttering of the sleeping men. He marveled at the unexpectedness of it, feeling as delighted as a child with a new toy and as bewildered as a thief who, having stolen a bag of moldy dried crusts from a beggar, has discovered inside it a huge sum of money. It was almost dawn when he finally closed his eyelids and subsided into an untroubled, pleasant slumber.

* * *

The men woke up rather late. The rain, as drizzly as the night before, continued to fall, making everybody drowsy.

"Get up, brothers, it's time!" Lushnya thundered, springing up from the straw.

One after another, they clambered to their feet. Matnya alone did not stir. The rest of them filed out to wash their faces with the water from the barrel that stood in the passage. When they returned, Matnya was still lying there, yawning his head off. A while later, their host joined them.

"I say, Uncle Maxim," drawled Matnya, sprawled like a boar on its litter. "Could we get more of the same to cure our hangovers?"

"Are we supposed to pour it down your throat while you lie there?" Lushnya asked before Maxim could say anything.

"Surely, I can get up for that!"

Saying this, Matnya jumped to his feet and made for the table just as he was: his hair tousled, his face sleepy and unwashed. Maxim said good morning to them and went out.

"We should probably tidy up," one of them said. "Look at this garbage."

"If somebody wants to do it," Matnya said, yawning, "he may go ahead."

Lushnya looked at him sharply. "What about you?"

"To me this place is good enough as it is."

"What if you get no vodka?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because of the straw."

"What does it matter? Now it won't get into my glass, will it?"

While Lushnya and Matnya were thus engaged in conversation, the others took an armful each and carried the straw outside. Maxim reappeared with the same cask as the night before; he was followed by his wife carrying two loaves in one hand and a big bowl of sauerkraut in the other.

"It looks like we are going to wet our throats after all," said Matnya, grinning, as he saw the cask.

"You should at least wash your mug first," Lushnya chided him.

"Why the hell am I to do it, if the rain will wash it for me just the same?"

"Well, brother Maxim, I see you've got some really fine boys here," one of the soldiers, a gunner, called to the host.

"Wait till you see our feats, mate," Lushnya exclaimed, slapping the gunner on the back and flopping down on the bench beside him. "You ought to stay with us a bit longer and see for yourself what we're worth."

"I can already tell you're pretty good. Take that one," the gunner waved his hand toward Chipka. "Why he'd knock a gun off position just by looking at it! Wow, what a fellow!"

Chipka did not hear any of this. After the night's meeting he sat quietly in a corner and kept casting sharp glances at the door through which Halya entered the night before. His thoughts wandered off, and he was totally oblivious to the blabbering of the others. The room was as noisy and unruly as a Jewish school, and the din died down only when Maxim began to pour the drinks. Then everybody grew silent, mouths began to chew and hands reached for sauerkraut and pickled cucumbers. They ate in silence, making up for the missed breakfast, their teeth crunching on the sauerkraut and cucumbers, their mouths working hard, noisily...

"Too dry!" Matnya shouted after a while, choking down a good handful of sauerkraut.

"Let's wet it," said Maxim, reaching for the cask.

Another round was poured. Again hands reached for the food and mouths chomped...

"I'm choking!" Matnya announced with a hiccup and put down his chunk of bread.

Everybody burst into laughter, eyeing Matnya's tousled hair and swollen face.

"Let's wash it down," said Maxim, taking the cask.

"You take him on, Uncle Maxim," Lushnya broke in, "and you'll soon be racking your brains trying to figure out how you can get rid of him!"

"Never mind!" Maxim said in Russian, holding out the glass to Matnya.

"You surely know the score, even though you're only a Ukrainian," the Russian gunner called to Matnya. "You ought to be in the Army, serving the Czar."

"We've tried serving in plenty of places, brother," replied Matnya, "only to find out that it's best to serve a fat barrel of vodka."

Guffaws filled the room.

"That's true, too!" the gunner moaned, laughing.

Maxim poured a third round. Now tongues loosened, laughter broke out, and the clamor rose. Tired of chewing, the mouths began to talk. Three fellows in a corner droned on about the present hardtimes; somebody else recalled how they had cheated the masters; others relived yesterday's adventure; and the rest reminisced about long-ago feats. There were twelve of them, which meant a dozen words even if every man uttered a single word. Now, with all of them talking at the same time about different things, it was impossible to make out anything. Amidst all that noise, no one could follow any single story.

Chipka alone was silent. He had eaten and drunk in silence and now remained dumb, his eyes fixed on the door.

"Why is our chieftain keeping mum?" wondered Matnya, looking at Chipka.

Chipka did not hear this, but the rest of them turned to look at him, exchanged glances and snickered. Chipka did not hear their laughter either.

"He may have spotted some sweet dish," Lushnya picked up. "He surely loves sweet things."

"Oh yes, that must be it," Sidir, who had unharnessed the horses with Maxim, broke in. "I was about to mention that pretty bird myself."

"May the Lord reward Uncle Maxim and Aunt Yavdokha," Patsyuk joined in. "They do everything for their own benefit, but there they worked really hard to make something nice for others to enjoy."

The room rang with peals of laughter. Guessing the reason, Maxim also laughed, almost noiselessly.

"Well, somebody will surely have to reward me nicely for her — and more than once, too!" he said, laughing.

"I can get you a fine horse or whatever you want, Uncle," Lushnya proposed.

"He needs no horse — not with such a mare as he's got already," Sidir joked crudely.

Then the door opened, and Halya gracefully stepped into the room. The banter ceased as everybody gaped at her, admiring her beauty and her blushing face, which seemed to have become still prettier overnight.

She quickly walked to the table, took some empty plates and, without looking at anybody — not even Chipka, left the room. He sat there, goggling owlishly.

"I must thank God and the hosts for the meal — and myself, too, for having eaten my fill," Lushnya broke the silence. "It's time to go home, brothers."

"Why?" Matnya protested. "Don't you like it here?... It's a nice warm place, and with all this vodka flowing round I'm ready to stick here for ages."

Laughing, they rose from the table.

"It's high time, indeed! If only this rain would stop... But we must be going just the same."

Chipka also stood up. They thanked the hosts, lighted their pipes and trooped out to go their separate ways. Chipka and his pals set off for Piski.

It was not until he had walked off some way into the fields that he discovered the absence of his tobacco pouch.

"Wait, brothers — I've left something behind..."

He turned back and saw Halya who stood at the gate, calling: "Whose pouch is this? Somebody's left a pouch..."

"What's that?" shouted one of those who had gone the other way.

"A pouch..." She held it up.

"A pouch? — No, it's not ours!" And they walked on.

Chipka broke into a run. Meanwhile, Halya, examined the pouch, untied it, looked inside, fingered it and tied up the string again.

"It's mine, darling..." he said in a low voice, running up to her.

"You fool!... You've gotten flustered like a hen that misses a couple of chicks... You don't seem to know what you're doing."

She thrust the pouch into his hand and flitted into the wicket.

He looked at the pouch. What the devil? There had been just a handful of tobacco left inside, but now it seemed to have swollen. What could it be? He untied the string and felt something soft inside. Then he pulled out another pouch — blue silk embroidered with flowers and trimmed with red fringe. His eyes lit up, and his face cracked into a smile.

"My dear girl... my love!" he whispered and hurried to rejoin his companions, his spirits raised.

XXIV

The Daughter of a Robber

For a whole week it poured with rain. For a whole week Chipka did not leave his yard. He spent all this time working about the house, doing this and that.

"There's something I want to tell you, son," his mother said as she was spinning wool one evening. "Look here! I've been thinking a lot about you and me, and the way I see it, I'm already far too old and weak — sometimes I find it hard to keep the fire going in the stove... I can feel my strength leaving me, so my death must be near. Why don't you marry, son? What are you waiting for? Lots of boys of your age feast their eyes on their children and thank the Lord, but you keep wandering about, alone, as if looking for something you've lost. Aren't there enough girls in this village? Find yourself one to your liking and marry her while there's still time before the Christmas fast. That'll make you feel better, and I'll have a daughter-in-law to help me."

"Too bad, Mother! All those girls just aren't made for me."

"Why not, son? What about Khristya Bondar, Motrya Knish or Ostap's Katrya? Those are surely nice girls. True, none of them is too rich. But a rich girl, son, doesn't need us and our poverty. Even so, they are good girls — from decent families, hardworking, well-behaved... Do get married, my dear! I wish I'd see you a married man at least in my old age."

"I'm sorry, Mother."

"What are you sorry for? This won't get you anywhere. Or are you going to run about alone until your head turns gray?"

"In time somebody'll come along."

"It can only be some loose woman from town. A decent girl won't just come along."

"I don't really care, one way or another."

The mother gave up, seeing that she would not persuade him. Chipka also grew silent, thinking.

On Sunday after this conversation, the lowering sky cleared, the sun flashed brightly, and a breeze blew. The ground dried up a little.

"I'm going to the fair in Omelnik, Mother," Chipka said. "Maybe I'll buy a horse."

"May God help you, son! Only why would you buy a horse for the winter? What shall we feed it with?"

"We'll find something."

He left after an early lunch, but instead of going to Omelnik made straight for the Hudzs' hamlet.

Reaching the place, he found it shut and locked. He tried the wicket, but that, too, was locked. Two dogs rushed to the gate, their chains clanging.

"Who's there?" a voice called from inside the yard.

"It's me. Open the wicket."

"Me who?"

"Is Uncle Maxim in?"

"No, he's not here."

"Where is he?"

"Gone to the fair, to Omelnik."

"And Aunt Yavdokha?"

"Mother has gone with him."

"Is that you, Halya?" he asked, recognizing her voice.

"And who are you?"

"Open up — and you'll see!"

Now she also recognized him and quickly ran to unlatch the wicket.

"Why have you come?"

"To see you... How are you getting along, my love?"

Halya did not reply. Looking at her, he was astonished to see her face haggard and sallow.

"What's the matter, Halya?" he exclaimed. "You look awful. Are you sick?"

"Come into the yard," she said with angry impatience. "I'm certainly not going to talk on the street."

Chipka entered the yard. Halya closed and latched the wicket and led him to her room.

The small room was as pretty as a picture — tidy, light and cheery. In one corner there were icons in silver frames decorated with cornflowers, carnations and immortelles; before the icons hung a silver lamp on a silver chain. A table made by a professional joiner stood in the same corner, while in the opposite corner there was a bed covered with a soft silk bedspread. Several small stools stood along the wall. Everything looked nice and clean; the fragrance of cornflowers and mint pervaded the room, tickling one's sense of smell. Chipka had the impression that he had stepped into a paradise. It would have been marvelous, if only Halya had not been so sad!

"Are you unwell, Halya?" Chipka asked her again, looking her in the face.

"I'm all right... only I feel uneasy somehow... Something is gnawing at my heart."

"Well, I forgot to thank you for the tobacco pouch," he remembered. "That was very nice of you. Did you embroider it yourself?"

"What tobacco pouch?" she asked, lifting her thoughtful eyes onto his face.

"The one you put into mine when I left it behind."

"When? Are you crazy or what?"

"Who did it then?"

"But when was it?"

"That was when you gave my pouch back to me."

"How am I supposed to know? Why would I want to make a pouch for such a type? Why, that's ridiculous!" she chirped in a merrier tone.

Now Chipka recognized the Halya he had known — a merry, jocular girl. His heart filled with joy, and his eyes shone.

"My dear Halya!" he began.

The girl looked him straight in the eye, sharply and intently. He felt ill at ease.

"Anyway, why do you look so strange today as if you got out of bed on the wrong side?" he asked, sitting down beside her.

"Why should you care?"

"Dear Halya!"

"Go to the devil! You just want to fool me... make me lose my head..."

"Halya."

"Get away from me!"

She stood up and went to sit by a window that gave onto the fields. Her gaze traveled far into the distance, to the point where mists merged with clouds and the gray mantle of the sky touched the earth. Now and then, shadows flitted across her sad, sallow face. Chipka stared at her, wondering what had happened. But her eyes were fixed upon that window. Then he saw her face grow pale, her eyes glisten and two hot tears roll down her cheeks. As he looked at it, his heart ached so much as if it were squeezed in a vice.

"Halya, my darling! Why are you crying?" he asked, coming up to her. "Why don't you tell me about your troubles?"

The girl covered her eyes with her hands and shook her head. Chipka stepped closer to her.

"Dear Halya, my love!"

She leaned her head against the window jamb and wept softly.

"Well, I just thought..." said Chipka, touching her head lightly. "I thought I'd just go and... visit you... Mother keeps nagging me, saying I should get married, suggesting girls (Halya grew still, as if dozing). But my heart doesn't accept them. So I thought I'd go to my darling... and tell her..."

And, stooping quietly to her, he lightly kissed her exposed cheek. Halya started and raised her head. Her eyes were wet with tears, and her face was burning from emotion and weeping. She looked up at him and asked in a strangely plaintive voice:

"Why didn't you say anything to Father and Mother?"

"I wanted to ask you first, honey... Will you marry me? Do you care for me, my love?..."

This seemed to bring Halya back to life. Straightening up, she looked at him intently for quite a while, as if trying to learn the truth. Suddenly, she wrung her hands so hard that her fingers crackled. Her eyes lit up with something which was neither happy-

ness nor hatred — something good and gentle, but also fierce and evil.

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?” she cried out. “Why didn’t you do it when I was free... when I was plaiting that wreath? Why didn’t you tell me about it when I was picking flowers in these fields and meadows? Then I was free to roam around, with no limits or bans... But now... now...”

Again she wrung her hands, and once more her fingers crackled, as if broken. Tears welled up in her eyes and were about to gush forth...

Chipka was beside himself with fear. Growing pale in the face, he drooped his head and muttered in a frightened, faltering voice:

“So what about now, Halya... what is it? Tell me... everything, everything!”

“It’s a pity... I’m already betrothed!...”

Tears gushed from her eyes and flooded her face... Covering it with a sleeve of her blouse, she again sank onto the stool by the window, lowered her head onto her hand and sobbed inconsolably.

To Chipka, those few words came like a stab in the heart. It was as if his head were being pounded with the butt of an ax; this was how Halya’s bitter sobs echoed in his brain. He kept asking himself what could be done, but his mind and his memory failed him. Thoughts disintegrated into fragments which he tried to put back together, straining his reason — but his reason, too, seemed to have left him. He could not remember anything... He only felt his head humming, buzzing, ringing and his heart thrashing about violently, as if trying to burst out of his chest...

Unable to decide what to do or how, he seized at the first thought that came along, voicing it with great effort:

“When was it... how... to whom?”

“It was then... on the same day when you left here... The soldier, Sidir, stayed with us, and in the evening he and my father got drunk together, and —”

“What did your father say?” Chipka interrupted her.

“He just told me to marry him... You can’t stay single forever, he said. Mother told me the same thing: they say Sidir is a good, quiet man...”

“What did you say?” Chipka almost shouted.

“Me? I just told them I didn’t love him...”

“And they?”

“I must stop waiting for somebody I’d love, they said... One would not be good enough, another not quite handsome... You two will come to love each other after you’ve lived together for some time, they said...”

“Dogs!” Chipka thundered. Halya cast him a sharp glance.

“Where does he live?” Chipka rapped out sternly, his eyes glowing with something sinister.

"I don't know..."

"I'll kill him... cut his throat... strangle him!..." he screamed, springing to his feet and running about the room like a madman, gritting his teeth.

"Oh, come on!" she scoffed, lifting her head. "Have you gone crazy or what? You touch a hair on his head, and you'll never see me again!"

Chipka came to his senses. He sank onto a stool, his heavy head low on his chest.

"See what you are like?" Halya told him. "So that's the kind of man you are! How could I marry somebody who thinks nothing of killing an innocent man?... How can I become his wife? Because some day he might fall on his wife like a madman and kill her, too..."

"Halya, dear!... God may punish you for what you say... I'd sooner let you kill me... strangle me..."

"And what about Sidir, eh?"

"Ah! I wish you knew how it hurts... It's burning in here, as if there were live coals inside." He pointed to his chest.

Halya kept silent. Chipka did not speak either. He stood up and paced the room, his wild stare roaming about the walls. There was an oppressive silence. The girl's pensive face suggested that she was thinking of something important, which she as yet did not dare to speak about.

Presently, her cheeks colored, and her eyes shone as if with relief, and widened; her lips parted to let out the breath she had been holding. Her face glowed with some inner fire.

"I say, Chipka! Maybe not all is lost yet. I'll speak to Mother... she might persuade Father... There's only one thing."

Chipka pricked up his ears, gazing at her.

"Give up this life!" she exclaimed, her face growing pale.

"What life?"

"Robbery and murder!"

"Dear Halya!... No one can say that I've ever killed anybody... Maybe only in self-defense, when I couldn't hold back my hand..."

Halya fidgeted, her eyes again glowing fiercely and her face twitching.

"Confounded criminal!" she shouted. "Self-defense?! Whom did you defend yourself from? You break into a house and expect the owner not to try to catch you!... Rogue!"

"Are they any better, those owners? They've just become fat with our work and now try to push us around... And my house is falling apart, my mother's too old to work, and I can't even make half a ruble a day... And one must eat and get something to wear... How can we live, Halya?... We don't really rob — we just take what belongs to us by right... The lord has been working us to death, and the Jew has been cheating us. Are we to starve to death, to die on the road, begging?..."

"Chipka, my dear, stop it! There'll be no happiness, no good... You'll come at night, after a fight, and lie down next to your wife... and hug her with the same hands which strangled and were stained with human blood only a short time before. And you'll whisper about your love and kiss her with the same lips which shouted obscenities and cursed all and everybody... ouch!"

She trembled like an aspen leaf.

"Then how can we earn our living?"

"By honest hard work..."

"What about the brotherhood and... your father?"

"We'll go far away, where nobody knows us..."

"Ah, Halya! I don't see how this is possible. I'm the chieftain... When the boys realize I've abandoned them, I'm as good as dead. We've all taken such an oath."

"To whom did you swear that oath, thugs, robbers?" Halya shouted, springing to her feet. "To whom did you swear, confound you all?"

"To one another, Halya..."

"That's like devils swearing to one another!..."

She burst into hysterical laughter which filled the entire room. Chipka glanced at her and, without a word, dropped onto a stool, as if he had been shot.

"Do you think..." she began again after a while, "d'you think it's easy for me to look at the way Father's been living and compare it with the lives of honest people?... You see, they work hard, earn their bread, threat others in a decent way and are calm and quiet when they go to bed and get up... Here it's so different... Here we stay locked up all the time, as in a jail. I'm even afraid to show myself to other people. And when night comes, a bunch of drunk thugs barge into the house. They whisper and murmur something to one another and then disappear for the rest of the night... They come back before light and, like ghosts, hole up in cellars and haylofts, hiding the loot. All that I'm wearing has been stolen! D'you think it doesn't burn me? I've got a feeling that somebody's hand is pressing on my throat, choking me... Sure, I laugh and joke, but don't let it fool you. It's my worry that amuses me! The days I can while away somehow. But when I lie down and try to sleep, somebody seems to crawl up to me, hissing, 'Give me back my kerchief!...' — and then it pulls at my hair... 'Give me my beads!' — and I feel ice-cold hands on my throat... Do you imagine it's easy to wear it, these rags, do you?!"

In a fit of anger she seized her silk skirt and ripped it open from the hem up to her waist.

"Halya! Halya!" Chipka exclaimed, seizing her by the hands. "Don't do this!"

"Get away! Let me go!"

Her eyes were burning like live coals, and her entire body was shivering.

"You know — maybe the woman who wore this skirt is now lying in her grave, rotting away, and her blood, shed in vain, is now appealing to God, demanding that the killer be punished!... And I'm wearing out these rags... tormenting myself, knowing it's a sin... Why? Just because I'm the daughter of a robber? I wish I could run named about these fields and steppes, rather than rot alive in this jail and burn in this hell! Ah, damn them!" Suddenly, she snatched at her expensive necklace. The string snapped, and the beads streamed to the floor.

"Stop that, Halya! They'll beat you for this..."

"I'd rather be killed than choked with loot!"

Again she sat down by the window, propped up her head with her hand and gazed at the black-and-gray fields lying there, lifeless and mute, before her eyes... To Chipka, she had never looked more beautiful as at that moment. His stare shifted between her torn skirt and the beads scattered all over the room. He felt sorry for the girl he loved, and the bitterness of her life made him sad; yet a fear crept into his heart that he lacked the strength to chase away once and for all.

Halya's silence did not last long. Her eyes fell on Chipka, who sat there downcast, not daring to look at her — and pity stirred in the girl's gentle heart.

"Chipka, my dear!" she said. "Give it up! Otherwise, my love for you would make no sense... Leave it, darling!"

She came up to him and gently looked him in the eyes.

"I'll see, Halya... Maybe I'll give it up... I'll see... It won't be... possible, maybe..."

"Oh no, you must stop it! Or I'll strangle you myself with my own hands..." she muttered frenziedly, throwing her arms round his neck and planting hot kisses on his face.

"All right, Halya!... All right, my dear!" Chipka whispered frantically, pressing her close to him.

"Now get the hell out!" she twittered gaily. "Father and Mother will soon be back!"

Chipka wanted to say something, but Halya would not let him.

"Go away, go!"

Seizing his hat with one hand, she pulled him toward the door with the other.

Reluctantly, he obeyed. He had to go, of course — there was nothing to be done about it.

Halya led him outside the wicket gate, closing and latching it behind him.

Slowly, Chipka dragged himself along, away from the hamlet, barely able to place one foot in front of the other... Bright hopes were struggling against inexpressible anguish in his drooping head. As he thought that Halya would hardly succeed in persuading her parents, his heart sank; but then he visualized themselves being wedded and living together as man and wife — and the

black despair released its grip on his heart, letting it flutter with elation. But how was he to break with the gang? For this he would have to betray them, break his oath... Such thoughts again plunged him into gloom and sent a gnawing pain through his heart. Thus, his moods continually wavered between delightful visions and burning agony — and the multitude of conflicting thoughts crowding in his brain wore him down. He wished he could forget them all and chase them away, but they kept flooding his head with obsessive tenacity. To break the spell, he started looking all around him. There was not a soul in sight. The mute brown fields spread out before and behind him. The day was gloomy and cheerless. It was no longer raining; but the smoky carpets of clouds screened out the sun, shifting from one place to another, sailing across the high sky, chasing and overtaking one another and casting their gray shadows onto the black earth... A slight breeze was blowing from the south... Chipka lifted his head, glad that there was at least that wind which was bathing his flaming face and cooling off his hot head. The cool touch of the wind seemed to bring him some relief; merrier thoughts crept into his heart, which the lingering sadness refused to leave. He began to sing:

*The green grove's humming over a gully;
Young Cossack, what makes you so sad?*

At first his singing came as a low, drawn-out wail, filled with profound grief and resembling choked sobs; but then his voice grew stronger and louder, spread wider and wider, and, like the howling of a winter wind, rang with sorrow across the deserted fields...

Those brown eyes are all I want from life...

the song went on; and the fields looked still darker and gloomier.

XXV

No Lad Is Quite Without Luck, No Girl Is Quite Unhappy

Coming home, Chipka immediately rushed to do his routine work, without even stepping inside the house. His mother only caught glimpse of him, as he fed the sheep with millet straw.

In the evening, Motrya lighted the stove and started making supper. Then supper was ready, but Chipka still would not come inside. Placing the cooked meal on embers, she washed the pots and swept the room. When she finished doing this, Chipka was still outside.

"I wonder why he's staying there so late," she said to herself, aloud, and went out to call him.

Her calls went unanswered. She went back inside and waited some more, but he failed to appear. Her mother's heart felt hurt.

"If I'd known he wouldn't come, I wouldn't have bothered with the cooking. He should at least have set one foot inside to tell me if he was going to sleep at home or to run about again all night long. It's a real curse to me, his running loose every day and every night! He must've found himself some horrible slut, that's for sure."

Annoyed, she got the pot with dumplings out of the stove, put some on a plate and sat down to sup alone. She picked up a dumpling with an eating stick, bit off some of it, then some more — and nearly choked. She took a spoonful of broth and fell to thinking. The dumpling on her stick grew cold; the broth in her plate also cooled, becoming covered with a grayish film. When Motrya again tried to eat, she found that the food had gotten too cold and thick. She rose from the table, put the pot with the dumplings on the stove ledge, washed her spoon and plate and clambered onto the stove to try to sleep. But thoughts about her son assailed her, keeping her awake...

Meanwhile, Chipka had some business to see to in Krutiy Yar, where Lushnya was employed by the local Jewish brewer. Chipka walked there to see his buddy, only to find him snoring away. Lushnya had spent most of the previous day soaking himself in drink, which pastime had left him so exhausted by nightfall that he flopped down on a pile of straw in a barn, where he had been sleeping like a log ever since. It took Chipka a lot of time and effort to find him there.

"Timish! Timish!" Chipka shouted, shaking him by the shoulder. "Can you hear me, Timish?"

Timish, however, only moaned and hiccuped. Chipka messed about with him for quite a long time, rolling him over from side to side and even trying to pull him up to his feet. Finally, he got impatient with anger and kicked his side. Lushnya gave a cry and opened his eyes.

"What the hell?" he growled and, without a glance at Chipka, again burrowed into the straw.

"Timish!" Chipka thundered, standing over him.

"What?"

"Get up!"

Lushnya squinted at Chipka, barely lifting his eyelids.

"Is that you, Chipka? What's the matter?"

"Get up!... I need you."

"Has something happened?" Lushnya asked, turning his face to Chipka.

"Do you know where Sidir lives?"

"I don't even know any Sidir... Who's that?"

"The soldier... The same one... D'you remember him?"

"No, I don't know!..." Lushnya said, scratching himself and yawning.

"You don't know Sidir the Soldier?"

"Well, I surely know him, but I just don't know where he lives."

"Maybe some of the boys here know?"

"I don't know..." Lushnya yawned.

Annoyed, Chipka scratched the back of his neck.

"You've got some gunners in the brewery, they must know."

"I can't tell."

"D'you know anything at all?" Chipka cried out in a fit of temper.

"I don't know anything," Lushnya replied gloomily and rolled over to one side.

Chipka spat and went out. Disgust was gnawing at his heart. Should he go to ask Petro and Yakim? But they were not just round the corner; he would have to toddle all the way to Pobi-vanka. He went back inside.

"Timish, tell me, for God's sake..."

"What can I tell you? Why are you dying to see that Sidir anyway?"

"You bastard!" Chipka hollered. "You've gotten so drunk you can hardly work your tongue. That's why you don't give a damn about anything and make a fool of me."

"Aw, Gawd!..." Lushnya groaned, yawning. "All right, let's go." He got to his feet.

Chipka felt a little better. They went out of the barn and made for the bunkhouse where the brewery hands lived.

The barn stood well away from the other buildings, and they had to cross a bare stretch of land. There they met a bunch of Russians going to get some beer. By that time, the dusk had thickened considerably. Greeting the Russians, they quickly walked on. Suddenly, a hand slapped Chipka's shoulder from behind.

"Hello, Chipka!"

Chipka turned round — and saw Sidir.

"Oh, hello, Sidir!"

"Where are you going?" the soldier asked.

"Looking for you," Chipka said.

"All right then. Let's go drink some beer together."

"You go ahead, and I'll go get some sleep," said Lushnya, stepping away.

Chipka went with the soldiers.

"I say, Sidir!" said Chipka after they had drunk some beer. "I've got some business with you."

"What is it? Shoot."

"Well..." Chipka hesitated. "There're too many ears around."

"You may talk, brother — there're no strangers here."

"All the same, I'd rather not..."

"All right, let's go for a walk. You wait here, brothers," Sidir turned to the soldiers. "I won't be a minute."

They went outside and walked around the brewery. Night had fallen already, and there was also a mist rising from the ground. It was dark and damp. Chipka felt his heart hammering as wildly as it had never beaten before; his nervousness was choking him. "What if he'll refuse?" he asked himself — and his heart sank. He was at a loss, not knowing where to begin.

"Well, go ahead!" Sidir snapped impatiently.

"You see, Sidir, I hear you're going to get married..."

"That's right. So what about it?"

"But it seems the girl doesn't want to..."

"She doesn't?... It doesn't really matter, because her father and mother have given me their word! What else can she possibly want?"

"That's all right, I guess... Only how are you going to hit it off with her? Because you'll have to live with her — not with her father and mother."

"If she doesn't behave, there'll always be this thing." The soldier showed a fist.

Chilling fear sent shivers throughout Chipka's body.

"Sidir!... Don't destroy our happiness!" Chipka blurted out. He immediately wished he had not said that, but it was already too late.

"Whose happiness?" Sidir asked in astonishment.

"Save me, dear Lord!" Chipka prayed silently. Aloud, he said:

"She doesn't love you... We've known each other for a long time, and —"

"Maybe you want me to yield her to you?" Sidir interrupted him. "No, brother, I'll never do it!"

"You're a soldier, brother Sidir, you go places, you're always on the move with your regiment... You can easily find yourself an even better girl somewhere..."

"It's impossible, brother! Why, I've already sunk a lot of money into this business. I've given twenty-five rubles to the sergeant major and fifty to the captain, just for the permission. I've also bought some things for the occasion, and those have cost me another fifty..."

"If you like, I'll repay you twice as much..."

"But how is it going to work out, brother? They might ask me why I haven't married — and where would I be?"

"Just tell them you've broken it off — the bride is sick or something like that. Do it, Sidir, please! If you agree, I'll give you the money straight away."

"I see, brother... Only what am I to do?... Do you two really... care for each other, eh?"

"That's just what I'm trying to tell you: we've been in love with

each other for a long time... She tells me that if they force her to marry you, she'll take her own life."

"You don't say so! I might have to answer for this..."

"That's right. Have pity on her, Sidir! I know you for a decent fellow..."

"How am I to explain it to her father?"

"Think of some yarn... You may tell him there's a campaign coming soon, and that's why you haven't got the permission. And I'm willing to treat your whole company to make them keep their mouths shut."

"Are you, really? All right, then..." Sidir pondered over it, beginning to yield.

Chipka threw his arms round his neck.

"Sidir, brother! Let's make a night of it! It's all on me! Come on, I'll give you the money right now."

They returned to the pub, where Chipka handed over the amount agreed upon. He also stood several rounds to Sidir and the soldiers whom he had brought with him. In his joy, he himself got so drunk that he had considerable difficulty getting outside. This made him wonder whether he should try to go home or find a place to sleep right there. While he was racking his brains, his feet brought him to the barn where Lushnya had been sleeping, and he made up his mind to stay there, if only to avoid being scolded by his mother. He stumbled inside and before long was snoring away beside Lushnya...

The night was damp and chilling. The thick mist streamed in under the door, freezing his hot body to the marrow. Chipka woke up, shivering, and so did Lushnya. Chipka told him what had brought him there. Outdoors, the darkness began to pale. The whitish light of the eastern edge of the sky, where the sun was about to rise, filtered in through some cracks in the door.

Chipka got up and, without washing his face or combing his hair, walked back to Piski.

Day was breaking when he came home. When he was still some distance away, he saw light glimmering in the window of his house. His mother must be spinning, he decided, and knocked on the door. The door was bolted from inside. He went to tap on the window.

"Who's there?" his mother called.

"That's me, Mother. Open the door."

"Oh, son!" Motrya sighed, letting him in. "How long are you going to wander about at night? Or have you gone back to your old habits? You stay out every single night! As soon as night comes, you are off and gone... And there are such terrible rumors going round... What if the people blame it on you?"

Even though his mother's reproach did not exactly please Chipka, his recent turn of good luck put him in a conciliatory mood.

"Never fear, Mother!" He grinned. "If God helps me, I might soon stop going out at all."

"That's the way it looks to me, too! So it'll take a wife to keep you at home, if you won't listen to your mother."

"It might be a wife..."

It was for the first time that she heard him say such a thing. This left her both puzzled and pleased, but she did not pursue the matter. Casting him a stern glance, she returned to her hatchel.

Lighting his pipe, Chipka went out to take a look at the livestock and just hung around the yard until the sun climbed high enough. Then he made for the hamlet.

* * *

Meanwhile, Halya had not been idle either. As soon as her parents had come back, she ran to her mother and, with tears in her eyes, begged not to be forced to ruin her beauty and health trailing along after an unloved soldier on marches and campaigns in strange lands, far from home.

A mother is always a mother. Yavdokha took her dear daughter's distress close to heart, was much moved by her tearful entreaty and went to speak to her husband. To be sure, Maxim would have been only too glad to have such a son-in-law as Sidir, who, although still quite young, was already a noncom. But remembering his own hard army life, always on the move and never free, he rather tended to agree with his daughter. Assailed by grave doubts, he spent a sleepless night, thinking.

In the morning, he talked things over with Yavdokha to try to find a way to get rid of Sidir. While they were holding counsel, the soldier himself turned up. After much beating around the bush, he finally worked up enough courage to break the bad news to them. In a voice that rang with sorrow, he told them at some length that, of course, he would have been only too happy to go ahead with that wedding, as God was his witness, but this coming campaign had shuttered all his hopes. The parents listened to him and expressed great regret over such an unfortunate occurrence. If they were glad to hear what they did, they did not show it. Halya, listening in from her room, was the happiest of them all.

Having shown Sidir out, the girl's parents drove off to Hetmanske on some business, leaving her alone at home. Halya was so overjoyed that she felt an urge to do something, to tell somebody all about her good luck. Putting on her Sunday best, she spent some time just running about the rooms and singing merry songs. Then she decided to make herself some lunch, lighted the stove and put on some food to cook. After this, she again ran up and down the house, singing and glancing out windows, looking out for Chipka.

But Chipka would not come, and she strained her eyes in vain. A couple of times she decided that the black dot of a human figure out in the field must be him; then she left the burning stove, cooking and all, and, beside herself with joy, ran outside the gate to meet him. Realizing her mistake, she went back inside, her heart heavy with disappointment and her eyes brimming with tears. His not coming could only mean he did not really love her. If he had, he would have flown over long ago. He had just been putting on a show... turning her head! Such thoughts fogged her mind and hurt her heart. They also made her cry.

She was still weeping when Chipka came. Did she rush to greet him! Her tears and gloom instantly vanished; her eyes beamed with love and delight, her face as radiant as a sunny morning in spring. This was a really happy day for them, and they had plenty of nice things to tell each other.

"Will you really do it?" she pressed him, peering into his eyes. "Will you give up that way of life, darling?"

Chipka kept silent, savoring the sound of her merry voice and admiring her beaming eyes, while she twittered on and on:

"I'm sure we'll be happy together! And we'll run things at home in a regular way!... In the morning... well, you'll see about the livestock, and I'll work in the house... Because you'll love our animals, won't you? I don't care much for horses, I like oxen better... Oxen are so quiet and docile... Also, I must have a cow! Do you hear? I won't marry you unless you buy me a cow... with a calf, too!... What was I saying?... I just don't seem to remember... Oh, yes! So in the morning we'll both of us work, then we'll eat lunch and take some rest; then you'll find something else to do before it gets dark, and I'll have supper ready in the evening... Why, I'll be making such fine, soft dumplings that you'll be able to eat them just with your lips! And there'll always be peace and quiet at home — no quarreling or cursing... You won't swear, will you?"

Chipka smiled.

"Why are you laughing? I guess you'll probably be beating me, too! And here I am, a foolish girl, asking you if you're going to swear... Only mind you — I'll just walk out on you if you beat or curse me."

"You don't really have to worry your head with such things, Halya. How could anyone beat or curse such a lovely creature? You'll be like sunshine to my gloomy house, you'll make my mother really happy!"

"Why, of course, your mother's living with you... I completely forgot about her."

She knitted her brows for a moment, as though thinking hard about something. But that thought must have flitted away almost at once, because she went on chirping as merrily as before:

"Is your mother old?"

"No, not too old. She looks older than she is, but that's because she's been suffering a lot and went through some pretty hard times when she was young."

"And I don't even think I really know what it means to be poor... I've been brought up in wealth, so I've never found out. But then maybe there's no getting away from it, and I'll still get my share later... But I don't want to! D'you hear me, Chipka? I want no poverty — and no troubles either! Hang it all! I want none of it! There's one thing: does your mother get angry easily? Will she be scolding me often?"

"No, Halya. No one will ever dare to say a single wrong word to you — let alone scold. And then you're such a girl that my mother is sure to like you on sight. I guess she'll come to love you more than she does me."

"And what kind of girl am I?" she demanded, her eyes twinkling merrily.

"A special kind..." he said jokingly.

"How special?"

Chipka rushed to embrace her.

"But take care, mind you!" She wagged her little white finger at him. "Don't you ever try to fool me!"

They spent quite a long time, admiring and caressing each other. Then they ate. After lunch they talked to decide what they were to tell her parents. At dusk, he left.

* * *

His mother was rather angry when she met him in the yard.

"I just wonder where you've been traipsing about all day long! Who do you think is supposed to look after the animals? Did you expect your old mother to do it for you? Good heavens! At least before you used to spend your days at home; and now you just loiter around until lunchtime and then drop out of sight and vanish. What have you been raising all these animals for if now you don't want to tend them?"

"The devil won't take them, Mother," he said gaily.

"The devil wouldn't have taken you either, if you'd at least dropped in for a while at noon. If you've no pity for the animals, you should certainly have thought of your mother who's had to work outside in such weather..."

"Wait a little more, Mother: when I get married, you'll live in clover."

"I'll believe it when I see it," Motrya said sullenly, going inside, her anger spent. Chipka followed her into the house.

What did all that talk about getting married mean, anyway? He had spoken about it the day before, and now she had heard him say it again... Could it be that he had really made up his mind? Her curiosity aroused, she sat down and picked up the conversation.

"So you say I'll live in clover after you get married, eh? It just might be true. But then, you might take such a wife that won't even wash a blouse for her mother-in-law..."

"She might even do no washing at all," said Chipka.

"Who'll do it then?" Motrya asked in a frightened voice.

"A girl servant."

"Have you picked some big lady that can't even do without a servant?"

"That's right, Mother," Chipka smiled.

"Don't you try to climb too high, because you might yet fall down..."

"That's not climbing, Mother. I just want to marry the girl I really care for."

"Well, I only hope you aren't trying to pull my leg. Do you mean you've really found yourself a good match?"

"I have."

"Whom have you chosen then? Could it be Motrya Shramchenko? She's rich and thinks too much of herself. I wouldn't advise you to marry her. That one will remind you of her wealth every day."

"No, Mother, it's not Motrya but Halya."

"Which Halya?"

"Do you know Hudz, the soldier?"

"Is that the one who lives over at the hamlet?"

"That's him."

"So what about him?"

"It's his daughter."

Motrya fell to thinking, a sad look creeping into her eyes.

"I just don't know that girl, son... I'm not sure what kind of people they are... I only remember that when he was a young lad, he spent all his time drinking, having fun and playing around with girls. Then his father had him drafted, and nothing was ever heard of him until he came back, already married and rather well off... His wife doesn't come from our parts — he'd brought her along from somewhere far away. Does her daughter take after her?"

"No, mother: the daughter doesn't look like her at all."

"Oh, son! You never know... Another person's heart is a mystery — you can never be sure what's inside. She probably looks all right for all I know, but that may change after she's wed. Every girl is nice before she lands a husband; but as soon as she's out of church, she begins to play up. Suddenly, this is wrong, and that's not the way she likes it... If she's rich, it makes it only worse!... To my mind, you ought to marry Fedko's Olena instead. I'm quite sure that she'd be a good wife to you and a good daughter-in-law to me... But if you've already fallen for Hudz's daughter, may God help you and good luck!... Surely, it's not I who'll have to live with her — it's you, son, who'll spend your whole life with her. I won't be around for much longer... I'll die

soon and leave everything to you to think about. Then you'll go on living with her, without me... But even after I'm gone, I'd feel so much better in that other world, if I saw you happy down here. Just think: how could I rest in peace with you here quarreling and bickering every day? Then my bones would be turning in my grave..."

"That won't happen, Mother. Halya will surely be just the right kind of wife to me. I've known her for quite a bit already..."

"If that's so, may the Lord bless you and make you happy! I don't forbid you to marry her. Only don't blame your mother if — God forbid — you have to suffer because of that for the rest of your life... How much do you know about women from rich families? They're all capable of humiliating you. And there's hardly a more humiliating thing than hearing somebody rich casting your poverty at you... Even if what little you've got you've gained in an honest way. But such a girl usually brings over a pile of fine clothes from home and then doesn't let you touch them. And then every day she scolds you and nags you, complaining that something has been lost or spoiled... There's nothing worse, son, than a rich wife's reproach! That's why I wouldn't advise you to marry someone wealthier. Find a girl who's your equal, and you'll be able to treat each other in the same way. You'll hear no talk about being poor, and there'll also be nothing you'll be able to reproach her with — because she could always say you must've known what you were doing when you married her! I've lived and I've seen people, and I can tell you that poor girls make better housewives... Poverty and need teach a girl to take care of all she has and of other people's property as well. But if a girl has been brought up in luxury, with servants all around her, she just wouldn't care and would let everything go to waste!"

"Halya's different, Mother. You don't have to worry. She may be rich, but she's been working a lot about the house. She knows how to go about doing everything. Sure, she's better off than the rest of them here, but that'll make things easier for us: there'll be something to make a start with once we're on our own. And then I've got my head and feet to use, too. Don't you worry, Mother — it'll work out all right! I'm sure that if you'd known her or seen her at least once, you would've told me not to marry anybody but her!"

"Never mind her good looks, son — better make sure she really cares for you. Some of those pretty things turn out to be quite nasty. It's hard to guess right when you have to choose your own lot for the rest of your life."

"I can tell you that I haven't been able to imagine my life without her ever since I met her..."

"If that's so, go ahead and may God bless you! Send your matchmakers to them and see if they will let you have her."

Before the day was over, Chipka ran to Hritsko.

"Hritsko, brother! You'd never guess why I've come to you."

"You tell me."

"I want you to be my matchmaker."

"Are you getting married?" Khristya broke in.

"Uh-huh. I just thought I'd try it once and swear never to do it again," Chipka joked.

"Whom d'you have in mind?" Hritsko asked.

Khristya pricked up her ears.

"You'll see... First tell me if you'll do it for me."

"Let me think about it... You might send me to a place where I'll get a thrashing and nothing else..."

They all laughed.

"That's exactly the kind of place where I'm going to send you, because it's time somebody gave you a good beating," Chipka continued in the same tone. "That's something Khristya ought to do, as a good wife should... But that can't be helped, because she's so gentle that I bet she can't even give you a tongue-lashing."

"You'd better stop cracking jokes and tell us whom you're going to marry," Khristya insisted.

"D'you really want to know?"

"Of course, we do."

"Just have some patience."

"Come on, out with it, because I won't let Hritsko be your matchmaker."

"I myself won't go anywhere unless he tells me," said Hritsko.

"Well, you're impossible," Chipka said. "I guess I've got to tell you. D'you know the Hudz girl?"

"Who's that? Odarka?" asked Khristya.

"Wrong. It's Halya."

"Now who could that be?" Hritsko wondered.

"She's the daughter of the soldier — the one who lives out at the hamlet."

"Well, I don't know her," Khristya said slowly. "To think that you've had to walk all the way to that hamlet to look for a wife, as if there aren't enough girls here in the village! What made you go there anyway?"

"It just happened," Chipka grinned. "So will you do it for me, Hritsko?"

"When?"

"Next Saturday — that'll be a holiday."

"Saturday will be all right."

"Don't forget then. And for now, good-bye. There's somebody else I must see."

Chipka went away and left Hritsko and Khristya talking about him.

"You mind my word, Khristya — Chipka will make good yet! Now he's getting married, and a married man is not the same as a young bachelor."

"Didn't you see before that he was a decent fellow? He's fit for everything — a good worker and clever with his hands, too."

"He was also a heavy drinker and a loafer," Hritsko reminded her.

"Then he was young and foolish," she said. "Now he's grown up and come to his senses."

"That'll surely be a break for old Motrya. The poor woman used to know no rest or peace, be it day or night."

"God knows what kind of daughter-in-law she's going to have."

"That doesn't matter. Whatever she might be, Chipka must not let her treat his mother badly."

"Well, Hritsko, some women are so pig-headed they want everything their own way — no matter what you say or do..."

"I'd surely make her behave."

"Oh, yes, you're that kind of man."

"That's the only way. I'd never let some young, silly girl push my mother around! I'd make her bite her tongue and keep her mouth shut, that's for sure."

"Would you have treated me in such a way, too, if you'd had a mother?"

"But you're different, Khristya. I'm sure you would've made my mother as happy and pleased as you've made me."

"That would've depended on what kind of woman she were."

"You'd please any mother... Don't you think that Chipka's mother is quite a decent woman?"

"There's certainly nothing wrong with old Motrya. Actually I'm grateful to her, because she's been so kind to us as if she were part of the family. Not all of them are like her, though. Just look what Vasilenko's mother has done to her daughter-in-law! When the girl was getting married, she looked fit and fine and was as big as a barrel. Now she's thin and looks awful. The devil himself — let alone a daughter-in-law — would find it hard to please such a mother."

They spent a long time talking. One word led to another, and thoughts followed one another, now turning to other people, now switching back to Chipka.

"You'll tell me all about the bride," said Khristya as they were lying down to sleep. "I wonder how he stumbled upon her!..."

"All right, I'll see for myself what kind of doll she is and then I'll tell you," Hritsko replied.

The mother and son put out the light early that night. Tired by the day's events, they lay down to sleep earlier than usual. But neither of them could sleep.

Halya's merry face kept drifting before him, and he could see her pattering around in his house. It was only a pity the house was so small and cramped — he would have to build a new one... The idea flitted across his mind, letting in a stream of thoughts. He visualized this old house pulled down and a new one started — with at least two separate rooms and large windows. "I think the two of us will live in the smaller room, because Mother will probably stay on the stove most of the time," he would tell Halya. "And we'll keep the other room just for receiving guests. All right?" And her eyes would express agreement... His thoughts would intertwine with hers, producing satisfaction and smiles... High hopes warmed his heart. Chipka forgot his past life and did not remember anything of what had happened in it; carried by the light wings of an impatient imagination, he flew on and on into the future... toward the paradise of blissful tranquility...

Motrya was also thinking about Halya. But her head swarmed with ill forebodings rather than visions of happiness. God alone knew how this would turn out, she thought. After all, she had never seen the girl or heard her voice, the way she talked... She might be one of those vain creatures who wanted you to know your place. Or, maybe, she just wanted to tie him up — which would not keep her from leaving him in case she fancied someone else. Quite a few rich girls had done it before. Of course, they were all so spoiled by wealth! A girl like that, raised in luxury and plenty, might never have had to bend her back working or to prick her white hands on straw stubble — that was what they had servants for. And when she found out that she would have to use her own hands here, she might simply walk away... Something had definitely gone wrong with the world nowadays!

Such thoughts and fears made the careworn mother roll over from side to side and sigh painfully.

"Are you sleeping, Mother?"

"No, son."

"Why?"

"I just can't... Too many thoughts on my mind..."

"Don't you worry, Mother!"

XXVI At Home

On Saturday, Chipka sent his matchmakers to Maxim. On Sunday, he received the bride's parents at his place. Maxim did not neglect the time-honored custom; he accepted the invitation and persuaded Yavdokha to accompany him.

Maxim knew to whom he was marrying off his daughter. Chipka's shabby hut and old, poorly dressed mother did not disturb him too much. Yavdokha, however, took it differently, and her haughty vanity experienced a real shock. To be sure, she had nothing against Chipka himself. But his humble, cramped dwelling and his age-bent mother, worn out by grinding poverty and constant worries, bruised Yavdokha's rapacious, greedy, luxury-hungry nature.

As soon as they returned home, she raked her husband over the coals. Well familiar with her fiery shrewishness, Maxim went outside, where he took his time doing some routine work. Then Yavdokha turned on Halya:

"That's some mother-in-law you're going to have... Good God! She doesn't even look human. Hatred has made her face twisted and shriveled like a dried fish."

"Maybe that's just what she looked like to you at first sight, Mother," Halya said.

But it did not help. Bursting into tears, Yavdokha whined:

"If I'd known, my dear child, that it would ever come to this, that I'd see such things at his place, I would've sworn to keep you at home unmarried for the rest of my life rather than see all this happening to you!"

Motrya did not like Yavdokha either. She thought the other woman too haughty, pompous and unfriendly. "Fine lady — that's what she thinks she is," Motrya muttered to herself. "I wonder why Chipka got mixed with this lot... The daughter must be the same as the mother: aren't they always? He'll ruin his life with them — and mine as well! I can feel it in my heart..."

And as far as the two mothers were concerned, the whole thing should have been called off. But there was no backing out now — not after all that had been said and done in public.

The following Sunday the young couple were wedded.

Maxim was so delighted he threw such a lavish wedding party as the village had never seen and was unlikely to ever see again. For a whole week musicians played away, feet were given no rest, honeyed vodka and spiced brandy flowed like water, and as to plain vodka, one could swim in it... Guests poured in in huge numbers: there were commoners, soldiers with Sidir among them, the village chief with the clerk and the assessor with some distant relatives who tried to pass for gentry... Both the house and the yard were so crammed with people that there was hardly an inch

of room left. Maxim was even said to be expecting the district police chief, but the officer failed to turn up for some reason.

Hritsko, acting as second best man, marveled at all that wealth which had so suddenly and unexpectedly fallen into Chipka's hands. He was even seized with envy—but so was everybody else, for that matter. They all wanted to know what had made such a well-to-do girl as Halya marry that pauper. The older villagers kept their suppositions to themselves, while young women did plenty of hard thinking trying to figure it out for themselves and reaching the conclusion that this whole business looked too suspicious for the devil not to have been somehow involved in it. Then they would look at Halya, who was sitting next to Chipka, as pretty as a picture, and they would start whispering to one another, shaking their heads and exchanging meaningful winks... Meanwhile, the men accepted brimming glasses from Maxim, one at a time, downed them and recited: "May the Lord keep the young couple hale and hearty, and may He grant that they be happy in love, swim in wealth and know no troubles for the rest of their lives!" "May they also get rich and grow humps—down in front!" added Yakiv Kabanets, the best man, who had quite a reputation for sayings of this kind. The crowd roared with laughter, and some women drove their fists into the best man's back, saying, with mock severity: "Take that! and that!" Paying no attention to their fists, Kabanets stuffed a dumpling into his mouth, pushed some dancers out of his way, shouted: "Let's hear some real music!" and went into a lively folk dance until the earth groaned under his feet. The musicians scraped and sawed until strings snapped; violins bent; the tambourine pealed like thunder on a summer day; the copper cymbals banged and jingled as if a hundred pairs of Gypsy horses fitted out with little bells were flying right through the village...

After several days of such carousing at the hamlet, the whole crowd moved over to Chipka's place in Piski.

This was when Motrya saw her daughter-in-law for the first time. Together with her son, she bowed low to her, holding out some rich gifts. Then she looked at the bride—and the shadows of dark thoughts melted away from her face. Sparks of relief flickered in Motrya's aged, lusterless eyes and flared up, spreading joy all over her shriveled face—much in the same way as a ray of sunshine, piercing through dense foliage, lights up the thicket down below, dispelling the gloom. Motrya embraced the girl as affectionately as if she were her own daughter and wept, kissing her. Halya, too, pressed the older woman close to her, as she would her mother, and kissed her coarse, shriveled cheeks and hands... Then Motrya hugged her son, still crying. After this she kissed Halya's parents and nearly all of those who had driven or walked into her yard. The old woman seemed drunk with joy. Never before had she been the object of so much public respect, and now she

was at a loss, not quite knowing how she was supposed to thank and greet all those people. Then the band began to play, the women in charge of the ceremony struck up a song, the newlyweds bowed — and went inside... The merrymaking started again. Maxim and Yavdokha danced together, twisting and turning, and after them Motrya, too, shuffled her old feet...

Like a terrible storm that leaves everything smashed and shattered in its wake, the wedding feast swept through Chipka's household causing considerable damage. The fences, broken in many places, lay on the ground; the gate, unhinged and quite battered, was down in the middle of the yard; the windows, like black holes, gaped at the street, their panes gone... But just as the sun seems brighter than usual when, after a gale, a downpour or a hailstorm, its light and warmth pour down upon the element-battered earth, so shone Halya now in that household, warming it with her ruddy face and cheerful eyes.

Chipka began to repair the damage right away. Now he went and mended the fence, now he made a new gate, now he fixed something else. Then he called a glass cutter and had the windows glazed. A week later, one could hardly recognize the once-devastated household; all things were back in their proper places, and everything seemed to look even better than before.

Halya had brought along plenty of things and livestock: it had taken eight wagons, each drawn by a pair of oxen, to haul over her dowry to Piski. Motrya was even frightened when she saw it all. She had never dared to dream of such wealth — and now it suddenly appeared before her, as if conjured up by magic. She did not know where to put it or what to do with it. The most necessary things were taken into the room, some were stored in the passage, but a great deal was left over. Halya asked Yavdokha to keep it for her at the hamlet. Maxim gave Chipka three fine horses as a wedding gift. Chipka asked his father-in-law that those, too, be left at the hamlet until the spring. Seeing how cramped the newlyweds were, Maxim and Yavdokha advised them to move to the hamlet for the winter — something neither Chipka nor Halya agreed to do. So Halya's parents went back, and the young couple were now on their own. Destiny sheltered them under its broad wing.

* * *

Their home looked nice and cheerful. The house seemed to have become larger and lighter. Halya covered the walls with wall paper and hung them with embroidered towels. In the icon case, the faces painted in expensive icons seemed to smile through a forest of cornflowers, mint, hare's-ears and carnations. Before the icons hung toy pigeons. Those birds had blue-gray wings, red chests, black tails, pinkish, flesh-colored beaks and eyes of red

beads that shone brightly whenever a ray of sunshine or a shaft of light fell on them. The pigeons caused general admiration. Their wings outspread, their feet pulled up, they swung lightly all the time, looking almost like live birds under some spell. Halya painted blue flowers over the whitewash on the stove and scrubbed the benches and the wooden bed until they became white and spotless. Everything touched by her hand or even catching her eyes, changed from gloomy gray to white and brightened until it seemed to smile.

Halya took loving care of Chipka's mother, doing all kinds of things to please her. She made several caps for her and gave quite a few kerchiefs and blouses as gifts. Motrya's old body was no longer covered with her usual threadbare things; these were now used as rags, while Motrya walked around wearing only new clothes. She now had good, black-vamped boots, skirts of the kind favored by older women but quite expensive nonetheless, a snow-white dress and a cloth-lined sheepskin coat for the winter. She was well protected from cold and did not suffer from either hunger or overwork. Halya had taken over all the chores, tending the cow and the sheep and doing all the cooking; she would not let Motrya do any work at all.

"You've certainly done enough hard work in your lifetime," Halya said. "Now it's time you took some rest. I'm young, so let me do all the work from now on. You just rest."

"Come now, my dear!" Motrya replied. "They say you don't have to pity your father just because he has to work, and that's also true for me. No one pitied me much when I was young, so it's too late to start now. A dog that's gotten used to following the wagon will also run after a sled. I've been working since my childhood, and it would be hard for me to lie around all the time, even though my bones sometimes ache as if they were broken and I do get those chills in the chest."

And Motrya took some wool, sat down before the hatchel and slowly began to spin.

Halya made even greater efforts taking care of Chipka and went out of her way to please him. She embroidered the fronts of all his shirts with pretty floral patterns and trimmed all his coats with cord. As soon as she was through doing her cooking or tending the livestock, she would get busy doing needlework or designing new embroidery patterns.

"Do you think this will look nice?" she would ask her mother-in-law showing her a piece of her embroidery.

"That's a pretty one, my dear," Motrya would praise her.

"I think it would look even better if I added some blue here and some green here..."

"You don't really have to rack your brains and spoil your eyes doing that. You could've done it just any which way, and that would have been fine! It hasn't been long since he wore plain

shirts with no embroidery that were sometimes mended and patched up all over, too. Well, he didn't seem to care."

"But what kind of wife would I be if I didn't embroider my husband's shirts? I would've done the finest patterns, but I just don't know all of them."

"Thank you, my dear, for being so kind to both of us! When you came down to live with us, it was like suddenly having our home full of sunshine. You seemed to open our eyes — and everything began to look rosy... You can't imagine how hard it was at the beginning. There was no bread and nothing to put on, and I had to go to work every day to make things worse. Then he was still a baby, so I sometimes had to take him along... But when I left him at home, even with his grandmother, fear drove me crazy... I'd be wondering if he was all right and fearing he might have done something wrong. The day seemed to drag on for ages, but as soon as it was evening at last, I couldn't get off the job fast enough... Then I'd fly home only to see him playing in the yard. And I'd thank the Lord as soon as I made sure nothing had happened to him. In winter it was even worse, what with all those biting frosts and snowstorms, and no warm clothes and nothing to wear on my feet!... Then the room got so cold we almost had to run up and down it to keep warm, and there was no fuel to speak of. Oh! I certainly drained a brimming cup of bitterness in my time!... Now, in my old age, I'm quite well off, thank God. Perhaps the Lord will let it last until I die. When I'm gone, I'll be praying for you two up there, asking God to make you happy and to let you raise your children in a proper way."

Such tales of want and bitterness horrified Halya who had not experienced anything of the kind and had never even thought about such things. Her heart was heavy with pity for her mother-in-law. Now she was beginning to understand why Motrya looked so old, feeble and wornout.

"I want you to know I love you just as I do my mother!" she told her warmly. "It's amazing how much you suffered! Did Chipka also go through all that?"

"Of course, dear! I nursed and fed him with my own hands, so he, too, got his share."

"This must be why he's now so grim and gloomy most of the time... With me it's been different: I was raised in a wealthy home, with not a care in the world, always gay and cheerful, often singing..."

"May God always make you want to sing — that's a lot better than crying!" Motrya said affectionately. The girl certainly brought her much comfort and joy.

But there were other moments when, in the dead of night, the wind howled outside and hooted in the chimney like an owl and wailed and wined, knocking on windows like a tardy traveler;

when gusts of wind lulled everybody to sleep — everybody, that is, except old people, who tossed and turned and groaned because of their aching bones, overworked through the years, while dark thoughts, like so many black crows, swarmed in their old heads. Then sorrow would creep into Motrya's time-worn heart and wring it hard.

This was just too good to be true, she thought. Why had such a rich, beautiful girl fallen in love with a penniless fellow like Chipka? Well, she may have — a young girl like her, hot-blooded and warm-hearted, would set her eye on a lad and then fall for him all the way before she knew where she was heading... But there were usually parents... Well, Halya's father and mother had not seemed to mind. Had they just let her have her way because they had not wanted her to suffer because of that love? Still, plenty of girls were made to marry men they did not love. Once a wealthy girl became involved with a lad much beneath her, her family always put an end to it... Halya's family had not. To be sure, Chipka was smart and handsome, clever with his hands and had a head that was better than most... All the same, he was hardly a match for such a girl! Didn't they say that a first love was a foolish thing? Maybe it would soon wear off, and then there would be reproaches and recriminations without end with her calling him a pauper and a beggar!... Or maybe she was different? She seemed good, she did. She treated Motrya with genuine respect, although she could not care for her half as much as she did for Chipka. Oh, Lord, make them happy! She, Motrya, was already old, so her only desire was never to see them cursing their fate... She would die before long, and they would live on... She wanted to die in peace.

Such thoughts drifted across the old woman's mind like light clouds on a clear day. But when the sun was out, shining brightly, clouds floated upward until the hot sunshine melted them into tiny wisps to be dispersed by a warm breeze. Here it was the same: as long as their fate smiled upon them and warmed them, it did not let any sad thought cast a dark shadow upon their happiness. Motrya was more often glad than gloomy, watching the young couple build their nest.

Indeed, they were as inseparable as a pair of doves. Whenever he was busy doing something while she was free, she would be by his side holding something for him or helping him in some other way, or just standing there watching him work. And when he saw her working, he would rush to her and do it himself to make things easier for her.

"Hire a servant girl, Halya," he told her, seeing how she strained herself at the stove, heaving big iron cauldrons. "Must you do everything with your own hands? You've been working in the cowshed and doing the cooking and all your needlework, too — all by yourself, alone."

"A servant girl?" she asked in a surprised tone. "What for? To let her cook for you with her unclean hands? No, never!"

"Think of yourself, Halya, of your health..."

"What's wrong with my health? Didn't I grow strong enough sitting idle back at home? I surely don't mind using my hands a little for you, honey. You had it tough in your childhood and youth, so you deserve to be taken care of now that you're married. Just what kind of happiness would it be, if I didn't see about everything myself doing all that there is to be done? No, thank you. I want no servants here!"

As he heard his wife saying such nice things, his heart filled with happiness and joy.

"My love! my happiness!" he whispered to her at night, pressing her close to him. "You brought real joy into my home, you took off the scales which had covered my eyes my whole life! Lies and injustice surrounded me on all sides and weighed heavy on my shoulders and squeezed my chest; and my strong hands felt powerless, and my eyes closed... I didn't know and didn't see any way out of that torture and thought there was no getting away from it... Then you rose, like a beautiful little star, over my worried head and lighted up the way for me!"

"Halya!" he began again after a while, slowly, as if voicing his inner thoughts. "If all the people had been as happy as us, our life would've been even happier!"

"This would've been wonderful, darling! But that's impossible, because fate has already sorted them out, giving plenty to some and nothing to others..."

"Fate? Are you sure it's been fate? Aren't the people to blame, too?"

"Well, they may be — a little... If I could, Chipka, I'd let them have part of my own wealth and happiness. You know, when your mother was telling me about your poverty and hardships back during your childhood, I went hot and cold all over. If I'd known about it, I would've given you all I had..."

"You're a generous kind, Halya... You're sensitive, too," said Chipka embracing her, while his grim face twitched and his voice shook as he remembered what it had been like. "But then my mother isn't the only one who's suffered a lot. There're plenty of such people around besides us. Hundreds, thousands, thousands upon thousands of them have been dragging out their miserable lives. And nobody minds or cares or gives a damn; nobody pays any attention to that, nobody even seems to see it... That's just none of anybody's business, that's always somebody else's troubles... If anybody really cares, it's only those defenseless people who've been starving to death... No wonder we have to use force to get back our lawful share."

"Don't bring it up now, for Christ's sake!" Halya begged him, snuggling up against him. "When I think of it, my head swims

and I see red spots before my eyes. Couldn't you have done without all that? Couldn't you try to get it by work — hard, back-breaking but honest?"

"By work? Hm... You can't expect to get too far just working, Halya. Work makes one fellow — and breaks ten others!"

"But there's Hritsko! He started poor and he's gotten on in the world. Now he's quiet and happy — all because of his work!"

"To begin with, a fellow needs a job, something to work on. But everything already belongs to somebody else, and nobody needs his work! He just can't get started. Everything's wrong and unfair..."

"Are you sure, Chipka, that everybody thinks like you do? No, by God! Lushnya is the kind of fellow that would sell you out any time; Patsyuk only cares for merrymaking and singing and kicking up a brawl; and Matnya has just got drinking on his mind. I bet they haven't been thinking about work at all! They grab everything and don't care to whom it belongs and why... Or take those soldiers. They spend their lives being taught to have no respect for other people's right to live, let alone their property... They surely don't see things the way you do — they just rob and loot and never give it another thought... That's the way things have always been in the army, and the soldiers have gotten used to it — and nothing will make them try honest work instead!..."

"It may be so... Maybe you're right there... Maybe..."

"No, Chipka, it's so much better to live quiet, to earn our living in an honest way and to enjoy life... And if God sends us children, we'll bring them up to be decent people and send them to school. Let them study while they're young... Maybe they'll read in those books how to live better than we have."

Her calm, wise reasoning lulled Chipka into blissful tranquility. His dear wife's candid words quieted his heart and softened his tough nature hardened by long years of privations; he was now ashamed of his former dissolute ways and of that twisted path he had thought would lead him to happiness... He also felt sorry for his luckless pals and regretted that their brotherhood was now a thing of the past. He lacked determination and courage to tell them the truth — Halya's truth. So he had to avoid and shun his former friends.

* * *

"It's a shame!" said Lushnya. "We can't expect much good from our chieftain now. The man's as good as lost!... He's been clinging to his wife's skirt."

"They say a honeymoon is the sweetest thing there is," Patsyuk explained.

"Vodka's even sweeter!" Matnya added. "The son-of-a-bitch ought to have let us visit him at least! Think of all that wealth his wife's brought him!"

"That's an idea... What about going to see him?" Lushnya threw in.

"Sure! Let's go!" they shouted all at once and went straight away.

"Too bad, brothers! My wife is sick, and my mother can barely shuffle her feet along... You know there's just one room, and I've got no other place to receive you..."

"At least give us a ruble," Lushnya cadged. "Things have been so tough we haven't got a single copeck left... Then we could drink to your wife's health, asking the Lord to let her get well."

Chipka was only too glad to get rid of them at such a low price. Thrusting a ruble into their hands, he turned to go back inside. The three "brothers" set off for the tavern.

Chipka had lately taken quite a liking to Hritsko and his good Khristiya and was as glad to see them as he was loath to meet his former cronies.

Hritsko was a tireless farmer. Everything he owned he had acquired through honest work done by his toil-hardened hands. Prosperity had not turned him into a lazy-bones; he had remained an early riser and still went to bed late. Unlike so many others who turned bossy and put on airs, he kept on farming himself with the help of his hard-working wife, having every intention to bring up his children in the same spirit. Hritsko became fond of Chipka and started to visit him quite frequently. There was certainly nothing improper now about keeping company with Chipka, and this was all the more reason why Hritsko wanted to see his childhood friend more and more often. Their wives also came to like each other.

When the four of them met, the hosts would seat the guests at a table that would be laden with foods and drinks. Chipka and Hritsko would then start a conversation about farming and their gains and losses — the usual everyday cares.

"How's your wheat been doing, Hritsko?" Chipka would ask.

"Well, it's not so good. It's tall enough, but there won't be too much grain. Must be those rains when it was in flower... I tell you: the grains are as small as poppy seeds. I hope I'll break even getting back what I sowed."

Hritsko always complained to Chipka. With him, all that was good was called bad, and sometimes not-so-good was made out to be awful. Hritsko was holding out on Chipka. He saw that despite his wealth Chipka had remained what he had always been — compassionate and sensitive to others' troubles. Realizing that, Hritsko deliberately exaggerated his losses and bad luck, hoping that Chipka, as a good friend, would take his complaints to heart and help him out if and when it became necessary.

Chipka's affluence sometimes made Hritsko envious. Having done plenty of whining at Chipka's, Hritsko would return home and say to Khristiya:

“Chipka’s surely well fixed now! That’s all sheer luck, of course... There’s a fellow who really rolls in wealth! Who’d expect to see him like this when he ran crazily about the village in those rags, drunk most of the time, or soaked himself in the taverns?! But there he is now, living like a lord! Suddenly he’s rich — just because fortune has smiled on him! And they say that he who is rich is also happy!”

“That’s just his destiny, I guess,” his wife would reply. “He’s also found himself a wife that suits him perfectly. She’s not just rich and beautiful but also kind and polite with everybody. And she dotes on him, of course. Like they say, she’d let him have part of her own heart, if only she could.”

“I wonder why,” Hritsko would say with bitterness.

“Don’t you see? Chipka’s a good man, that’s why.”

“What’s so good about him?”

“Everything. Of course, for some other woman he might be the wrong kind of husband, but he and Halya seem to be made for each other... They’re very much alike... Both are kind and generous... They’re a good match — that’s for sure.”

Khristya always defended Chipka. There was indeed much *good* in Chipka, which Hritsko’s mercenary mind failed to perceive. But Khristya, with her woman’s intuition and sensitive heart, saw it well.

“You must’ve been charmed or something, Chipka, because all the women are just crazy about you,” Hritsko joked while in his cups.

“What do you mean?”

“I know what I mean... When my Khristya hasn’t seen you for some time, she always starts talking about you, wondering why you haven’t been coming.”

“I’m surely grateful to her for remembering me,” Chipka said warmly.

“Doesn’t that make you jealous?” Halya broke in.

“It sure does! That’s impossible! I’ve as good as lost my wife to him.”

“We’ll yet take her away from you!” Halya laughed.

“Why? What do you need her for? Or maybe you two haven’t been getting along too well?”

“That’s what it’ll probably come to,” Khristya smiled. “I’ll just leave you and the children and go to live with Halya and Aunt Motrya...”

“I don’t care... Take her any time, only give me Chipka instead,” said Hritsko.

“Oh no, thank you!” Halya protested. “We won’t let you have Chipka. He’s staying with us.”

Listening to their funny conversation, Motrya also put in a word or two. This was followed by more jokes and general hilarity.

"That surely calls for a drink," announced Chipka, having joked to his heart's content. "Let's have some of your honeyed vodka, Halya."

Quickly, Halya rose from the table. In the twinkling of an eye she was back with the vodka which was fragrant, pure and delicious. She went round the table pouring a full glass for each of them. They drank, smacked their lips, praised Halya, praised the vodka even more and cracked more jokes.

Such visits usually took place on Sundays and other holidays. But hardly a weekday passed without Khristya going to see Halya or the other way around.

They had now come to like each other so much as if they were sisters. Although, as was usual with women, neither of them bared her soul to the end and let the other see all that was going on at the bottom of her heart, they sensed they were united by a certain affinity and mutual affection. Halya had a clearer perception of things; her mind, cultivated amid wealth and plenty, reached farther and wider. Isolated from people, sheltered from life, knowing no hardships or troubles, she had grown used to living in the realm of her thoughts and to use her brains. Khristya's childhood and youth had been different. An orphan from a very early age, her powers of reasoning were blunted by the drudgery of servitude. Penury and privations had left too profound an imprint on her for her to be indifferent to material things. In fact, these were not the last of her concerns. But no matter how different the two women were, both could distinguish equally well between good and evil — something that made their views very much alike. Khristya was only instinctively drawn to *good*, whereas Halya not only loved it with all her heart but also named it and spoke about and for it. Their was a union of kindred hearts and souls. They built up as strong a friendship as had ever been developed by two women brought together by life.

Because of this deep mutual affection, each of them swore to herself to make the other her future children's godmother. Khristya was looking forward to it. She was again with child, and shortly after Christmas God sent her a second son. Halya took part in the baptism as the baby's official godmother. Hritsko had no objections; in fact, he had been delighted to hear that it would be Halya. He had every reason to expect that such a godmother would be a considerable asset in the child's life. As to Khristya, she regarded this as an additional tie that would seal her everlasting friendship with Halya.

Indeed, they became even closer after this. They began exchanging confidences, revealing their innermost thoughts, fears and hopes to each other. Neither could spend a single day without seeing the other.

Halya came to love her godson as if he were her own child. She made embroidered shirts and caps for him. She would take him

in her arms and carry him around, full of admiration. Sometimes her eyes would meet the child's nice gaze, and she would spend a long time staring at his face and peering into his eyes, as if she wanted to devour him with her eyes. Suddenly, her eyes would glitter with something that was neither tears nor plain joy — and she would press the boy close to her heart and cover him with kisses.

Watching them, Khristya would sigh. She understood only too well what it was that Halya needed and that God would not give her.

"I just wonder what you'll do when you have a child," she would start carefully. "I see you really enjoy looking after the boy, even though it's not yours..."

"If I ever have a baby, Khristya, I'll probably eat it up or kiss it to death. I won't let a speck of dust fall on it and won't even allow anyone to look at it... If I could, I'd nurse it in my heart! It's a real wonder, this t'ny little thing that can't even speak and just looks at you with its little shiny eyes! When I speak to him, he moves those little eyes around and mews and reaches out to me with his tiny hands, as if he wanted to hug me... It must be wonderful to look at such a baby and realize it's your own flesh and blood... You're such a sweet thing, dear!..." She turned to her godson and covered him with hot kisses.

Those stormy waves were still caused by the emotions of maidenhood, but motherly sentiments were already clearly visible in them. In the fervent outburst of girlish passions the first stirrings of motherhood could be discerned. Halya's thoughts and feelings were those of a young married woman who had not yet gone through the torment and torture of childbirth, had spent no sleepless nights looking after a child and was still unaware of the other, difficult side of motherhood. But the motherly instinct awakens in every woman's heart when she first cuddles a doll, and it is still there when, years later, she pets a kitten as if it were a baby. And when she, already as a grown girl, snuggles against her sweetheart, she also cherishes the great hope of motherhood...

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The winter was almost over. The sun shone brighter and got warmer, melting the snow; fast rivulets ran down hillsides into valleys; early *chumaks** got busy rigging their wagons, and before long farmers also stirred to life... Presently the spring arrived, and everything revived and rejoiced. The Easter holidays came and went, the fields turned green, the orchards went in blossom, and nightingales warbled... After the long hibernation

* *Chumak* (Ukr.) — a carter in the Ukrainian steppe

everything awoke, opened sleepy eyes and, casting a look around, admired the earth basking in the golden rays of a smiling sun...

As soon as warm weather set in, Chipka bought a considerable amount of lumber, hired some carpenters and, choosing a site close to the street, started building not a peasant hut but a real house. Before the villagers were through gathering in the crops, the old, shabby hut in his yard gave way to a merry-looking building proudly gazing into the street with its large, green-framed window panes. Chipka's old dream had come true; instead of a single cramped room and a passage, he now had three separate rooms: one for his mother, another for Halya and himself, and a third, across a passage, for receiving guests. A new log barn was built not far from the house. Soon after it was ready, work began on a shed and a stable. Finally, a new wattle fence with a narrow roof on top of it was put up round the lot. The old gate was torn down. Instead, Chipka made a new one — a folding plank affair that was quite rich-looking. Right in the middle over the new gate there was a round wooden shield on which a human face was carved. Its mouth was like that of a sheatfish, its eyes were owlsh, its nose resembled that of a cat, and its hair, parted in the middle, was long like a woman's. Crowds of children from all over the village gathered to admire that marvel.

In the course of just one summer that lot, which had once enjoyed a somewhat uncertain reputation and which all the villagers had seen deserted only a short time ago, changed beyond recognition. Once awe-inspiring and accursed, it now caused general admiration, tantalizing the people's envious eyes and still more envious thoughts.

Motrya herself was often amazed as she looked at her yard. Instead of a humble hut she saw a big new house; the kitchen garden, once overgrown with weeds, had turned into beds of flowers; the once-filthy backyard was now green and clean, flanked by barns, sheds and pens and surrounded by a new fence. The sight made her so happy that it brought tears of joy to her eyes.

"To think how we used to live... And now!... The Lord be thanked!"

Chipka left farming and started driving out to fairs and buying up linen homespun to resell at a profit. Many others in Piski have since gone into this business known here as *homespunning*, although nobody had tried doing this for a living before Chipka hit upon the idea.

XXVII The New Age

Time did not stand still. The abolition of serfdom had shattered the age-old shackles with which the once-free villages and hamlets had been chained to their masters; the former serfs got their hands free and, timidly, as if still afraid of something, reached for the land which had once belonged to "God and the people," then had become the property of nobility and was now turned over back to the peasantry, although in the form of curtailed compulsory allotments. The slavery-stupefied populace rubbed their eyes open, took a look around — but failed to see anything, except peasants and masters. All who did not go around in plain gray coats were supposed to be masters of one sort or another. All who stuck to the land, digging it up again and again and soaking it with their sweat, were common peasant folks. The serfdom had divided brothers and sisters, burrowing between them a deep ravine that could only be filled up — but not bridged or crossed. But in the course of ten or even twenty years, let alone a single year, it was impossible to fill an abyss which it had taken centuries to dig. On one side of it stood the descendants of the original Cossack chiefs along with numerous carpetbaggers attracted by the riches of the cheated Ukraine. The latter included Polish noblemen and their hangers-on, Russian squires and various trash of Muscovy. There were also orphaned children of Judas who had been busy rebuilding their destroyed kingdom in a land that did not belong to them; there were quite a few members of the new middle class — former tar-makers, wagoners, smalltime traders and store clerks who had managed to give their sons some education and to get them jobs entitling them to don tunics with brass buttons and caps with stars. All of them in this motley crowd had been living of somebody else's work and were fed and clothed by others. Now they stood there like a pack of hungry wolves, their teeth chattering, glaring angrily across the ravine at other Cossacks' descendants who were digging the black soil over and over — that work-crippled, poverty-stricken, ignorant lot who did not even look human, who had almost no knowledge of their forefathers' glorious past ridden with bloody raids in the name of "freedom and fame," who were only dimly aware of who and what they themselves were, whose hearts were seething with fury and whose throats were hoarse from hurling bitter curses across the abyss. It even seemed that had it not been for the abyss, the two mobs would have attacked each other — and then rivers of black blood would have flowed to drown the guilty and the innocent alike... In that terrible slaughter, eyes blinded by rage would not have distinguished between friend and foe, and blood would have flowed on and on, and countless corpses would have rotten to fertilize the already fertile soil. It never came to that, thank God. But the appalling vision frightened

and haunted the very men under whose stares everybody had trembled with fear not too long ago.

It did not even spare Vasil Semenovich, the king of Hetmanske District. Mirin Hudz, the last Zaporozhian Cossack, had once been killed by the mere thought of serfdom; Vasil Semenovich Polski died before his time, because the peasants' demands for money in his own Piski and this "crazy freedom business" was more than he could stand. Fear and fury shook and shocked the not-so-young nobleman to put him in bed, then on a table and finally into a coffin. The family mourned his departure at home and wept on his grave; and a certain Ozersky, a self-styled writer, Polski's bitter enemy during his lifetime and his close friend after his death, published fitting obituaries in Russian newspapers. With the big chief gone, the henchmen sulked. What were they to do without him? What should they undertake to keep their long-occupied positions? Who could advise them, who would help them?

They began by wrangling over the choice of successor to the departed marshal of nobility. An outsider might be dangerous, and among themselves there did not seem to be anybody fitted for the job or willing to take it. In the past they had nearly come to fists contesting the honor, but now everybody was after soft, well-paying jobs and wouldn't hear about something like this. Titles were meaningless when the money chest was empty — words to that effect could be heard more than once during that debate. True enough, their savings were quickly melting away, for lately they had not been sufficiently persistent and resourceful in replenishing them. Which meant they needed a good man for marshal, preferably one of their own.

Somehow, they managed to talk Vasil Semenovich's only son into acceptance. This was the same gentleman who had manhandled Chipka's father years before. He was a rather colorless individual with a limited life experience and no particular talents. Although he had studied somewhere and was even said to have finished the course, he had little intelligence, even less courage and practically no willpower. The only thing he inherited from his father was pride — the same pride which had shaped and molded him in his childhood and youth and to which he had been clinging ever since. Now it was this pride that made him accept the job nobody wanted.

Yet the times had changed, and pride alone was no longer sufficient to get along in life. Many young people had suddenly gone crazy, scoffing at "the rights of nobility" and treating their noble origins as something to be ashamed of. Many a young gentleman walked out on his father, called him names, using such strong words as "slavedriver" and "despot," left his home and, making a mockery of his parents' customs and expectations, trod the streets of Kharkiv or Kiev in search of odd jobs. Quite a few

noblemen's daughters followed the example set by their brothers; paying no heed whatsoever to what their parents were telling them, they spent their days and nights poring over books like a rabbi on a Friday night, did no work and even showed no interest in merrymaking. It was rumored that Krivinsky's younger daughter had run away one night with some student, a priest's son, to go to study in Kiev. The gentry's self-esteem suffered terribly from such outrageous behavior.

To make things worse, the "crazy freedom" bred such freaks as local self-government which did not distinguish between nobility and peasantry and arbitration courts where litigants were not even asked to state their social origins. The whole world had turned upside down! But it was too late to cry over spilled milk; the gentry had to adapt themselves to the new order of things to recover something from the wreckage. What was there for them to do? How could they fit into the new pattern? They had not been taught to work in childhood and certainly had no intention of learning to use their hands in their ripe years. As to brains — who had thought before the emancipation that a landlord would ever need such a thing? All a landlord had needed then were titles and wealth, and all that had been required of him was to know how to cut the right kind of figure, to live in style and to possess the necessary skills in consuming foods and beverages. An active brain capable of doing real work and not just inventing fancy frills was probably the last thing a noble landowner had needed. But now at all crossroads and marketplaces of life everybody seemed to be shouting about intelligence and work.

He who did not let himself be unduly frightened by those shouts and got down to work, was caught by the churning river of life and carried forward, on and on — now dragged to the bottom and almost drowned, now pulled back to the surface and tossed out of the water, now riding the crest of a wave — but finally brought to a safe shore. And although such a swimmer ached all over, he set his unsteady, swaying foot on sure ground and found himself in a land where the human spirit still reigned supreme. After all, here he was his own master — not a hanger-on or a hired servant. He quickly got used to his new place in the old country and made the land obey his will: it worked for him, brought him crops and gave him a decent living. But he who got scared holed up in his village or hamlet, cursed the new age and the new people and dragged out a miserable, dreary existence, eating away at his last remaining means — the land redemption pledges which Jewish profiteers bought from him at less than half their face value. Behind him was a gay, carefree life of luxury and leisure; ahead of him was slow dying, maybe with some hard work in his old age, with bitter anguish instead of comfort, with all his money gone — pocketed by Jewish swindlers, with not a single square foot remaining of his land which would have been auctioned off

to pay his old debts... No wonder he was cursing the reforms and would never become reconciled to them.

Left without a leader, the august assembly at first scattered to all sides, like a flock of scared sheep. But seeing that all routes of escape were blocked by the new institutions of local self-government, the fugitives turned back and flocked together again, sadly reminiscing about the good old days when they had had plenty of green pastures to graze on and fine watering places. The late marshal's son still hung around in the middle of the flock, but it had already become abundantly clear that he was no leader of men. Who would lead them? Who was bold enough to take the responsibility? Who was used to braving the elements and weathering the storms? Shavkun was willing to try anything — had been ever since his boyhood. He had been around for a long time and everybody knew him. The only hitch was that he wouldn't want to be in charge, for he had always preferred to keep a low profile. Would he at least agree to guide and advise the nominal leader and to keep an eye on him? That he would. So Shavkun was drafted to chaperon the top man.

While Shavkun was not a man of brilliant intelligence, he was certainly no fool either. He had seen quite a lot in his lifetime and had had his ups and downs. The son of a needy priest who had served in a poor rural parish of Khituni, he had become an orphan when both he and his elder sister were still in their infancy. Their guardian, a distant relative and also a priest, took them to live in his home. The girl was at first allowed to run loose about the village and later, when she got a little older, began looking after, and playing with, the guardian's own children. Then she grew up and was married off to some deacon who drank rather a lot. The boy was sent to learn some sense in a seminary. He found it tough going being flogged and beaten so often that he soon lost count. They worked so hard on him there that a lively, hefty boy turned into a dumb freak who instead of trying to learn a little something only tried to think of another dirty trick to play on somebody. Mean tricks and loose behavior in general came to dominate the young student's thoughts and interests. When he did not see a penknife or an inkpot he could steal, he would put up other boys to fooling around or making trouble, and when he grew up, he started to worship the god of wine... The "reverend fathers" gave themselves a lot of trouble trying to make him mend his ways but in the end threw him out of the school. The boy found himself on the street practically naked, barefoot and hatless. Where in the world could he go? Where could he lay his head? Somebody advised him — probably in jest — to go to university. Young Shavkun thought it over. However, he did not do it and instead walked all the way to his native village of Khituni where his sister and brother-in-law were living in his father's old house. He hit it off fine with the deacon, and the two of them would often

roam the village enjoying the parishoners' hospitality so thoroughly that sometimes they had to crawl back home on all fours. His sister's patience lasted for quite a long time, but when it finally gave out, she began to chew out both of them reproaching her brother with being a burden to her family, squandering their pitiful means on drink and depriving her hungry children of their daily bread — and him so young and strong, too. When scolded in this manner, Shavkun kept mum. The bitter truth of her accusations must have been hard to swallow. The following morning he spent a long time complaining to his sister about his bad luck, disclosed that he was indeed going to seek admission to university and explained he would need about fifty rubles for that. The sister described his plans as sheer nonsense and advised him to get a clerk's job in some office to "earn his daily bread" as she put it. Shavkun did not follow her advice. Instead he tied up his few belongings in a bundle and made ready to seek his fortune at random, just "following his nose." Taking pity on him, his sister opened her chest and took out thirty rubles — her last savings which she had been hiding from her good-for-nothing husband for a rainy day. Shavkun said good-bye and left. Three months later he wrote to her from Kiev that it had worked out all right and that he had gained admission to the university. God alone knew how he managed to support himself, but somehow he stuck it out for two years. When he was in his third year, his old bad habits returned to get him first into a lock-up and then out on the street... He now found himself all alone in a big city, without a penny to his name, shunned by his former merry pals and, worst of all, with his name on the black list. He might as well have jumped into the Dnieper River there and then! Shavkun did not jump into the Dnieper but left Kiev leaving behind his buddies and his books (he never opened one after that and did not even want books to be mentioned in his presence) and trekked to Hetmanske. He did not dare to go to his sister again. So Shavkun went to Chizhik, his friend in youth whom we have met before and who then worked in the district trusteeship office. Chizhik told him to ask his superior for a job. That he did and was taken on as a junior clerk at a flat ruble a month, conditional on his diligence. Shavkun was willing to give it a try even at such beggarly pay. He got down to work copying papers, one tedious line after another, first receiving a single ruble a month, then two and going up to three by the end of his first year. He turned into a respectable, prosperous-looking young man and pleased his superiors by never failing to take off his hat whenever one of them was around. To Vasil Semenovitch he bowed from the waist the moment he caught sight of him. The mighty lord noticed the "meek calf" and had him transferred to his private office. It was probably the happiest day in Shavkun's life when the king of Hetmanske District called him to his study and promised to make him

somebody, provided he behaved right. Leaving the big man's presence, Shavkun made the sign of a cross and established himself behind a desk in the district marshal's office. From then on he practically lived there, spending all his days and many of his nights at that desk, hunched up over papers, hardly ever lifting his eyes off them and speaking only when spoken to, as though the whole world and all his life had become reduced to those papers. The old chief clerk praised his good work, and the marshal gave him ten rubles every Christmastide. Shavkun mailed part of that money to his sister, and the rest went into a leather purse which he kept at the very bottom of his small chest. Then the old chief clerk died, and Shavkun was promoted to replace him. Now he was more than just a tiny cog, and almost overnight people developed respect and reverence for him. Now others took off their hats before him just as he used to do before his bosses. However, Shavkun did not let himself be overly impressed by either respect or reverence shown by clients, realizing this was only to be expected from people whose money was at stake. That was also why money became his sole absorbing passion. Money and wealth were all he dreamed about when he slept. He lived quietly and frugally and married a girl who was just as penny-pinching as he was. The two of them kept on hoarding money without quite knowing for whom, because there were no children. They led an existence that was devoid of great happiness, but also free from even minor worries.

Now it was this workhorse who thought nothing of sticking at his paper-laden desk from early morning until late at night without a letup, this wheedler and toady who had learned his lesson well and knew all that was worth knowing about how to ingratiate himself with the right people, who suddenly saw a whole district dumped into his lap to run as he pleased and saw fit in the name of the dull-witted and lazy "boy marshal." The latter immediately abdicated whatever claims to leadership he may have had, giving Shavkun a free hand.

Meanwhile, life had been bringing one novelty after another and plenty of practical problems to be solved. They were not yet through gathering redemption pledges and forcing allotments upon the peasants who did not want to touch that land for fear that it would lead to a return of serfdom, when the *zemstvo* business sprang up, elections, councils and all.

"What have we come to!" petty noblemen fumed whenever two of them came together. "First they made the rabble free, took away our peasants... then they grabbed our land... Now it seems they want to make gentlemen out of those bumpkins giving them this *zemstvo* nonsense!"

"That's where we seem to be heading, all right," some squire would agree. "Just think of it! Both noblemen and peasants can vote... Yesterday my Omelko cut dried cowdung for fuel at my

estate and tomorrow I might find him sitting next to me at the same table, for all I know... He can get himself elected deputy, just like me..."

"Never! Those swine will never live to see it!" an elderly gentlewoman would blurt out in rage, striking her fists against each other and proceeding to heap curses both on the "swine" and on those who had brought such "dishonor" upon the high-born nobles.

Shavkun cursed nobody and had no fits of anger. Actually, all that talk about *zemstvo* seemed to improve his spirits. He knew that he would manage to survive under the new regime and might even benefit from it.

* * *

The new age also brought about a major change in Chipka's life. It ended his happy but uneventful existence at home with his beloved wife and his old mother and brought him out into public life where he won considerable respect. The villagers came to know and appreciate him, also because he sometimes stood some of them in good stead. Even though he now did not like to throw money around, he never failed to help out a man in need. When a baby was to be baptized, the parents would ask him to be godfather. Being a kind man, he treated such requests with sympathy, and although he himself invariably declined the honor, Halya collected a whole flock of godchildren scattered all over the village. The joys of motherhood being denied her, she lavished her unspent affection upon them. Loboda was marrying off his daughter but all he could scrape up for the wedding was a paltry sum of ten rubles which would not even have bought him enough vodka. The man racked his brains trying to figure out some way to raise a loan. "Go and speak to Chipka Varenichenko," his wife told him. "Maybe he'll lend you something until the next harvest." "Why, of course," said Loboda and went to Chipka straight away. Chipka talked it over with Halya — and Loboda had his wedding party at which his guests caroused for a whole week.

"Chipka's the kindest man we've got!" the villagers were telling one another, taking off their hats even when he was a good way off. As a matter of fact, his popularity spread beyond Piski. Constantly traveling to fairs on his homespun business, he made himself known all over the district. At his father-in-law's place he once met Dmitrenko, the new police chief, nicknamed Mare's Muzzle because of his passion for horse-swapping. Dmitrenko, too, took a liking to Chipka. Then they ran into each other at some fair and sealed their friendship with a swap. The policeman admired the colt which Chipka had received as a gift from Halya's father and pestered Chipka to make an exchange. Chipka resisted for a long time but finally gave in. So Dmitrenko got the fine

young stallion, full of life and vigor, in exchange for an old, old hack, a veteran of some hussar regiment sold off after it had ruined its feet in the service. Beaming with delight, Dmitrenko thanked Chipka effusively and promised to honor him with a visit. But the old animal left Chipka so stunned and speechless as though he were seeing a horse for the very first time in his life. He just spat in disgust and said nothing.

Arriving home, he unharnessed the horses, went indoors, greeted his mother and kissed his wife.

"We'll be having guests soon, Halya," he said.

"Who's coming?"

"The police chief."

"What does he need us for?" she asked wonderingly.

"He says he'll come over when he begins to miss that hack of his," Chipka joked.

"Hack? What are you prattling, for God's sake?"

Then he told her what a fool he had made of himself.

"He did the same thing to my father," Halya said. "There was no getting rid of him! At first Father wouldn't go along with it, but then some problem sprang up and he had to talk to the police chief about it. But before going to the district station he took a pair of his horses to Dmitrenko's stables."

Dmitrenko proved to be as good as his word and kept his promise. About a month later his carriage rolled across Piski straight to Chipka's house. "Whoa!" — the horses came to a halt. Halya and Motrya darted to the windows to see who had come.

"Is Nikifor Ivanovich in?" the police chief asked them from his seat.

Halya was about to say her husband wasn't but then blushed and muttered, "He's in, yes." At this very moment Chipka appeared and went to the carriage to greet the visitor.

"Well, here I am," said the policeman. "Will you put me up for the night?"

"Shall we go in, if you please?" Chipka invited him.

They went inside. Dmitrenko took off his cloak, shook the dust off his coat, stretched himself and gave a noisy yawn that sounded so much like the bellowing of a good-sized ox that Halya peered out from another room to see what was happening. Then he sank onto the bench behind the table. Chipka brought a stool and sat down across from him.

"Do you know why I've come to you?" Dmitrenko asked, yawning again.

"God knows... I guess that's what your job is all about. Don't you keep going places all the time?"

"Sure, that's right, too. But I'm also bringing some news."

Halya opened the door slightly and peered through the crack, with Motrya trying to look into the room over Halya's shoulders. Both women were curious to hear the news brought by the officer.

Dmitrenko flicked his eyes at Halya.

"This must be your wife?"

"She is," Chipka said.

"Hudz has raised a really beautiful girl! He surely had reason enough to keep her under lock and key the way he did... She's nice all right. If I'd known what she was like, I would've smashed that lock and carried her away."

Hearing this, Halya blushed shyly and closed the door shut.

"Halya!" Chipka called to her. "Why are you running away? Are you afraid that Petro Ivanovich might still carry you away? Never fear — I won't let him."

"I myself wouldn't let him," said Halya as she stepped into the living room. Even as she spoke, a dog barked outside.

"Oh, you're really afraid of something if you keep all those dogs," the officer chuckled.

"Mushka's the only dog we've got," Halya said, coloring.

Here a poorly dressed girl stepped into the room but paused silently at the threshold, seeing she would clearly be out of place there.

"Hello," Chipka greeted her. "You want something?"

"I'd like to see Aunt Motrya," the girl said timidly.

Motrya heard her and came in from the other room. Bowing low to Dmitrenko, she furtively pulled at the girl's skirt and led her out into the passage. In a little while, Motrya came back in, and the girl went away. She was the village chief's servant sent to nose out why the police officer had arrived in Piski.

Meanwhile, Halya put a samovar on in the kitchen. The sun was setting, casting its parting glances into the living room, where the police chief and the wealthy Cossack faced each other like a pair of good old friends. But their conversation did not make much headway; it kept skipping from one subject to another like a light harrow bouncing its way across a lumpy field. As they began drinking the tea Halya had served, it died down altogether. Chipka, the host, felt ill at ease.

"So what about that news you've brought us?" he began, sipping the steaming tea.

"It's good news — for good people, that is... But your peasants here in this village are an unruly lot who've been giving me plenty of trouble and nothing else! That's what Larchenko warned me about when I was taking over from him. 'Watch those people in Piski,' he told me, 'because they're pretty tough!' And he was right!"

"I'm sure they would've made no trouble at all, if only —"

"Now what was I saying?" Dmitrenko interrupted, having lost the thread. "Oh, yes! I've brought the *zemstvo!*"

"What's that?" Chipka asked, peering into the officer's eyes.

"*Zemstvo?* It's a new favor from the czar! You see: here you live in Piski — Cossacks, former serfs and Jews... You've got Jews

too, haven't you? (Chipka said they had). Now you see: it's the same in Kotolupivka, Bairaki and Vovcha Dolina — there are landowners, merchants, Cossacks and peasants... They all travel and they all have to use the roads, so they want them to be kept safe from rogues and robbers — may God guard us from them! One man can't do it, but the lot of you can... So you see (Dmitrenko started using the words "you see" and "so" so often that it became apparent he had only a vague idea of what he was trying to explain). So you see: now all of you will come together — the masters and the peasants — and do everything there's to be done about it..."

"What? Are the masters also supposed to do it with us?" Chipka asked in surprise.

"Well, not exactly... Not all of them will be doing it. They will elect deputies who will then choose a council from among themselves, and that council will be running everything..."

"Won't there be any police chiefs for that?"

"Nobody can do without us! We're the police, and the police will also be watching those councils and make sure they level out roads, build bridges and all... It would be impossible to get anything done without us. Who'd collect tax arrears if there were no police? We'll be around as long as the sun keeps on shining down on this earth..."

"I'm afraid I can't figure it out," Chipka said in a wondering tone. "We've already got the police to look after the roads, and now there'll also be this *zemstvo* to do the same thing..."

"You'll hear all about it when we get the commune together and I read the decree to them."

No sooner had he finished saying this than the village Cossack chief with his clerk and the peasant elder with the headman tumbled into the room. The ex-serfs mumbled greetings and remained at the threshold, their heads drooping humbly. The other two froze ramrod-stiff, like soldiers at attention.

"Aha! That's good," Dmitrenko grunted, without bothering to return their greetings. "I was about to send for you... The commune must be gathered tomorrow morning! D'you hear? I'm telling this to you and to you, too! Only make sure you try harder this time than when you pay the arrears," he added reproachfully, addressing the peasants.

"These are busy days, sir," the clerk complained. "All the men have been working in the fields..."

"I don't care. Busy days or not, I want the village assembled or I'll let you take some rest in the lock-up!"

The elder kept silent, working one foot against the other.

"How shall we put it to them, sir?" the clerk asked.

"Just tell them the police chief has brought the *zemstvo* and will read about it... It's *zemstvo* — have you gotten it right? Will you remember?"

"We will."

"Am I tired, Nikifor Ivanovich! You may not believe me if I tell you that I've hardly been out of my carriage for the past two days." Then, turning back to the deputation, he said: "All right, you may go now — and may God help you."

The visitors rushed to the door, each of them so eager to be the first man out that they even got jammed in the doorway.

"How d'you like that?" said the Cossack chief. "The fellow was just Chipka to everybody — and now he's suddenly Nikifor Ivanovich! Amazing what money can do!"

"Never mind his money," the elder said. "Better tell us what the horsethief has come for."

"Didn't he tell you he'd brought the *zemstvo*?" the clerk broke in before the chief could answer.

"Sure he did... Now you explain to us what this *zemstvo* is all about. Does it mean new taxes or what?"

"Why, indeed, Vasil Vasilyovich!" The chief turned to the clerk. "What is it anyway?"

"They say it's going to be some new kind of authority... The Cossack district offices have just been abolished, and the peasants' arbitrators won't be around much longer. There must be somebody to hold the people in check, right?"

"They've been holding us so tight they've almost crushed our bones," the headman reflected aloud, as if talking to himself. "Now they've decided to give us more authorities."

"But the people must not be left without *anybody* in charge," the clerk argued. "You can't just tell them, 'Now you're free to do anything you like any way you like, and you may govern and judge yourselves as you know best.' It would lead to such a rumpus that —" He scratched the back of his head.

"That's right," the chief supported him. "What else can you expect of our people? It hasn't been long since *your* peasants kicked up such a riot that decent folks almost had to run for it. Either you govern this hot-headed rabble with a firm hand or it'll turn the village upside down!"

"Aha!" the headman broke in. "I know already what it's going to be like."

"Tell me," the elder urged him.

"You see, it wasn't without purpose that they tried so hard to make us take the land," the headman explained. "Now I can see why! They just wanted to keep us on a lead with it. Now they can say, 'Even though the czar has made you free, the land still belongs to us, and you must keep on paying for it. And before you redeem it, we'll think of something else...' Now they've come up with this *zemstvo*. We've been paying for the land and now we'll also have to pay for the *zemstvo*! So we can tell the commune that they'll have to earn more to pay the *zemstvo* taxes as well!"

Here they reached the *volost* office. The elder and the headman walked on toward it, while the chief and the clerk turned into a side street that led to the chief's house.

* * *

The following morning both the Cossacks and the peasants of the village assembled in the square in front of the Cossack *volost* office. Dmitrenko arrived in his carriage drawn by Chipka's horses, read the decree to them and told them whom they were to elect, forbidding to "push through rough bumpkins" and ordering them to vote for the gentry who "knew everything and could do things the right way." He even promised to make it hot for them if they chose "uncouth louts."

The commune listened in silence. The policeman got ready to leave but then changed his mind and returned to tell them once more to vote for the gentry. Then he said good-bye to Chipka, gave him a broad wink, as if to say he was a wholly eligible candidate, and rolled away.

Almost as soon as he departed, the crowd started to buzz.

"How's that?" the peasants fumed. "Why does it have to be masters again? Haven't we had enough of them?"

"Shut up, fools!" the Cossack clerk shouted at them. "Who else could serve in the office? Can you do it? D'you have any idea about that kind of work?"

"We can hire somebody smart like you to work for us there," a peasant needled him.

"Sure you can... But who knows what this work will be like?"

The clerk and the crowd argued for a long time, and all that time Chipka listened to them in silence. The peasants painted the masters in dark colors; the clerk did not deny their accusations but still maintained that it would be impossible to get anything done without gentry, that this would be a totally new experience and that therefore they had no choice but to vote for the gentry. At this, Chipka broke his silence.

"Here's my advice to you. A farmer, no matter how bad, is still better than a hireling. Sure, the *zemstvo* is a new thing, but it's new for everybody. We didn't have it before, and the masters don't know more about it than we do. The Lord has given us brains to use them and to figure things out."

"Right! That's true!" the crowd murmured.

"The masters have been ruling you, good people, long enough as it is. Now try ruling yourselves for a change! Be your own masters... They won't try too hard to make everybody happy — each of them will be after his own good... Besides, our masters here are all relatives, and each of them takes care of the rest. That one (Chipka poked his finger in the direction the police chief

had gone) was my guest and ate my food, but he, too, sides with the masters."

"Oh yes! Sure!" the gathering buzzed excitedly. "They stick together like pigs.—No more of this, brothers!... We've had enough!...—Why, they're like damn weeds: they keep pushing up and up! Now that they've got no more serfs, they want at least to get elected deputies... No way!"

The meeting broke up and Chipka went home, glad to have set the commune on the right course. New feelings stirred in his heart; he really wanted his advice to be heeded and already visualized himself guiding the commune and managing its affairs. His past troubles were forgotten, as though they had never happened; now he could sway the whole commune.

"I wish they'd follow my advice, Halya," he confided to his wife at night. "If they do, it'll be the end of the rope for the masters." Then he told her at some length how he intended to serve the common people. She was pleased to see her husband commanding such considerable respect in the village.

The desire to lead men seethed in his heart and burned him, continually escaping outside in his thoughts and words. He was obsessed with the idea and, whenever he talked with somebody, never failed to bring up the subject of the *zemstvo* and the elections. In effect, he hardly spoke of anything else. He urged everybody to watch over their interests and those of the commune and not to let the masters take them in hand again.

His appeals had their desired effect. A week after the meeting in Piski, arbitrator Krivinsky drove into Hetmanske at full speed and burst into the marshal's office, where the district *zemstvo* council was to be seated.

"We've had it!" he shouted, without a word of greeting. "The peasants have beaten our men!"

"What d'you mean?" the usually quiet Shavkun cried out, leaping to his feet and freezing in stunned bewilderment.

"In Piski... not a single nobleman has been elected."

"That means even Dmitrenko hasn't been enough to make them obey us!..." Shavkun muttered with difficulty. Then, as if doused with cold water, he sank into his chair, propped his head up with his hand — and froze into stillness.

XXVIII

Old Things Revamped

It was a sweltering day at the height of the hectic harvesting season. The scorching sun hovered overhead like a red-hot frying pan. The wheat shed its grain faster than it could be reaped. On such days, every minute counted for a farmer. But now a few of

them had to leave their fields and travel to town to serve as *zemstvo* deputies.

Country squires arrived in great numbers. Their carriages, coaches and gigs were parked in three rows outside the Polskis' new manor in Hetmanske. In addition to the deputies, many curious noblemen from all over the district flocked to town to watch the new wonder and find out for themselves about this *zemstvo*.

The common deputies were also there, although not all of them. Nearly all of them were Cossack chiefs and clerks; only Chipka and Loza had never served in any capacity. Conspicuous among the peasant deputies were two serf elders — one from Piski, the other from Rudka.

The gentry chattered animatedly in drawing rooms, their exclamations and guffaws reaching people on the streets. The peasants, who had come by their back-drawn wagons (some of them had also brought the poll tax), camped near the Polskis' manor well away from the gentry's vehicles. To keep out of the terrible heat, some sat under their wagons, while others hid in the shade of the building walls. Chipka and Loza were among the latter. They sat not far from the porch, apart from the Cossack chiefs, having the gentry's coachmen on their right and the "leeches," as Chipka had used to call petty village officials, on their left. Somehow, Chimpa felt out of place here. The coachmen had gotten down from their boxes, and some of them went to talk to deputies they happened to know. The men chatted about this and that, described their harvest prospects and complained about having to waste such a day. Chipka sat there in silence, apparently listening but probably not hearing any of it. His face showed that his head was being worried by some uneasy thoughts. Then his train of thought was interrupted by Dmitrenko's stentorian voice.

"Hey, you!" the officer shouted from the porch to the deputies. "Come over here!"

The deputies went up to the porch and took off their hats. Only Chipka and Loza stayed where they were.

"How many are you?" the policeman asked.

"Well, not too many," the man in front, a *volost* clerk, replied after casting his eyes over a small group of his fellow deputies. "There are three of us from our area and five from your villages and two from Svinki... That's all."

"Aha! Nikifor Ivanovich is here... Good morning!" Dmitrenko nodded to Chipka.

"Good morning!" Chipka said, rising to his feet and removing his hat. Loza followed suit.

"Why have your men sent down all this rabble?" the police officer asked Chipka.

"What rabble?" Chipka shot Dmitrenko a sharp glance and, lowering his voice, added, "All men are equal before God."

"Before God, maybe — but here we are before other people..."

"It doesn't make it different. A fellow feels so much better when he's got one of his own by his side... Because you can go inside and have a nice chat in the cool, but we've got to roast ourselves in the sun."

"You don't have to. You could've gone into the corridor."

"Thank you. I'd rather stay with the rest."

"Now you, dunderheads!" The police chief turned to the Cossack deputies. "You've surely played a dirty trick on us! What are you hanging around for? You can't know a damn thing about all this! Let's take you, Sverbinis!" Dmitrenko snarled at a red-faced stout Cossack chief who smelled heavily of vodka. "What do you know? You should be soaking in Khaika's tavern back home... But no, you must needs be a deputy! Or take Stupa. The fellow's afraid of his wife's shadow and can't put two words together, but he, too, thinks he can make a public servant!"

Neither Stupa, nor Sverbinis found anything to say. Both were staring at the ground in front of their feet, not daring to lift their eyes onto the police officer. Turning away from them, Dmitrenko pounced on the peasant deputies:

"You wretches! Are you sure we couldn't do without you? How long has it been since you last got your hides birched off you? But now you seem to think you've suddenly turned gentlemen!"

The pain of the old sore, rudely chafed by a pair of unclean hands, made Chipka's heart throb achingly. His eyes glinted hard under his knitted brows, now boring into the policeman, now shifting to the peasants who stood there speechless and motionless, as though riveted to the ground.

"What do you want of us, mister?" Chipka demanded angrily, glaring at the policeman. "Do you think we've come to visit you? We are here to serve the commune which has sent us."

"But I don't mean you," the police chief said in a lower voice. "You are in a trade business, so you've been going places and meeting all sorts of people and getting world-wise. That's why you can say a sensible word or two if and when you have to. But these!" Dmitrenko eyed the other commoners with disgust. "Pah!... Well, it's too late to change them, I guess. Only mind you: at least don't any of you get on the council! D'you hear?"

The men did not murmur a word, as if the question were not meant for them.

"Look here," Dmitrenko went on. "If I twitch my right mustache, put the ballot cards to the right, and if it's my left mustache, put them to the left... Make no mistake about it!"

Having said his last word, he wagged his finger at them threateningly, spun on his heels and dived into the corridor, slamming the door hard in their faces.

"What a sharp fellow!" Stupa said. "He must be thinking we are a bunch of fools. That's no way to talk. Here's what we should

do, brothers... When he shows us his right mustache, let's put those cards to the left. Let's take him for a ride!"

"It's a shame the way they're treating us!" some village clerk complained. "In a little while, there'll be no room left inside for common folks like us."

"Every common fellow like us should stand up for the rest instead of just taking care of himself," Chipka remarked fiercely.

He was about to add something when they were called in to the hall.

* * *

The middle of the spacious hall was occupied by a long table which was covered with red cloth trimmed with golden fringe. At the head of the table sat the district marshal of the nobility. On his right was Danilo Pavlovich Kryazhov, a descendant of the ill-famed Cossack colonel Kryazh who had made himself famous not in battles or campaigns but by his zeal in attaching free peasants to the land as serfs. Then he had reduced to serfdom quite a few of his distant relatives, also throwing in his own brother and sister with the lot. Or maybe it had been done by his wife, widely known for her habit of knocking out peasants' teeth and eyes with her shoes... On the marshal's left sat Shavkun, elected by the town constituency. The marshal kept leaning over to him, and each time he did so Shavkun whispered something into his ear. Other urban and rural deputies sat round the table. The Polski clan was represented particularly well. Sovinsky, Krivinsky, Hayetsky and Mitil were also there. Only Makukha was missing: after all, Porokh had done him in with his denunciations, and the man was out of job and facing trial. Among the urban deputies one could see Lejba Ovrarnovich, the Polskis' leaseholder, sitting next to Reverend Father Dmitry, who had as strong a passion for trading in beggars' certificates as Dmitrenko had for swapping horses — a weakness which was said to have cost him more than one summons before the consistory. Dmitrenko, being a non-deputy, sat apart, with some squires who had come to watch. There were only two unoccupied chairs in the entire hall, and those, too, were most likely being saved for some gentry deputies. Chipka boldly sat down in one; Loza took the other. The gentry deputies exchanged glances. Even though the two wealthy commoners were wearing good-quality blue coats, their unusual daring had a shocking effect. There were no seats at the table for the other commoners, so that they had to deliberate on their feet.

After a general prayer and the wearing-in ceremony, elections to the district council began. Kryazhov was nominated, Sovinsky recommended, Shavkun extolled and Hayetsky and Mitil thrust upon the assembly. But despite the efforts of Dmitrenko, who incessantly plucked at his mustache ends and cast withering

glances at every deputy who went to cast his ballot wearing a tailless coat, the count showed that only the first three managed to squeeze through — by the slimmest of margins, at that. Having elected Shavkun, the assembly went into a brief recess.

When all was set to go on with the elections, deputy Sayenko, the grandson of a Cossack captain, asked for "the floor." This caused no surprise among the gentry. Sayenko had long had a reputation for restlessness. Back under Vasil Semenovitch he had never attended an election without talking nineteen to the dozen. But for the Polskis his talking had always come as bitter as wormwood. Uncommonly intelligent and razor-sharp, Sayenko never missed a chance to give his all-powerful relatives a tongue-lashing. Common people loved him as a man who never failed to speak up to the strong and to protect the weak. On the other hand, the gentry and the Jews feared his shadow — and with good reason, too. He took some special delight in harming a noble or suppressing a Jew. Now this "liberal," as he was called, made a speech about the *zemstvo*. Addressing the gentry deputies, he reminded them about the "all-estate character of the *zemstvo*" and talked profusely and eloquently about the "intellectual activities" which they were to dedicate to the "cause of public welfare" in expiation of the "sins of the past." Then he turned to the commoners to remind them about "equality" and to urge them to look after their "interests" and the "good of the people." In conclusion he called on the assembly to elect at least one commoner to the district council.

A murmur of voices rose in the hall. The nobles shrugged, shook their heads skeptically and exchanged whispered remarks. The lowborn deputies by the wall stirred, shuffled their feet and peered at one another, as if to ask, "What now? Who is it going to be?"

After talking it over in whisper first with Shavkun and then with Kryazhov, the marshal rang his bell and, looking over the commoners, asked in a loud voice which of them wanted to run for the council.

Slowly, the murmur died down. The marshal repeated the question. The men continued exchanging glances, but none of them spoke.

"Maybe Varenichenko will agree..." the Piski elder muttered timidly through clenched teeth.

Fifty pairs of eyes turned on him. Glaring at him, Dmitrenko pressed his hand to his mouth, which meant, "Shut up, you fool!"

"Who's Varenichenko?" the marshal uttered, almost against his will.

"Here! Here he is!" voices came from the wall, as many fingers pointed at Chipka.

He reddened, as everybody in the hall stared at him.

"Do you consent to be a candidate?" the marshal asked him.

"If the people want me," he said, standing up, "and if it's all right with you, gentlemen, I'll go along with it." His voice shook, his face glowed, and his eyes beamed with joy.

His candidacy was put to the vote and went through. Then, flushed with excitement, they elected Sayenko to the provincial assembly.

The session was over. The commoners left for their villages, and the gentry stayed behind to celebrate.

Seeing Chipka through a window, Halya ran out of the house to meet him.

"How did it go?"

"Fine!" he exclaimed gaily. "Now, Halya, I'm not just a deputy but also a member of the council..."

"Really?" she cried out, delighted and worried at the same time.

"That's true! I got elected!" he boasted.

"Who got elected? To what?" Having heard Chipka's last word, Motrya leaned out of the window.

"I've been elected to the council, Mother!"

As Motrya looked him straight in the eye, a shadow flitted across her face.

"Why do you need to mix with the masters, son?" she asked sadly. "They might get you in trouble, God forbid! Then they'll keep you out of sight and let you take the rap."

"Never fear, Mother!" Chipka reassured her. "I won't let them do it to me."

"Still you may get mixed up in something..." Motrya insisted.

"I see you simply don't know what it's all about, Mother," he said, without anger. "It's the will of the people. Maybe I'll help them sometime... do them a good turn..."

"Come on! There too many of them around for you alone."

"Alone but good!" Halya defended her husband. Smiling, they went inside.

* * *

Chipka was genuinely proud to have won the people's respect, even though he preferred to conceal his pleasure from his mother, sharing it just with his wife. The feelings which had first stirred in his heart only a month before now evoked an endless stream of visions and dominated his thoughts. He was determined to serve the commune, to do good and deep in his heart, keeping it secret even from Halya, he nurtured a hope of undoing the past and making proper amends for all the wrong things he had done. Yet it would so happen that the newly-gained respect would deprive him of peace of mind and become his undoing!

His election to the council, done on the spur of the moment, without reasonable advice or proper consideration, left nobody

satisfied. The petty Cossack officials looked askance at him. All those village chiefs and clerks were bursting with envy, watching the rise of this soldier's bastard, a penniless pauper, a loafer and a good-for-nothing in the not-too-distant past who had suddenly become somebody just by marrying rich and was now allowed to rub shoulders with the gentry — something they themselves had been trying to achieve since childhood, something they had been dreaming about and longing for — a wild dream that would never come true! Having elected Chipka, the nobles were having second thoughts. Now they openly deplored the advent of such times that made it possible for their fellow noblemen to fraternize with a "churl" and virtually force the rest of them to follow suit. Voices were heard that Sayenko had done it deliberately to disgrace the entire district and make a laughing stock of it. Chipka's fellow councilmen regarded his election as an insult and terrorized the authorities, threatening to resign and leave Chipka to run things on his own. Shavkun racked his brains and turned over one thick statute book after another in search of something that would help him rid the council of the one member who was likely to cause him inconvenience by keeping him from getting his hand inside the public money chest.

Shavkun was an old hand at it. He had not been doing all that paperwork for nothing until his head had turned gray. He asked around and also wove a far-flung cobweb to catch every word he might use. Failing to find a solution on his own, he turned for advice to his old buddy Chizhik, the chief court clerk. "Has the fellow been mixed up in anything?" he asked hopefully. "Let's see if he's had some trouble with the law." Chizhik took a pinch of snuff, sneezed, put his finger to his forehead and spent some five minutes thinking. Then he reached into a case for some old files. He browsed through one, skimmed through another, opened a third, a fifth, a tenth, came across a clue, picked up a thread and, together with Shavkun, followed it on and on...

"We've got him!" shouted Shavkun, bursting into the office and brandishing the *Case of the Theft of Wheat From the Storehouses of Landowner Aulic Councillor Vasil Sem. Polski and of the Murder of Watchman Derkach*.

There were gaping mouths and bewildered stares. Shavkun read to them the file which said that "soldier's son Varenichenko remains under suspicion." There was general jubilation, as though the disclosure had somehow added to each councilman's personal happiness. Dmitrenko, who happened to be in town, was called for and taken into a lengthy conference behind closed doors. Then everybody came out, smiling.

Chipka had no inkling of what was in the offing. On the Maccabees Martyrs' Day early in August he had left for a fair at Khamlo and did not return until the beginning of the Savior's Holidays almost a month later. On the same day when he came

back, Dmitrenko called on him, explaining to him how the matters stood and urged him to quit of his own accord before things got worse.

The mention of that old case came to Chipka as a stunning blow. Shame, frustration and fury rushed into his head all at the same time, stirring up his blood, pounding at his temples and blurring his vision with rings of yellow and black. He went pale, and his hands trembled. Deep at heart he knew that this was his past coming back, reaching out for him, gripping and strangling him. In order not to betray his feelings, he jumped to his feet and paced the room, his murky stare wandering aimlessly about the walls. Thoughts raced in his mind, pursuing one another; he wanted to catch at least one of them on the run, but they flew away and disappeared, with only tiny fragments of them showing for a fleeting moment. Finally, they all merged into a single thought: whatever happened, he must not let them take him alive!

Dmitrenko haunted Chipka like a ghost and hovered over him like a hawk, waiting until he gave in and agreed to "resign."

"If you took me under a gallows and told me you'd let me live if I quit, I wouldn't do it even then!" Chipka shouted. "Who can prove that I've killed a man? For all I know they may have sent tens and hundreds of people to their graves... And now they get mad because they aren't free to do it anymore... Is it because things have gotten tough for them now that all are equal? I'm serving the people... they've put me on that council, so it's up to them to get me off it!"

Dmitrenko went away, his mission unaccomplished.

On the following day, the marshal dispatched an urgent report to the provincial capital.

Only a day later, a courier brought the governor's order that "deputy Varenichenko be removed as suspect."

* * *

Chipka was thunderstruck. This was worse than theft or armed robbery, he thought bitterly. There was even no name for it. When a fellow wanted to steal something, he just went and took it, the owner saw what was missing, and everything was clear. But here nothing was missing... and he was still very much alive... But just being alive was not enough to a man who had seen himself dishonored and his name disgraced. But no! He would not leave it at that! That was a game two could play, and it remained to be seen who would come out on top. The times had changed — and so had the people!

Chipka harnessed his horses and left for Hetmanske. He drove them hard and made them fly — and they brought him straight to Porokh's yard.

The man had changed a lot since Chipka had last seen him: he

had aged, withered and drooped. His face, once well-rounded, had become drawn and haggard; his cheeks had sagged; his eyes had dimmed; his body was stooping and shaking. Yet they recognized each other right away and met like a pair of old friends. Hearing a stranger's voice, Halka came into the room, took a look at Chipka and, without saying a word, went out. She had thinned terribly and was black in the face and looked awful.

First of all, Chipka sent a little black-haired girl, Halka's daughter, to fetch some vodka. Porokh was delighted and downed three glasses in a row. Then Chipka told him all about his big adventure, without holding anything back. He told him how Dmitrenko had instructed the Piski villagers, how he had twitched his mustaches, how the gentry had conspired to keep commoners off the council and how the elections had gone off. Chipka's indignation made his sharp tongue tell the whole story.

His searing words heated up Porokh's blood and injected fire into his weary hands — and he wrote a complaint for Chipka. And although the old scribbler's hand shook and his pen left blots of ink, he still succeeded in getting enough poison down on paper. Writing that paper, Porokh gave vent to all his bitter hatred which had been building up over long years. The veteran telltale denounced and castigated the Polski clan so convincingly that he himself trembled all over as he read the finished complaint to Chipka.

Chipka paid him generously, thanked him profusely, went to the post office to mail the paper and drove back to Piski.

* * *

A week went by, and nothing happened.

A big party given by the marshal drew an enormous number of guests who stayed until daylight, drinking, merrymaking, playing cards and congratulating one another on having driven the "churl" out of the district council.

Shortly before dawn, a shaft-bow bell jingled past the Polskis' manor, momentarily disturbing the gay gathering. Some even peered out of the windows but failed to see anything from the brightly lighted hall, hearing only the rattle of wheels along the pavement.

Soon a message for the marshal was brought from the post station.

"An official from the governor has arrived," one of the guests announced, after talking to the postman.

The news came as a thunderbolt, scaring the exuberant crowd. A hush fell upon the hall, with everybody freezing into stillness. Cheerfulness in the eyes gave way to strangely frightened stares that roamed erratically about the hall; every guest would cast a furtive glance at somebody else and then switch his or her gaze

to a third person, a fourth one, and so on. As the marshal withdrew to his study, a low murmur rose in the hall that sounded like the rustling of leaves in the wind... Whispers could be heard in every corner.

About five minutes later, the postman left, and the marshal came back into the hall.

"Well, I never!" he exclaimed, after taking breath. "I'm resigning immediately..."

In the pin-drop silence that followed, the words he gasped out rang particularly clear.

"What's that? They've ordered an inquiry... They are putting me — all of us — under investigation! How can they expect me to serve after this? I'm resigning now — immediately!"

"What's the matter? What's happened, Petro Vasilyovich?" they asked, pressing around him. "Has there been something — some complaint?..."

"Certainly — what else?" he muttered, nodding his head. "Our elections have been annulled, and there's to be an inquiry... How can I serve now? No, I'm certainly not going to!" he cried, starting to pace up and down the hall.

Shavkun, white-faced and grimly thoughtful, pressed his way to the opposite end of the hall.

"Sure, that's him all right..." he whispered, coming up to Chizhik. "Him and Porokh... Three days ago — no, it's been closer to a week — he was seen with Porokh."

"None other than Porokh!" Chizhik told his friend. "Damn that old telltale! There's no getting rid of him — he's been pursuing us like a dog."

Shavkun stepped aside, his shrewd eyes lit up by a glimmer of hope.

"I say, there's something we might do to put it right," he lisped, lifting his voice. "We must find out who has written this complaint. If it's really been Porokh, we've got nothing to fear. The man is a known slanderer! Who'd believe a slanderer?..."

"Why, that's true!" voices droned around him. "We must find out... Petro Vasilyovich should go to that official and ask him about it all..."

"Me? To whom?" the marshal fumed. "I'll never do it! This is impossible!"

"Please, Petro Vasilyovich, please!!" shouts came from all sides.

"I'm not going... choose somebody else... I can't go to him! I'm under investigation!"

"Please... please!!" they shouted still louder.

Finally, with great difficulty, they persuaded him to go.

It was already broad daylight.

The guests thanked the host, said good-bye and left.

About three hours later the Polskis' building was again swarm-

ing with gentry. All the guests came back to learn who had written the complaint and what it was about. The marshal was not yet there: he had gone to talk to the governor's representative. Soon he returned, bringing the complaint. He handed it to Shavkun.

"Read it!"

The voices died down as everybody pressed round Shavkun. He unfolded the paper, cleared his throat like a deacon before a hymn and had a look.

"Oh, I see," he said, as if to himself. "This is Porokh's hand all right..." Then he began to read.

Listening to those accusations, they went hot and cold all over. Each of them stood with his head hanging low, like a guilty schoolboy who has to listen to the harsh truth about his misdeeds.

Shavkun finished.

"It's slander! It's a pack of lies!" they screamed. "You must complain, Petro Vasilyovich, because that's sheer outrage... The language is intolerable: 'organized gang,' 'a clan of serfdom-mongers'! How can anyone write such things?"

"I wonder why the governor accepted this slander at all!" a man said with bitterness.

"Incredible!" another nobleman exclaimed, shrugging.

"This is nothing but pressure applied by the state administration... interference into *zemstvo* affairs!" somebody shouted from a corner.

"Yes, that's what it is. We must write to the minister."

"Certainly... yes... To the minister! On behalf of all the nobles. We all ask you, Petro Vasilyovich, to do it, please!"

"All right, all right," the marshal said, blowing out his cheeks like a turkey cock.

Shavkun and Chizhik exchanged glances — and sparks of laughter glimmered in their sly eyes.

"Wait," said Shavkun. "We must not get excited like this. Why should we go all the way to the minister? First we must hush up this business and get that man off our backs..."

Shavkun's proposal met with approval. They followed his advice upon the testimony they would give about the elections.

At noon, the official, accompanied by a police officer, arrived to the Polskis' manor house and got down to work... At six o'clock, the guests sat down at the long table to dine. The official was seated at the head of the table, flanked by marshal Polski on his right and Kryazhov on his left... One would think those were three close friends of long standing, delighted to meet again after many years... They were engaged in lively conversation, with much laughing and joking. Along the two sides down the table the conversation was conducted in quieter tones, and yet it could be inferred from the guests' happy faces that the contagious hilarity of the presiding trio had not left them unaffected... Some mirth could be discerned upon the wilted courtroom mugs of Shavkun

and Chizhik, who were sitting side by side at the very end of the table...

Now the lavish dinner, offering an abundance of delicacies and choicest beverages, was drawing to a close. Afile footmen served tall goblets filled with foaming, sparkling wine. The official was the first to rise to his feet. He fitted a monocle into his left eye, thanked the marshal for the excellent fare, reminded that the authorities, in "alliance with the privileged estate," must "closely watch revolutionary elements," that both had "common interests," and that their duty was to support the "state order," defending it against the "pressure of insane socialist ideas" disseminated by criminals... This was a fine, learned speech, the likes of which the Hetmanske squires had never heard before. In conclusion, the speaker wished Mr. Polski excellent health and recommended to the "privileged estate" to "merge their interests with those of the lawful authorities," on behalf of which he now asked them to drink to the "people's common welfare."

They drank to the "welfare..." The footmen hastened to refill the goblets. Then marshal Polski stood up — but failed to think up anything besides a toast to the health of the "dear guest..." This, too, was duly drunk. The footmen kept on pouring the fine. After this Kryazhov rose to dwell at some length upon the "deplorable discord" which had lately arisen between the two estates; he praised the authorities for looking after the "interests of the propertied classes" and "promoting the economic development of the country" by building railroads, establishing banks and "sheltering the national economy with protective tariffs" — in other words, "assuring the people's welfare..." In recognition of these outstanding services Kryazhov proposed a toast to the authorities. They drank to the authorities... The official thanked ("from the bottom of my heart") and countered with a toast to the "noble estate."

The dinner was over. The guests rose from the table, thanked the host and scattered throughout the building, filling it with the noise of their voices. Some admired the official's eloquence, others praised Kryazhov, and still others declared they had been impressed by the "modesty" of the marshal's speech.

Only Shavkun and Chizhik were amused by the comedy. Standing in a corner, they were taking counsel together in low voices as to what they could do to get rid of Porokh.

After a game of cards that lasted well past midnight, the official began taking his leave. The post station's three finest horses harnessed to his carriage were waiting at the porch. A small suitcase containing his few things was placed at the coachman's feet. The official got into his seat, the coachman flicked his whip, the loud bell jingled — and dust rose as the carriage rolled away...

"He's gone!" several voices said in chorus.

"A good man..."

"He's wonderful... even though he's still young... And he's clever like hell!"

"You bet! He's a jurist, so he's supposed to be clever anyway... And then, of course, he's the son of a noble family."

"I only hope that son won't do us any harm," some skeptic broke in.

"What? That fellow?" Kryazhov stumbled with surprise. "Never! Never in your life! I know him like the palm of my hand. He's in big trouble with our bank here — up to his neck in debt! I've got him like that!" Kryazhov balled his first and lifted it above his head.

"If that's so, he's safe enough!" Shavkun and Chizhik said in chorus.

* * *

Misfortunes never come singly, or so they say.

When Chipka returned from Hetmanske, his heart heavy with bitterness, his mother told him that Halya had gone to her parents' home, because Maxim had suddenly fallen ill.

"What's the matter with him?" Chipka asked.

"God knows. They say he was fit and cheerful when he left for some fair. Then he was brought back, barely alive."

"Hm... Has there been some good news here?"

"Well, good news is a rare thing nowadays. There's been nothing good here... They say some rogues tried to rob the Krasnohorka estate. About twenty men raided the place but were beaten off by the watchmen. Good heavens! They say there was some terrible fighting down there!"

The news gave Chipka the cold shivers... It had happened, he thought. The man got what he had been asking for!

He unharnessed the horses and gave them some hay. Then he paced up and down the yard, because he did not feel like going inside. The sun was setting, and the air was filled with the usual evening noises. The bellowing of oxen reached him from one side, the bleating of sheep came from another, and somewhere else women were calling their pigs — the din and bustle of the countryside. Chipka, however, was hardly aware of it all. He had his own worries — plenty of them — to think about...

He walked about the yard until it bored him and then went inside. But the murk of the house deepened his own gloom, and his imagination unrolled before him, like a carpet, some of the ghastly experiences of his life... There was Maxim, lying on the ground, badly beaten, his bones broken... There appeared the familiar shadows of his past: Lushnya, Patsyuk, Matnya and other "brothers..." He saw the blood-red glow of their faces and the ferocious hunger burning in their eyes... Presently, his mind flashed back to the estate storehouses he had been reminded of at the

zemstvo office — and he remembered the watchman... Now Maxim and the watchman were both rolling on the ground at his feet, moaning in agony... Was it true? It was, this was the bare terrible truth of his life! There was nothing he wouldn't give or do to erase it from his memory, to be able to forget... But no! Such things could not be forgotten — they had a way of coming back, again and again, as if deliberately, to frighten him like hideous monsters... Why did they keep returning, why did he have to remember them? Now they had found him and crossed his track just as he was trying to obliterate all their traces... He thought about the *zemstvo* and its traps and tricks, and its painful unfairness... It had reminded him of all those things... He had been ready to devote himself to it for the rest of his life — and it had shoved him back into his past! Wasn't the *zemstvo* made up of people who had been around for a long time? Certainly, they could not have changed all of a sudden. Then why was it all right for them to serve? And why couldn't he?... All men had to live with the burden of their sins. Then why were some absolved from theirs and could forget them, as if they had expiated them? And why was there neither forgiveness nor forgetting for him? He had not been punished and yet was believed to be guilty... Was there any justice at all in the world?!

It had grown completely dark. The people and the world had gone to sleep. Motrya, too, had gone to bed. Only Chipka was still up and awake, wandering, brooding, suffering, going in and out all the time.

"Why are you roaming about, son? Why don't you go to sleep?"

"Can *you* sleep?" he asked gruffly.

His voice rang with that melancholy of old. The mother's heart sensed it at once — and filled with apprehension.

"I can, of course," she said gently. "Why shouldn't I be able to at so late an hour?"

"Well, go to sleep while you can," Chipka said in a softer voice and sank on the bench.

The room was dark and quiet. Motrya sighed softly...

"Mother!" he called her.

"Yes, son."

"Will there ever be justice in the world? Or maybe there'll never be any?!"

"God knows, son. If things go on this way, there'll probably be even less justice than we've got now..."

"No, mother... It looks like there's never been any — and never will be! Things would've been different if it had existed."

Motrya did not say anything. Chipka rose from the bench, went out again and paced the yard almost until daylight.

Next day he went to see his father-in-law. Yavdokha and Halya looked frightened when they met him and led him to Halya's

former room. For a very long time Yavdokha whispered something to him, wringing her arms, her sheet-white face distorted by fear. Halya's eyes were full of burning anguish, as she stared at her husband, ruefully and fixedly, as if to say, "Now you see!"

Chipka, however, had other things on his mind. After a whispered conversation with Yavdokha, he went to the living room, from which terrible moans were heard. There Maxim lay on a bed, his body doubled up. Every now and then, heavy groans escaped from his chest, as he pressed his hands to his bent back. Chipka was so shocked by the suffering written on Maxim's face that his cheek twitched. Yavdokha approached the sick man's bed.

"Maxim!" she said.

"O-oh!" he moaned.

"Chipka is here."

"Hello, father," Chipka said, stepping forward.

"O-o-oh!"

"What's the matter with you?..."

Maxim gave a terrible cry, gripping his back with both hands. His mouth twisted from excruciating pain. He choked and went into a coughing fit... There was a gurgling sound in his chest. Maxim stretched out, trembled, opened his eyes wide and moved their ferocious stare about their faces... That was his last glance — the glance of a sudden death... Yavdokha promptly covered his face with a black kerchief.

When the kerchief was lifted, Maxim was dead. Suffering froze upon his face, peering from his distorted, gaping mouth and glaring from his wide-open eyes...

Halya looked at him and gave a cry. "He's dead! Dead!" she screamed insanely and burst into her room.

Chipka cast a glance at the dead man — and trembled all over. He had never seen such a horrible, cold stare. Another death — his grandmother's — flashed back to his mind. There it had been a good soul quietly passing away, as though slipping into unconsciousness or falling asleep. Here a man had departed from this world in pain and suffering, with curses on his lips. Chipka's head swam and got fuddled. He closed his eyes for a moment, as his pale face drooped onto his chest.

Only Yavdokha held herself in hand somehow. She replaced the black kerchief on Maxim's face, pulled Chipka's sleeve and led him out to the room, tightly shutting her eyes, from which grief had squeezed not more than two tears.

* * *

In Hetmanske, the gentry were rejoicing, having managed to have everything their own way. The election results were confirmed and a reply rejecting Chipka's complaint had been sent through the district police officer.

Soon after that, a session of the district assembly was held. The session was attended only by noblemen, since none of the commoners turned up. Some of them, like Loza, simply did not want to hear such abuse and insults as Dmitrenko had heaped upon them before the elections to the council; others were busy carting in their hay. They had to do it fast, anyway, because it kept raining day after day. As a result, only gentry assembled to deliberate.

A week later rumors about those deliberations spread throughout the district. First of all, people told about the high salaries voted for members of the district council. Then they complained about a strange land tax, under which those who had more land were to pay less, while those who had less had to pay more. Finally, they explained that the road, dam and bridge maintenance duty was to be paid "in kind," that is, in work done with peasants' hands.

Chipka did not care for all that. He was absorbed in his family problems. He had to bury his father-in-law, prepare the funeral dinner and take care of Maxim's property. For a whole month, he was as busy as a cockroach on a hot stove and had no time to listen to what people around him were saying.

On St. Parasceve Day there was a fair in Hetmanske. Chipka went there, having finished his chores at home. First of all, he went to the district office. When he was told that his complaint had been rejected, it was as if a hundred snakes had suddenly bitten his heart. Speechless with indignation, he did not ask them a single question and staggered out, as if poisoned by charcoal fumes. His head went round and swam and ached; heavy hammers were pounding away at his temples; everything went black and yellow before his eyes; his ears rang and hummed and buzzed... To recover from the shock, he walked aimlessly about the fair. He wandered among wagons and along stores, looking and listening. The assembly session and the new tax seemed to be the only things everybody was talking about.

"Do you see now?" one wealthy landowner asked another, with a grin.

"The son is no worse than his dear father..."

"The hell he is! It wasn't him at all. Shavkun and Kryazhov have fixed it all... There're two really smart fellows for you!"

"Enough of that 'all-estate character' nonsense! The rabble wanted equality — now they've gotten equalized... It was disgusting indeed to see all those louts going around with their noses high in the air! Now they'll know what's what!"

"That's some self-government!" a petty squire, breathless and scared-looking, exclaimed, meeting his neighbor. "Have you heard about the tax?"

"Sure I have. Good news travels far, but bad news spreads even wider and faster..."

"That's outrageous!" fumed a third near-nobleman. "Nobody has ever had the effrontery to say such shameful things in broad daylight and in the face of everybody: he who's got land worth ten rubles must pay a ruble, and he who owns a thousand rubles' worth of it has to pay just a copeck! But now that we have this self-government we've heard it!"

"What do they care?" a fourth squire said. "They've gotten themselves elected to the council and now they'll be milking us and won't have a worry in the world.."

"But for fellows like us this is going to be a pain in the neck," the first man went on. "We'll have plenty to worry about."

"That's right!" the third one agreed. "With such taxes they'll bleed us white in no time at all! But where shall I get the money, for God's sake? Before I used to own three serfs, even if they were nothing to boast about... Now it's much worse. And the peasants have become so lazy that I might soon have to plow the land myself... It's impossible to make them work for love or money. They'd rather spend a day in the tavern than get hired..."

"That's sheer robbery! The masters want to skin us alive!" some peasants were shouting under a marquee.

"Didn't I tell you?" a tipsy headman pestered the elder. "I guessed right that they'd invented this *zemstvo* just to line their pockets! The czar took their serfs away from them and made them free... But the masters wouldn't let them go just like that! Oh no. If they don't have to work anymore — let them pay!"

"Before it was the district chief who fleeced us, now it's going to be this new council," some Cossacks complained to one another.

Chipka heard it all — and every word stung. The general discontent added to his own troubles, hurt his burning heart and stirred old memories... His face was afire with wrath, his eyes burned with wrath, and he grew white with wrath, his hands shaking.

"Now I see why they tried so hard to get rid of me... That's what they were after all along! Damn them all! To be warm and well fixed — that's all they care for! Let the stupid peasant sweat for all and pay for all and work out all duties. There's nobody to stand up for him! They stick together and know everybody in their masters' gang... And the peasant is just an ox that must pull the plow as long as he's strong enough! Give him a little chaff to keep him alive — and harness him again and drive him hard until he drops dead in a furrow... And then skin him to make boots from his hide... To hell with them! They're devils — not people!"

Chipka was shouting, flailing his arms, and his passionate words were full of fire. The crowd around him grew all the time. For a long time they listened to him in silence; then a few of them began putting in their own remarks, adding fuel to the flames. Attracted by the clamor, Dmitrenko hurried to them.

"What do you think you're doing here?" he asked Chipka.

"What do you mean?"

"I know what I mean. You're exciting the people, speaking against the *zemstvo*, the council, the tax..."

"May they never live to collect it!" Chipka blurted out.

"Why are you yelling like this?" Getting angry, the policeman raised his voice. "Why are you getting the people excited?"

"You're the one that's getting them excited — not I!" Chipka snapped out.

"You make sure, Cossack, you come back home with your tongue in one piece. Do you hear? Don't you forget yourself!"

When the police officer had disappeared among the wagons, Chipka again attacked the council.

In the evening he drove home, together with Hritsko. He was grim and kept silent for most of the way. That silence made Hritsko uneasy, and he finally spoke bluntly:

"What makes you want to quarrel with them anyway?"

"I just can't stand it all."

"Spit on them. Let them go to hell with their council and *zemstvo!*"

"I was elected by the commune and swore an oath to the commune. Who's more important: the commune or they?"

"Spit on the commune, too!"

Chipka turned green in the face on hearing this, but did not say anything.

He looked awful when he came home shortly before nightfall. Meeting him at the threshold, Halya was frightened by his appearance.

"Chipka! What's the matter with you? Are you sick?"

"I'm all right... I'm just hungry."

She fed him. He sat dark-faced and frowning and ate in silence. Finishing his dinner at sunset, he did not rise from the table but leaned his head on his hand and froze in that posture. The western glow lighted his dismal motionless figure, whose hunched, bent-up appearance caused the impression of deep sorrow. Seeing it Halya quietly wept. Chipka heard this.

"Is something wrong, Halya?"

She did not speak.

He came up to her, took her head lightly with both hands and, peering into her eyes, said:

"What's the matter, darling?"

"You've completely forgotten me," she muttered, sobbing.

"What do you mean?"

"With that damn *zemstvo* on your mind, you never tell me anything..."

"To tell the truth, it's been giving me a lot of pain — here!" He pointed to his heart.

"Why don't you stop thinking about it, son?" Motrya asked

sadly. "Aren't you sick of it yet? You look horrible, you know. And before it all began, you'd been quite something to look at, too!"

Chipka found nothing to say to her.

It was already quite dark outside. Night had descended upon the earth, bringing rest to human hands and easing human worries and troubles. They went to bed. Chipka lay in silence, wide awake. Thoughts were swarming in his head. Memories of his life — from early childhood down to that last day — made him relive every episode, heated his blood and muddled his reason. "There's injustice everywhere — everywhere!" he whispered. Wherever he looked he saw only injustice and more injustice... One lived and languished and spent one's energies and willpower to hide from that injustice, to run away from it all; one wandered in the dark and stumbled and fell, and rose and went along and fell again, unable to find the right way or shelter... The world was big and wide, but there was no place for him in it! If he could, he would have demolished that whole world and would have built up a new one. Maybe then there would be justice...

Hearing Chipka sighing heavily, without speaking, Halya again started to cry. Instead of soothing her, he told her about his worries and nearly began to weep himself. She tried to comfort him, caressed him and held him to her heart. Chipka responded reluctantly.

After having a good cry, Halya went to sleep. She slept as quietly and peacefully as a little child.

Chipka tossed and turned the whole night through and did not sleep a wink, brooding and torturing himself.

XXIX

Troubles Don't Keep Silent

Having buried Maxim, Yavdokha was afraid to live alone at the hamlet. She asked Halya and Chipka to come and live with her, but they did not feel like it. So she sold the whole homestead with everything that could be sold and moved to their house. Together with her, new troubles entered Chipka's household.

To begin with, the two mothers could not get along. Yavdokha was too haughty and willful. No sooner had she moved in than she began changing everything her own way and bossing the household. This was not right, that was not proper, and that other thing stood in the wrong place! Motrya, worn out by work and want from her youth, as thin and shriveled as a honey agaric, humble and poorly dressed, kept silent for quite a while, letting Yavdokha have her way. But then she lost her patience. Getting increasingly bossy, Yavdokha bawled out Motrya who became annoyed and called Yavdokha a big lady, after which Yavdokha called her a

beggar and a drone. That started it. There were rows and scenes, and squabbling and bickering without end. Not a day passed without the two women clashing with each other.

Halya felt sorry for Motrya who she had come to like very much and, not to antagonize her mother, hid from those quarrels in her room or fled to Khristya. She preferred to run away in order not to see it all and not to hear anything. But whenever she got somehow involved, she naturally sided with her mother. Chipka, although seeing that his mother was not to blame, supported his wife which also meant his mother-in-law. All this made life so unbearable for Motrya that she might as well run away from it all.

"Didn't I tell you, son?" Motrya complained to Chipka after Yavdokha had gotten under her skin. "Don't marry a rich girl, I told you, because that'll turn your life into hell, with no peace for me in my old age either!"

"Just try to put up with it some more, Mother. What can we do? She wants to run things her own way, so she's been making trouble. When she wasn't here, we had peace and quiet, and everything was fine. But since, she came, everything's turned upside down. Yield to her, Mother."

"I'm certainly not going to be pushed around by God knows what kind of woman if I can help it. I'd sooner go and bow to neighbors and ask them to feed me than have to bow to her each time I want to eat some of the bread you earn that I'm entitled to anyway."

Then Chipka would run outside, even angrier than before. To dispel his anguish, he would go to Hritsko or start cleaning out around the cattle. Sometimes he would drive off to some fair and stay away for three or four days.

"You see!" Yavdokha would tell Halya gloatingly. "That old witch is dragging you apart... stirring up trouble, setting him against you! The old rag ought to be thankful for being fed and clothed and warm... But no! She wrinkles her nose, as if she were now worse off than when she lived from hand to mouth! These beggars! As soon as they're out of their lousy rags, they're hard to please!"

Then Chipka would come home, and Yavdokha would nag him and smear Motrya. Chipka would fly into a rage and take it out on Motrya. The poor woman would hide in a corner on the stove and have a good cry, but there was nothing else she could do about it.

That interminable feuding and bickering added poison to Chipka's already poisoned existence. He felt a stranger in his own house, which he now hated, for it suddenly seemed cramped and stuffy. His heart sought freedom and craved for wide expanses. He began to recall his old bunch...

Hritsko, with his constant complaints about losses, his palaver about his gains and property, his decent quiet wife and with the

whole course of his uneventful farming existence, now seemed boring and dull. Even as he listened to his whimpering, yawning now and then, his memory painted the picture of a different life — the one he had led before his engagement... Although vodka had flowed like water in that other life and mouths had blurted out all sorts of drunken twaddle, every one in that life had lived fully, suffered, loved and hated... Even seen through a mist of drunkenness, it had been real living. Now his life had become as still and sad as a bog, as somnolent and silent as a cemetery... And his home was worse than hell!

To brighten his dismal loneliness, Chipka took to the bottle. Drinking is easy for those who can hold their liquor. With Chipka, however, it was different. Liquor increased his agony, burning his bleeding heart. Then he hated all and everything. His mother-in-law found him hard to please; his mother was afraid of him; Halya alone had some influence over him, for he still loved and respected her. Nevertheless, he sometimes made it hot for her, too. He would nag her, wanting to know why she refused to hire a girl, or why this or that had not been done, or why she kept spoiling her eyes over needlework. He would just cavil at one thing or another.

Halya listened to all of it, sometimes replying, sometimes just weeping softly and sometimes growing afraid. Forebodings of evil stirred deep down in her aching heart...

“Chipka!” she would sometimes call to him at night, after everybody else had gone to sleep. “What’s happened to you? Nothing seems to please you anymore... There’s nothing you like... It looks as if you’re fed up with everything. Do you really hate *everything*?”

That question came as a bitter reproach to him. He felt guilty, realizing that he had been carping at her unnecessarily. Now her sorrowful voice soothed and accused him at the same time.

“Halya, darling!” he would whisper. “I feel bad... real bad. I just don’t know where to go or what to do with myself... If only we had children... Maybe they’d make me feel better — their prattle might keep me from sulking...”

“What is it that makes you feel bad? Do you also feel bad with me by your side? Do you feel sad when you are with me, too?”

“No, no, dear Halya! With you I’m happy and feel great... I only wish our mothers could get along with each other, without those rows. But we’ve got bickering and cursing every day...”

“Is this my fault, Chipka? I myself would be happy if they made it up and stuck together. But you see there’s nothing I can do. They are just made that way: neither of them would yield an inch.”

“Oh no... No, Halya, it’s not that... it’s not that... I’m just afraid I might ruin your life,” he whispered, skipping to something else. “I’d give half of my life to make you happy... But you see how

it is — there's no happiness, no peace! There's some kind of curse on me — has been ever since my childhood! It's been pursuing me, and I can't drive it away, get rid of it! It's gotten right into my soul, like the Devil, and chokes me, and plagues me and stirs up trouble... And my former bunch — I met them not long ago — are merry and happy..."

Now Halya saw which way the wind was blowing and caught the drift of what he had been telling her. She knew that she and Chipka had been drifting apart for some time. Also, her heart told her that she would not be able to keep Chipka by her side, for such life did not satisfy him and made him sick. And she wept — very softly, so that he would not hear... She went back to her recent happiness, examined it, turned it over and studied it without that initial love passion which had kept her from taking a clear view of their life. Now she scrutinized it with the detached eye of an outside observer. The results of this examination and her private reckoning appalled her. She had not been really happy, but failed to make Chipka happy, had not become a mother — and was unlikely ever to become so. And, falling to her knees before the icon, she begged the Holy Virgin to have compassion on her tears...

Meanwhile, Chipka continued to become increasingly gloomy, irritable and impatient.

"If you can't carry on any further, Chipka, you probably should call your friends and have a good time with them. Maybe that will cheer you up a little," Halya told him once, seeing in what shape he was.

She hoped to appear before that unruly bunch as a gentle guardian angel, to teach those inveterate souls, hardened by crime and drink, some love for the people and respect for their peaceful habits and established order of life. Alas! The inveterate souls needed an outlet for their brute strength which seethed inside them, demanding to be let loose, recognized no customs and was drowned in drink. Their drunken heads yearned for unruly lawlessness unrestricted by limits or conventions, as wild and noisy as a drunken mob. Nothing would make them follow the beaten track of peaceful, undisturbed existence. Halya, with her inclinations toward a quiet sort of happiness and her gentle but pliant womanly mind, was hardly the right kind of person to undertake to demolish those citadels of dogged determination. This was a task not for a woman's heart, loving and warm, but for a stone-cold heart totally insensitive to sparks of love. A feeble woman's hand could do nothing in the face of such resistance.

Now Halya saw that she and Chipka had, like a pair of fish, got caught in a net. She became entangled in it and struggled and writhed and thrashed about until she found a hole and slipped out to find herself in smooth water. Chipka stayed behind in the net. She mourned for him and grieved and bewailed him. But he was

not aware of it. He denounced the human injustice, cursed the *zemstvo* which had turned him down, condemned, together with all people of modest means, the extortionate taxes, talked with former serfs and aroused in them bitterness at having been cheated into accepting allotments of worthless land, helped them out with loans when they were hard pressed by poll tax collectors, caroused with them and sometimes, fired by drink, shouted that it was high time somebody punished that lot. Then he would come home and drunkenly press his Halya to his drunken heart without noticing hot tears in her eyes and sadness upon her withered face.

* * *

Times changed, bringing different ways into Chipka's household. From a pleasant, peaceful home attractive for its quiet family routine, his house turned into a den of wild carousing, deafening guffawing and drunken singing. Yavdokha, quite accustomed to drinking sprees in her time, rediscovered her taste for them in her old age and willingly cooperated with her son-in-law in such undertakings.

On a Saturday, a Sunday or a holiday Chipka's old pals Lushnya, Patsyuk and Matnya would come over. A cask of vodka and some food to go with it would appear as if by magic. Yavdokha would act as the hostess while Halya would hide in a corner and sit there in silence, watching her husband having a good time and listening to his buddies' drunken rambling. Motrya would climb onto the stove in order not to see it all.

Chipka would sit at the table with his guests; drinks would be downed in quick succession, muddling their brains; yells, singing and laughter would fill the house, escaping outside through the windows. One of them would then start spinning yarns and telling about his adventures. Yavdokha would listen with pleasure, laughing happily; Halya would become even gloomier; Motrya, up there on the stove, would spit in distaste without saying anything, wishing she would die soon and be spared the indignity of having to see and hear such things.

Most of such stories were told by Lushnya. Like a musician who could make the strings of a violin sound now like shouts of joy, now like a sorrowful wail, Lushnya could play with his tongue upon human souls. He told them something funny — and everybody would roll with laughter; then he would start speaking about something else and make their hearts heavy with sadness and bring tears to their eyes... He mostly liked to reminisce about his tender age and his mother.

"My mother taught me to steal when I was still a little kid," he would begin. "She'd make me sit down by her side and put a chunk of bread right before her eyes and I had to pinch it so she wouldn't notice when I did it. If she caught me at it, I got

trashed. She carried a brown rod that was so supple it swished something terrible... I'd try this and that to get that bread, but she'd notice and lash at me so hard that I'd get a long blue bruise wrapped, like a leech, all around my hand... I'd yell and beg her, 'Dear Mummy, please don't! I won't do it again!' Then I'd get one arm around her neck and take that bread with the other hand and stuff it inside my shirt. She'd look around and see it was gone. Then she'd let me keep it and I could eat it... Otherwise I had to go hungry all day long..."

"It just might be true," Halya would say tonelessly, shaking her head dubiously.

"May I drop dead if it's a lie! Then she'd tell me, 'Don't you think, son, that I beat you for nothing. I'm teaching you for your own good. When you grow up, you'll be thankful... You should steal everything that lies around waiting to be taken. And if it's something that belongs to the master, you must find where he keeps it and get it!'"

"That's because masters fleece their men," Chipka would break in. "Take from the master what is yours by right..."

"Aha! Masters take everything from the people and they used to take people when they felt like it... Our master surely took my mother! But I'm even thankful to him, because that's how I came into this world."

Then he would tell them how his mother had been brought to the estate and taken to the master's chambers, how she had been afraid of everything until she came to know the master somewhat better, and how delighted the master had been when the stork brought him, "fine fellow Timoshka..."

"The master was surely glad to have me — and to have my mother, too. He kept us in his chambers and did not let us go out. He sometimes fondled and rocked me in his arms... And when I'd learned to walk, he fed me with honey biscuits and candies and gave me small silver coins. Mother was really happy, seeing it all. Then she was awfully kind to me. She'd give me some tea, put me in the master's feather bed to sleep, wrap me up in good warm blankets and bend over me and just stare at me for a long time... Then she'd kiss me even longer. I surely lived in style! But then the master's son came back from school. He'd finished his studies because he'd been thrown out... As soon as he saw us, started yelling, 'Get out of the household!... And stay the hell out!' Then those two fell out and bickered every day, and my mother cried every day and hid me from the son... Suddenly, the fine living was over for us. After some squirming, the old master moved us from the manor to his new house that he'd had built behind the smithy. That's where we stayed. After we'd gone to live there, things in the manor quieted down a bit, and we got along fine. My mother and I lived there together, just the two of us, and the old master often dropped in. He was still very

kind to my mother and brought small gifts for me... Suddenly, word got around that the young master was getting married. He married one of your master's daughters, as black and swarthy as

Gypsy straight out of camp, tall and thin, with a huge nose jutting out over her mouth... After the wedding, things got worse for everybody. Not a day went by without somebody howling under rods in the stable. It looked like the old master didn't have it too good either: his hair turned gray, his body grew thin, his face became haggard, and he took to the bottle. He'd get up in the morning, very early, and run to Yakim, the steward, making sure his son was still asleep.

"And Yakim had been ordered to run and tell *that woman* whenever he saw the old master go behind the smithy. So the old man would beg him, 'Yakim, my dear! I'll let you have my old vest if only you keep mum and don't tell on me!' Yakim would look at him and feel sorry for the old man who had once bossed everything, including Yakim himself, and was now standing before him, bent and shaking, and humbly asking for a favor... 'Go ahead,' he'd say, 'only be quick about it, because the young master and mistress will get up in a short while...' So he'd hurry to us then. 'Where's Mother?' he'd ask me. I'd tell him she was in the kitchen garden or someplace else. 'Go and call her.' And he'd thrust a copeck into my hand. Then I'd fly to tell her. She'd come over, and he'd sit across from her and stare at her, remembering the good old times. He'd even have a cry, complaining about his son and daughter-in-law. 'I disgrace the noble estate, they say... Fools! What the hell does that estate matter if my life's not worth living, because I'm not free to do what I like? I'd wanted to provide for you — to have a house built, to give you some land and to make you a free woman for your services... But now I can't do it... they won't let me... I'm not free to do anything...' Then he'd just lean over the table and cry, and Mother would stare at him and cry, too... And I'd sit somewhere in a corner and wonder why they were crying. The old master didn't live long after that. He kind of pined away and died. When Mother heard about it, she wailed something terrible for a whole week and beat me every day for close on a month for nothing at all... Soon after that we were sent to the kitchen. Mother was put to work with the poultry, and I was supposed to help her. It was tough on us working there — cold place, nothing to eat! So Mother began pinching a little something now and then: she'd steal some pork fat and share it with me, then it was gizzard and liver from a baked duck... Then she got caught, and they put her down and lashed her like a cat — she barely got to her feet... But she didn't repent and didn't mend her ways. Actually, she began teaching me, like I said. She did it well, too, thanks to her!"

As Yavdokha listened to such tales, she praised the "fine fellow" for having learned his lessons well. Halya was grimly thoughtful,

feeling sorry for the old master and Lushnya's mother and pondering over the horrors of serfdom. Motrya, distressed by the fact that her son was drinking in the company of such characters, whispered softly to herself:

"Good heavens! What kind of son is that? What a horrible story to make up about his own mother! He is a real devil with no fear of God in his soul!"

Meanwhile, Lushnya, who surely knew how to use his tongue, poured more drinks for everybody, chattering gaily:

"Here's to the master's health, so they can buy more things for us to take!"

"And may they croak as soon as they've bought them!" Patsyuk added.

Sometimes Hritsko was also present at such gatherings. But he had little stomach for this kind of merrymaking and especially for needling remarks that were dropped only too often by Lushnya or one of the others.

"I say, Hritsko, how is your wheat doing?" Lushnya would begin in a roundabout way, hinting at Hritsko's everyday complaints.

Hritsko kept silent, as though the question did not concern him at all.

"Too bad!" Patsyuk answered instead. "The last few summers have not been good for wheat..."

"Why not good?" Hritsko snarled. "Maybe they haven't been good for such as you, because you've got nothing to grow wheat on. All you've got is your big mouth, and you can't sow anything in it."

"It's not that, Hritsko," Lushnya went on. "Nowadays something has gone wrong with the land, too. You soak it with your sweat and drop your tears on it, begging it to bear you some grain. But the damn land is deaf and dumb — it just doesn't hear you and gives you nothing!"

"That's why people have to complain about land," Patsyuk picked up. "But there aren't any authorities you can complain about your land to. Unless, of course, you've got a well-fixed friend or your child's godfather who'll hear your complaints and tries to do something about it..."

"D'you want to know why your land wouldn't bear wheat?" puffy-faced Matnya broke in. "It's not because your land has gotten barren — it hasn't! It's the Lord punishing you for greed. You shouldn't have taken that rye Chipka gave you without paying for it."

Hritsko was on thorns. Certainly, he could have riposted to that, but he was afraid to kick up a row with those drunken rogues.

But then Chipka shouted at them to stop it and came to Hritsko's rescue, so that those caustic jokes were dismissed just like that.

That lasted until Chipka got in an expansive mood over drinks and gave Hritsko a hundred rubles — for his godson.

“Do you know what you should do now, Hritsko?” Lushnya asked.

“Tell me,” Hritsko said happily.

“Now you can give up farming — your land bears no wheat anyway — and work on Khristya real hard. Let her have a baby every month. Chipka is a kind fellow — he’ll baptize them all...”

“You go and tell this to your bald father!” Hritsko snapped.

“By God, you’ve guessed right that he was bald. I would’ve told him gladly, too, except that he’s dead, which is rather a pity. But my telling him would probably have done me little good, I’m afraid, because actually he gave me nothing — and me my mother’s only child, too... I wonder what would’ve happened if my mother had had a kid like me every month...”

“You would’ve eaten each other — till one of you choked on the other,” Hritsko fumed.

“That’s probably true — we might very well have eaten up one another... Only we’d never have touched somebody else’s grain and money!”

“What d’you mean by that?” Hritsko shouted excitedly. “Did I ask Chipka for those gifts? Did I grovel at his feet?... It was his own good will — and it’s none of your business!”

“But I’m not trying to meddle — God forbid. I just wanted to give you a piece of advice. May your Khristya never have another child, if you’d rather have it that way. What do I care? I only tried to tell you that more children would do you a lot of good.”

“No, Chipka, I can’t visit you anymore because of your company,” announced Hritsko when Chipka, who had gone to fetch some vodka, returned to the room.

“What’s happened?” Chipka asked.

Hritsko started to tell him. Lushnya showed repentance and mumbled he was sorry and all, putting in some more digs at Hritsko. The rest of them split their sides laughing. Finally, Chipka ordered them to make it up and to drink to it, and filled their glasses. Hritsko appeared to calm down a little and stayed at the table. He had another drink but soon after that left for home.

But after that night Hritsko kept away from Chipka’s place and forbade Khristya to set her foot there. Still, she sometimes slipped out and ran to visit Halya and Motrya; she, too, had failed to hit it off with Yavdokha.

They say that of all evil things vodka is the vilest. And now it was vodka that ruled Chipka’s household. The days when the bunch did not get together there to get drunk and shout themselves hoarse were few and far between. But even such days were filled with squabbling between the two mothers who all but tried to bite each other... To Chipka all that bickering was as bitter as wormwood — and he tried to sweeten that taste with drink and drunken

merrymaking. Without that he felt grim and gloomy. He would then pace the yard, from the house to the gate and from the gate to the house, sullen and scowling, and looking not quite himself, hardly uttering a word all day long. But in the evening his pals would show up, and a cask of vodka would appear — and then it was good-bye to reason! They would get drunk and fill up their stomachs and then go away — with Chipka! Shortly before dawn they would return bringing a wagon load of all kinds of things...

“What do you think you’re doing, son?” Motrya reproached Chipka, weeping, her heart breaking from despair. “Others earn their living with their blood and sweat, and you... If you don’t fear people, at least fear God! Just remember: we lived in poverty and suffered from terrible need — but nobody could say a bad word about us... And now we’ve got wealth —”

“It’s none of your business!” Chipka interrupted her rudely. “Just lie there on the stove while you can!...”

Motrya would moan and grow silent, her face bathed in hot tears. She became sick and black in the face with worry. He was her own child, her only hope... She almost wished he had never been born and thought that putting him to death with her own hands while he was a baby would have been better than having to go through all this. And she cursed the men around her son who had led him to *such things*.

Yavdokha saw and knew this but deliberately undermined Motrya’s efforts by encouraging Chipka and welcoming his bunch. Having spent her whole life in this way, she had grown used to crime, rejoiced at every success and helped the men to mount their forays. Chipka’s rapacity increased with every passing day. Like a ferocious beast, he attacked all well-to-do people in sight. At first he “punished” only masters and Jews but then began to take away his “lawful share” from wealthy Cossacks like himself, robbing them blind and only sparing their lives.

Although efforts were made to conceal all these goings-on from Halya, she could not help being aware of them but was powerless to act. All she could do was cry... Like her mother before her, she would have to learn to live with it, she thought as she lay alone at night when Chipka was not at home. Did that also mean she was going to become the same as her mother? Or had her mother been born with a weakness for that kind of life? Probably not — it must have been her husband who had made her what she was... She was sorry for herself, because, most likely, her own fate would be no different: a rogue’s daughter, a rogue’s wife! Oh, Lord! At such moments Chipka seemed hideous and horrible, and she almost abhorred him... But when, in a happier hour and a gentler mood, kindness stirred awake in his heart, he poured out his troubles to her, embraced her and caressed her — and then she no longer believed her thoughts of the day before. Oh, no — a

rogue could not caress her so gently nor hold her to his heart so tenderly nor kiss her so passionately... No! Her Chipka was not a robber... No, no! He was nice and fair... He just punished men for injustice... Punished? But who gave him the right to punish anybody?... Who?? All right, he didn't do it then!.. And she reveled in her happiness, fleeting and wavering as it was.

And Yavdokha continued to bully Motrya, giving her not a moment of peace. She would burst into Motrya's room, turn everything upside down and holler at the old woman. At first Motrya talked back, but when she saw that Chipka neglected her, his old mother, by pandering to Yavdokha, she told herself, "That fiendish woman has stolen my son and ruined my hope!" Then she grew silent and kept silent, no matter what Yavdokha said or did. Instead, with tears rolling down her cheeks furrowed by suffering and age, she implored God to let her die. "Oh, Lord," she often prayed. "Please accept my unhappy soul and don't let me keep on suffering in this world!..."

But although Motrya sought death and looked forward to it, it was Yavdokha who died quite suddenly. On a Sunday, right after dinner, she was seized by a fit of stomach pain that choked her, gripped her heart and squeezed her chest.

"Dear me! I'm dying!" Yavdokha cried out and gave up the ghost.

Halya was stunned with grief. Pale-faced, with tearful eyes, not noticing that her hair came out from under her kerchief, she rushed about the house, wailing and wringing her hands. Why? Only in the morning her mother had laughed and joked and looked fit and cheerful, and in the evening a lifeless body was all that was left of her. How terrible! Chipka, too, wandered around in a kind of daze, unable to make up his mind whether he should be comforting Halya or see about the dead body... Motrya alone seemed to have kept presence of mind. She was not exactly glad — far from it! She felt pity for Yavdokha, for she took her death for God's punishment. "So she has died unshriven, without the extreme unction, like a — Forgive me, Lord!" But she was certainly not beside herself with grief and was actually glad for Chipka. Maybe he would give it up now that there was nobody to put him up to it... He just might come to his senses yet...

On the third day after Yavdokha's burial, Chipka gave a lavish funeral feast. People flocked to it not only from Piski but also from the surrounding hamlets. There were as many beggars as one could see outside the Lavra catacombs! Guests ate in the house, and for the beggars benches were rigged up outside. All kinds of food had been prepared in big cauldrons: Chipka had slaughtered a pig, three sheep and a hefty yearling calf. As to vodka, it flowed around like water, drunk to the peace of Yavdokha's soul... At the end of the meal, Motrya gave the beggars

large chunks of good wheat bread to take with them in their bags, and Chipka counted off seventy copecks in silver into each man's outstretched hand.

Next day, Chipka harnessed the horses and drove off without telling anyone where he was going. He did not come back that day nor the day after that... On the third day he returned, bringing several wagon loads of all kinds of goods. Motrya even cried out when she saw all that. Losing her patience, she began to reproach and castigate both her son and his bunch. Chipka's pals did not hold their tongues and kicked up a row. Chipka, too, rushed into the fray. Strong words were exchanged, and passions heated up. Halya became frightened and locked herself up in her room. Lushnya worked himself up into a fit of rage and hollered at Motrya. She shouted back at him. Finally, he knocked her cap off her head...

Poor old mother! "In my own house... a rogue... a loafer..." She did not finish and burst into bitter tears.

In the morning, she walked to the *volost* office to complain — not about the robberies but about having been "beaten up by a loafer." She was afraid to mention *those other things*, not wanting to harm her own son. Some petty officials came running to the house, where carousal was in full swing. Chipka got them so drunk that they could hardly crawl back home, and that was the end of Motrya's complaint. But when the officials were gone, Chipka flew into a drunken rage, called his mother a bitch and threatened to beat her up himself. Motrya wept, silently cursing her fate which had set her such a wicked child.

And Chipka again sat down to drink with his "brothers."

"No, Chipka!" shouted Lushnya. "You'll never have another mother like Yavdokha! She was a real mother for you, and this one is a dog — not a mother! Are you sure it wasn't Motrya that did Yavdokha in?..."

Those words rang out sinisterly, each of them wondering if this could be true. Indeed, they thought, the late woman had been so gay and full of life that morning... And in the evening there was just a dead body left of her — and it got stiff in no time at all, too!

"Indeed!" Chipka exclaimed. If his mother had been anywhere in sight at that moment, he would probably have killed her there and then.

Halya, alone in her room, had been weeping. When she heard that conversation through the wall, she started and also began to reason frantically... Indeed! And she felt as if a cold wind swept through her heart. But her sensitive soul did not let itself be swayed by that wind.

"No, no," she whispered. "Only an evil man could come up with something like this... My mother-in-law is right: my mother was punished by the Lord for the way she'd been living... No, Motrya

is just not that kind of person..." And Halya drove off those horrible thoughts like so many annoying flies.

When the drunken company had gone away, Chipka came into her room. Unable to control herself any longer, Halya flew at him, reproaching him, scolding him and weeping.

"Chipka! I'd never expected something like this from you! How could you let that scum and robber insult your mother? A wild beast, a vicious killer wouldn't have done such a thing!"

"Did you hear what Lushnya said?" he asked her sternly.

"Lushnya?... Lushnya... If there's ever been a heart never warmed by good and justice, it's surely his! If a tongue exists that's never been made stiff by lies no words can describe, it's Timish's tongue! Only a bitch could've bread such a dog! And you listen to him and believe him!"

"Are you afraid that people might talk or what? I don't give a damn about their talking — and about them either!"

"But this isn't going to be mere gossip or slander, although that, too, would be unpleasant enough," she interrupted him. "It'll be the truth — the same truth you've been saying you're after and which you so often despise... You say there's no justice among the people! But where's your justice? Where?"

Those last words stabbed Chipka in the heart like a sharp knife.

"You always blame me! You're always against me!" he shouted, storming out of the room and slamming the door behind him. All night long he wandered about the yard while Halya sobbed.

The following day, word got around the village that Chipka had nearly thrown his mother out of his house.

"As long as she ate lousy bread, everything was just fine. But when she started getting real loaves, she suddenly became too particular and ran to complain about her son!" said those who blamed Motrya.

"Just what kind of son is he that would let such a bum hit his mother?!" others argued.

Humiliated and deeply offended, Motrya fell ill and took to her bed. She did not eat or drink, and her gaze was dull. Halya took care of her as lovingly, as if she were her own mother. She called in wise women who whispered over Motrya, sighed and gave her some herbs. Somehow, they pulled her through.

"Halya!" she said. "I feel I'm getting well. I already feel better... Why? I prayed to God that I may die... I'd be better off in the other world than in this one... But the Lord wouldn't let me go... May His will be done... He ought to know why He makes me live on. He might let me live to see Chipka come to his senses, so that I could again see my child, my son... Halya, my dear child! Of all people you are the closest to me now... Try to make him see reason, as a wife should! He respects you a lot and loves you dearly — and he might listen to you where he wouldn't listen

to me. Oh, Lord! What wouldn't I do for him! What wouldn't I give him! I would've torn out a piece of my heart for him if only that could help him become a real man! Then I'd be able to die happy. Not now."

Both women wept copiously.

XXX

Is That Your Justice?!

The winter was terribly severe. Never before had there been such a cold and snowy winter. A great many people froze to death then, lost in snowstorms and buried under snow. In the spring, swollen rivers carried some of those frozen corpses; other bodies, lying in the open fields, were devoured by wolves.

Motrya completely recovered over the winter. Now she often sat spinning while Halya was busy with needlework or also spun on a wheel. Their house was quiet and warm and would have been cozy if it had not been for some haze before their eyes and a heaviness in the air. They would sit in that room, brightly lighted by a candle, quiet, sad and silent; and their shadows would sway on the walls; and the wheel would hum, casting a gloom over them and making them drowsy. Sorrow would weigh on their minds, their hearts would be heavy with anguish, and dark thoughts would press into their heads. Sometimes, the silence would be broken by a deep sigh; a thread would snap, and the hum of Halya's wheel would die down until she set it going again; or Motrya's spindle would fall out of her hand and land on the wooden bed with a dull thud, disturbing momentarily the somnolent stillness. Very seldom would a word escape somebody's lips and sail across the room like a ghost, frightening the gloom and the silence... Then it would fade away, without response. Without company, Chipka felt bored. He would lie down and find it was too stuffy. Then he would get up — and start shivering with cold. Sometimes he listened to his mother's reminiscences about her youth — and then his childhood years appeared before him, and he again saw his grandmother, old Ulas, the steppes and the sheep... "I was happy then," he thought to himself, not knowing what to do with himself now.

Outside stood the black wall of night; a severe blizzard was raging and howling; the cold was so terrible that anyone would be afraid to stick his nose outside. The cold pressed into the house, painting fancy patterns on the window panes. The wind-witch roared and howled in the chimney like a hungry beast and threw lumps of snow at the windows, which sounded as though somebody were knocking at them, asking to be let in. Halya and Motrya sat in silence, bent gloomily over their hatchels. Chipka

lay on a bench, face up, staring at the ceiling and listening to the frenzied howls of the wild wind. Now and then, the candle dimmed and flickered as soot formed on the wick; Halya or Motrya took off the soot, cursing the flame which mercilessly burned their fingers. Two or three times, the candle was put out inadvertently — and then jokes and laughter sounded in the darkness. It was as if their gaiety feared light; for as soon as it was struck, it sealed their lips — and they sat in silence, without uttering a word, as deaf and dumb as shadows.

Suddenly, there was a loud noise outside, and somebody knocked at a window. Quickly, Chipka jumped to his feet, as if suddenly pushed off the bench, and rushed to the door. The door clanged; there was the sound of voices and the stamping of feet. A while later Chipka came back into the room, followed by Lushnya, Matnya, Patsyuk and seven or so other men. Some of them were soldiers — Sidir was one of them; the rest were civilians.

"Oh, Lord!" Motrya gasped softly, freezing at her hatchel.

"Good evening to you!" some of the men said.

"Have you pulled through, old hag?" Matnya asked Motrya. "But it's time you kicked off — by God! Look at yourself: you haven't got a tooth left, and still you stick around, wasting bread!"

"Leave me alone, young man!" Motrya retorted. "Have you come into other folks' home to make fun of an old woman?"

"Don't touch her, Yakim," said Patsyuk. "Look how she bares her teeth! She'll bite you yet."

"May you bare your teeth, rogue, and stay that way forever!" Motrya spoke with bitterness.

The robbers burst into laughter.

Halya felt annoyed and hurt. Her heart throbbed.

"Are you sure that's the way for decent men to behave?" she asked them contemptuously.

The laughter died down as the men cast down their eyes. Halya looked sharply at them, her cheeks flushed, her heart hammering, her chest heaving. At that moment, she looked both terrible and beautiful. Like a she-wolf, which, protecting her young, bristled up and waited for the slightest movement to spring at her enemy, Halya stood there, haughty and disdainful, waiting for a single word from those men... That word never came.

Chipka, noticing signs of a coming storm, said quickly:

"Let's go into the living room, brothers, because we won't get anywhere with the women here... Let them get on with their spinning."

Hurriedly, the "brothers" followed Chipka into the living room.

Motrya's heart turned so heavy with bitterness that she was unable to stay at the hatchel. She rose to her feet, got onto the stove, lay down and burst into tears. Left alone, Halya thought,

"Just you wait! Wait until your buddies are gone... It's happened before... confounded criminals!" She was equally furious with Chipka and his bunch.

Meanwhile, in the living room a single glass made its usual round, loosening tongues that did not need drink to be bold, muddling the already muddled minds with visions of freewheeling living and adding toughness to men who were already as tough as they came. There were wild shouts and peels of laughter; the noise invaded the other room where Motrya and Halya had remained.

"What d'you say, chieftain?" asked Lushnya, addressing Chipka. "In what turbid waters shall we cast our net tonight?"

"It'll have to be not too far but with plenty of fish," added Matnya, as flushed as right after a hot bath.

"Petro and I have been thinking of going to Khomenko over at the hamlet," Lushnya went on.

"That'll be too dangerous," one of the men said. "He's got such an army at home..."

"True, he has those three sons, all of them as strong as bulls," Lushnya agreed. "And he himself could still tie up a bear single-handed — but that doesn't matter. That fellow's got such a fine thing that'll surely surprise him." Saying this, Lushnya pointed to Sidir.

"What's that?" asked Chipka who had kept silent until then.

Sidir got a rifle from under his coat and silently showed it to Chipka who eyed it gloomily and said nothing.

The glass made another round of the table, making the men's eyes shine still brighter.

"Time to go, brothers, if we want to get anything done," Lushnya insisted.

"Let's go then," Chipka said grimly, standing up.

The rest of them followed suit. Drinking another one, "for the road," they filed out of the house. Chipka put out the light and joined them outside. "Cock-a-doodle-doo!" a rooster crowed on a perch nearby, flapping its wings. Many of them started with fright.

"Aw damn it!" Lushnya swore. "Did it scare me!"

Halya had heard the drunken company leave. Had Chipka gone with them or had he stayed? Taking the candle, she went to the living room.

There was not a soul there. On the table stood an empty bottle, three empty glasses and two bowls with pickle juice at the bottom — apparently, they had contained pickled cucumbers. There were pools of spilled vodka, crumbs of bread, some cucumber ends. An empty cask with a funnel rattling inside lay on its side under the table. The benches had changed place: one stood along the wall, the other across the room. The room was blue with smoke, and it was hard to breathe; the stench of vodka was

terrible... One could have said this was a cheap tavern rather than the living room of a wealthy man.

Halya was unable to stay there long, because the smoke mixed with the smell of vodka suffocated her. She slammed the door shut and went to her room. She removed a fine plaid blanket from the bed and was about to lie down but then sank onto a chair absent-mindedly, put an elbow on the table, propped up her head on her arm — and fell to thinking... She sat there for a long time, thinking; then tears started rolling down her cheeks — and she threw herself onto the bed, drowned in them, and kept on weeping until she fell asleep. The candle on the table burned down and went out...

Motrya, tossing on the stove, spent a sleepless night, also crying. She had been deeply hurt by the jeering of those "wretched men." She did a great deal of thinking during that night. She even thought of reporting her son to the authorities for robbery. Then he and his bunch of rogues would be arrested, and she would know she no longer had a son. But then came another thought: maybe he would mend his ways yet. Also, she felt sorry for poor Halya who had been tormenting herself so much over him. And pity again wrung her mother's heart, and she begged God to allow her to die and wept again... She thought and cried all night through.

Shortly after the roosters had crowed for the second time, the tramping of feet and the thud of hoofs could be heard in the distance. The noise grew nearer... still nearer... sounded just outside... They were back, Motrya thought, wishing they would stay away from her room. Then she heard them pass into the living room.

A while later, the door squeaked as somebody came in.

"Who's there?" she asked from the stove.

"It's me," Chipka answered.

Then she heard him wash himself over the slop pail. Her heart sank.

"What are you doing, son?"

"Nothing..."

"Oh, son! At least you should've stayed away from such things. It's enough that you steal and rob... So don't —"

"And who put Yavdokha out of the way?" Chipka asked sharply.

"What?"

"Who poisoned Yavdokha, I ask?"

"D'you think it was I who did it?!"

"Surely it wasn't me..."

"Well, I do really thank you..."

She did not continue. There was a burning pain in her chest; despair, wrath and bitterness seethed in her heart, heating up her old blood. She felt stunned, her ears rang, and everything went dark before her eyes...

"I should've taken my life to spare myself this!" she whispered, rolling and moaning.

Soon afterward, the others came into the room. A candle was lighted. Motrya peeped out from behind the chimney — and trembled with horror. Smears of fresh blood could be seen on every man. A chill ran through her. Hiding in the darkest corner on the stove, she shook as in a fever... Then she heard them light a fire in the stove — to burn their clothes. Afraid even to sigh, and fearing she might start to scream, Motrya clenched her teeth harder and harder, pressing herself into the corner...

Having cleaned up and burned their blood-stained clothes, the rogues went back to the living room, putting out the candle.

"Oh!" Motrya sighed. "I wish Halya were with me now... Oh, Lord!" she moaned. "Please let me live to see the morning... Then I'll break with you... and renounce you, my son... my curse... and shout about everything for the whole village to hear... Oh! Why is this night so long? Why is it dragging on forever? When will it be light at last? Save us, oh Lord, and have mercy on us..."

She climbed down from the stove, fell on her knees before the icons and prayed, softly and earnestly, bowing until her forehead touched the floor. She did not hear the roosters crow for the third time nor did she see day beginning to break outside. She was torn away from her eager prayer only by a frenzied shriek and a persistent knocking at the window.

"He-e-elp! Oh... he-e-elp!" a child's voice screamed by the window outside.

"Who's that?" Motrya asked from the house.

"It's me... Save me... if you believe in God... Open the door... let me in..." the voice pleaded, sobbing.

Motrya quietly went out — and nearly fainted. A girl of about ten stood there, wearing only a blood-stained shirt, her feet bare, her hair disheveled, her body shaking...

"What's this?... What's happened to you, my dear little one?... What's your name?... Where d'you come from?..." Motrya asked the girl, trembling all over.

"Oh, how horrible, Granny! Something terrible has happened," the girl sobbed out, barely able to speak. "I'm from the hamlet... rogues came... killed everybody... cut up... shot... Father... and Mother... Grandfather... Granny... uncles... aunt... my little brother... all... all... There's only me left... they didn't find me... I ran away..."

"Ran away?"

"They're gone... They set the house on fire and... just went away... Oh, Granny, it was so terrible!" the girl shouted, clutching at Motrya with her little hands, as though she were afraid she might run away from her.

"Hush! Hush, my child!" Motrya silenced her. "I know who those rogues are... Only you keep mum! That was my son — confound

him! Hush, because if he hears you, it'll be all over both for you and for me..."

The girl pressed herself to Motrya, sobbing softly. Motrya led her inside.

"Let's go to the office... now..." Motrya whispered, her head swimming, her eyes burning painfully, and her legs shaking under her and making her afraid she might fall any moment. "Let's go, my dear, while they sleep..."

"I'm freezing, Granny... It's so cold..." the girl whispered, still pressing herself to Motrya.

"Here, put on my old boots... There's a shawl... a coat... Only be quick!"

Hastily, she helped the girl put on a pair of old, coarse boots, a coat and a shawl. Then she pulled on a sheepskin coat — and they quietly went out of the house.

A red glow hit their eyes. The girl again clutched at Motrya: she was afraid of that fire, for it was her house burning... They immediately turned away from the broad shaft of red light which rose high into the air, as though trying to set fire to clouds, and hurried to the opposite end of the village. The blood-colored glow of the fire lighted their way, while dogs barked all around them.

Soon *volost* officers and wardens came running, men packed the whole yard, and the house was surrounded. Not a single soul was let out of the house: all the rogues were seized and tied up. There was a wild commotion.

The din awakened Halya. Quickly throwing on a coat, she ran out of her room. Then she saw Chipka who stood there, glumly gazing at the ground, his hands tied up behind his back... She also saw the little girl in a blood-smearred shirt.

"Is that your justice?! This!!!" she cried frenziedly — and burst into an insane laughter.

Her body shook, her eyes went turbid and moved about strangely, a bloody foam came out from her mouth, but she laughed on and on...

The news came like a thunder, flashing and sweeping through the village. People came running from all sides, as if there was a house on fire to gape at. Then they went home, filled with terror, and started praying.

"Have you heard?" Hritsko shouted crazily, bursting into his house.

Khristya glanced at him and went as pale as a sheet.

"What's happened — a fire?"

"Chipka's knifed plenty of people... killed off Khomenko's whole family!"

"O-o-oh!" Khristya moaned strangely. Her eyes went wide as she looked around the room, timidly and fearfully.

"They've already been driven off to town... to the jail," said Hritsko.

"And Halya? Motrya?" asked Khristya in a barely audible voice.

"I don't know... they must be at home..."

Khristya seized her sheepskin coat, threw it over her shoulders with trembling hands and rushed out of the house.

— Hritsko shouted at her, ordering her not to go, and called her many times. But she was already far off and did not hear him.

A short time later, she returned, looking dazed. Stepping inside, she crossed herself.

"What's happened?" Hritsko asked.

"Halya..." She crossed herself once more. "She's hanged herself..."

"I'll be damned!" Hritsko blurted out, opening his eyes wide, and grew silent.

For the rest of the day, both of them kept silent, looking grim, pale and frightened, as if waiting for their own death. Their two children, a boy and a girl, noticed this and, not understanding what had happened, sat quietly on the stove and spoke in whispers.

"Why are Father and Mother so angry?" the boy asked softly.

"I don't know..." said the girl and, wagging her little finger at him, added, "Hush! Keep mum... or they'll beat you!"

* * *

This happened the following year, late in summer. As though having sensed that fall was not far off, the sun made the best of what time was left to it, burning, rather than warming, the earth with its heat. Rain would not come, and fine dust lay on the road almost ankle-deep and hung in the air in a gray mist, getting into eyes and choking throats... People kept driving up and down the road, the harvest-wagoning period being at its peak. A convoy of convicts in hand and foot irons, bound for hard labor in Siberia, plodded along the same road. They were escorted by a platoon of soldiers armed with rifles.

Having gone through Piski, the convoy halted for rest on a common near the *volost* office. They were Chipka and his gang.

As the news spread, people — old and young alike — came running from all over the village, as if this were a fair or something.

At this time Hritsko was returning from the fields, bringing as many as three wagon loads of sheaves. He drove one of the wagons, Khristya another, and their son, Halya's godson, sat on the third one on top of the sheaves, with only his little head rising above them. Seeing the crowd, Hritsko and Khristya stopped the oxen and went to have a look... They were struck dumb, both of them! Some time passed before Hritsko recovered from the shock and stepped closer to the convicts.

"What is this, brother Chipka?" Hritsko asked in a sorrowful voice that went from the very bottom of his heart.

In his question and his voice there was neither reproach nor revenge but only deep regret — and genuine pity for a lost brother.

Chipka shot him a sidelong glance, knitted his thick brows — and turned away.

Hritsko stood there, stunned, staring silently.

Shortly afterward, the noncom commanding the escort ordered the men to get ready for departure.

The convicts struggled to their feet, their heavy shackles clanging. There were parting words and embraces, weeping and wailing... Villagers wept, hugging their hapless brothers, giving them what little money they could spare — half a copeck, a whole copeck or even ten... The rogues also cried, leaving forever their home village and their fellow villagers — relatives and strangers alike. Chipka alone did not cry. Scowling like an owl, he stood apart from the rest, his heavy head low on his chest, his eyes downcast... Only several times did he shoot grim glances at people from under his knitted brows. Not a soul came forward to say good-bye to him...

Clang!... cling! Clang!... cling! The convoy started.

"May God help you for all the best!" Hritsko shouted after Chipka.

Chipka looked back — and shouted from the road:

"Hritsko! Give my love to Mother... Tell her I'll be back... Let her wait for me — if she's still around..."

"Oh, Lord!" Khristya cried out, tears gushing from her eyes. "Set him on the right path!" Then she and Hritsko turned back to their wagons.

"This Chipka has always been shady, I'd say..."

"His father was the same..."

"And he was born in *such* a way, too — good God!"

Thus spoke the people of the village as they looked after the convoy of convicts wading away through the gray dust. They stood there for a long time, trading gossip and guesses, until the conversation turned to yields, crops and other farming matters. After that, they went home.

* * *

Hritsko took Motrya to live with him — to support her until her death. She died soon after.

Chipka's house was sealed and boarded up. Owls nestled in it, and bitches in heat gathered packs of dogs in the kitchen garden overgrown with a forest of weeds. In a single year the once merry yard turned into a deserted, neglected place. The peeling empty house looked even more gruesome than the one which Khrushch

had bought many years earlier. People again crossed themselves as they hurried past it, and little children were afraid to look, even from afar, at the human face glaring at the road from above the gate with its saucer eyes.

Not far from Piski, right by the road, there was a high burial mound near the Khomenkos' hamlet. It was surmounted by a huge cross overlooking all the surrounding hamlets and fields... Rotting underneath it were the bodies of eight innocent people murdered during a single night by a "terrible man."

And in the middle of the village, across from the small ramshackle church, stood the renovated manor, buried in luxurious verdure, shining with lavishness and gilt and admiring its beauty mirrored in the pond. In it lived the new master of Piski, the wealthiest man in the whole Hetmanske district, the boss of the district, the most dedicated champion of the local *zemstvo*, the marshal of the nobility, a banker and the owner of sugar mills — Danilo Pavlovich Kryazhov. Now the manor was such a merry place! And such delightful parties were given there that the general's widow would have risen from her grave only to attend them — if only she could! Now the noblest aristocrats and the richest merchants not merely from one or two districts but from all over the province gathered there to enjoy the hospitality and exquisite foods and drinks of a cordial and generous host...

As years went by, the deserted house stood on the edge of the village as lonely as an orphan, envying the manor. But then it had an unexpected turn of good luck when it was bought for a song from the treasury by our old acquaintance Jew Hershko. He had its crumbling walls dressed up a little and the rotting roof patched up in places — and opened a tavern. Every Sunday and every holiday, and sometimes also on weekdays — to keep up with its noble neighbors — the building made itself available for drunken celebrations of ignorant rabble... But even now many a merrymaker suddenly felt his flesh crawl as he saw, toward night-fall, the black shape of the cross looming far away over the Romodan...

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