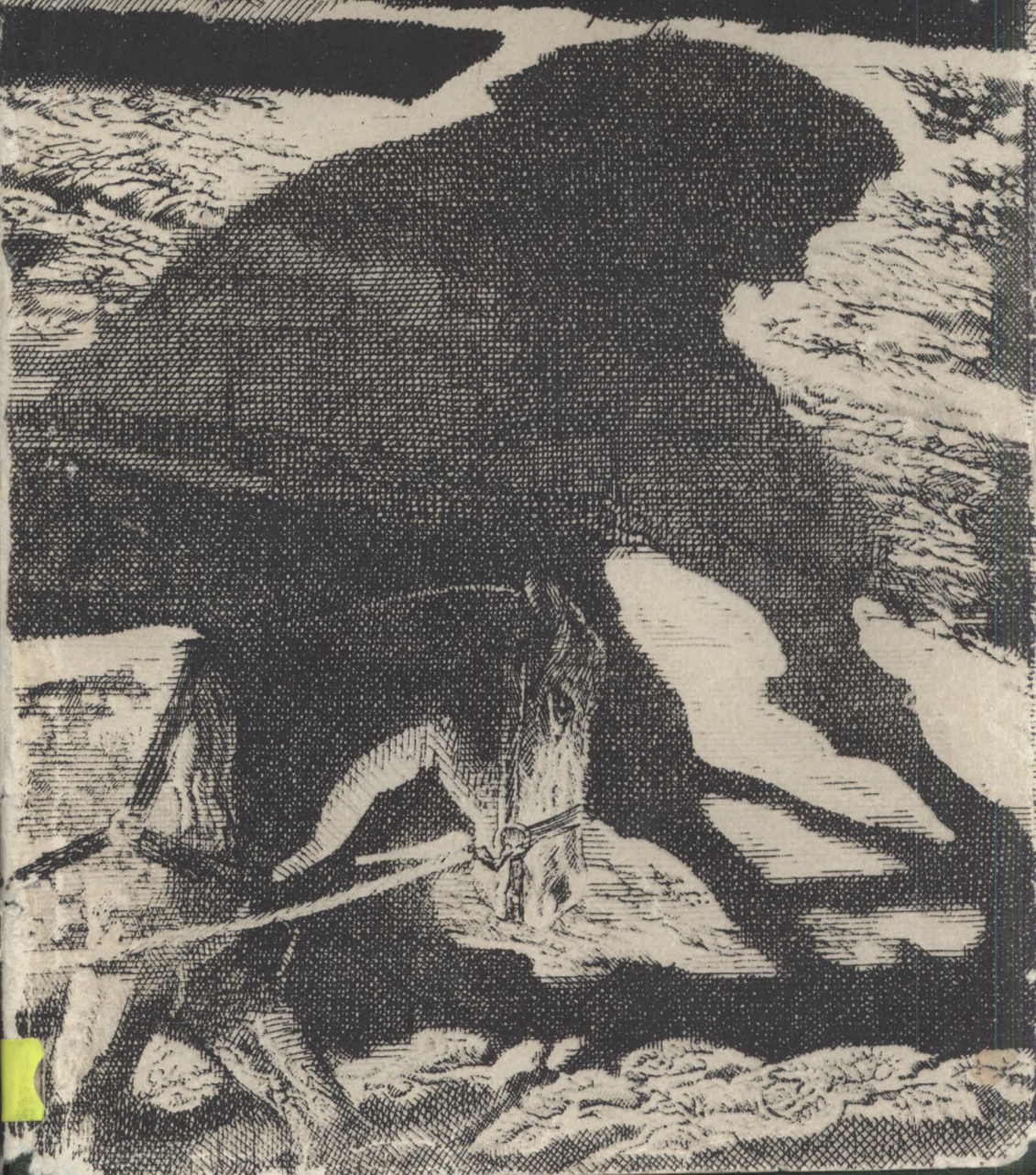
VASYL STEFANYK

MAPLE LEAVES AND OTHER STORIES

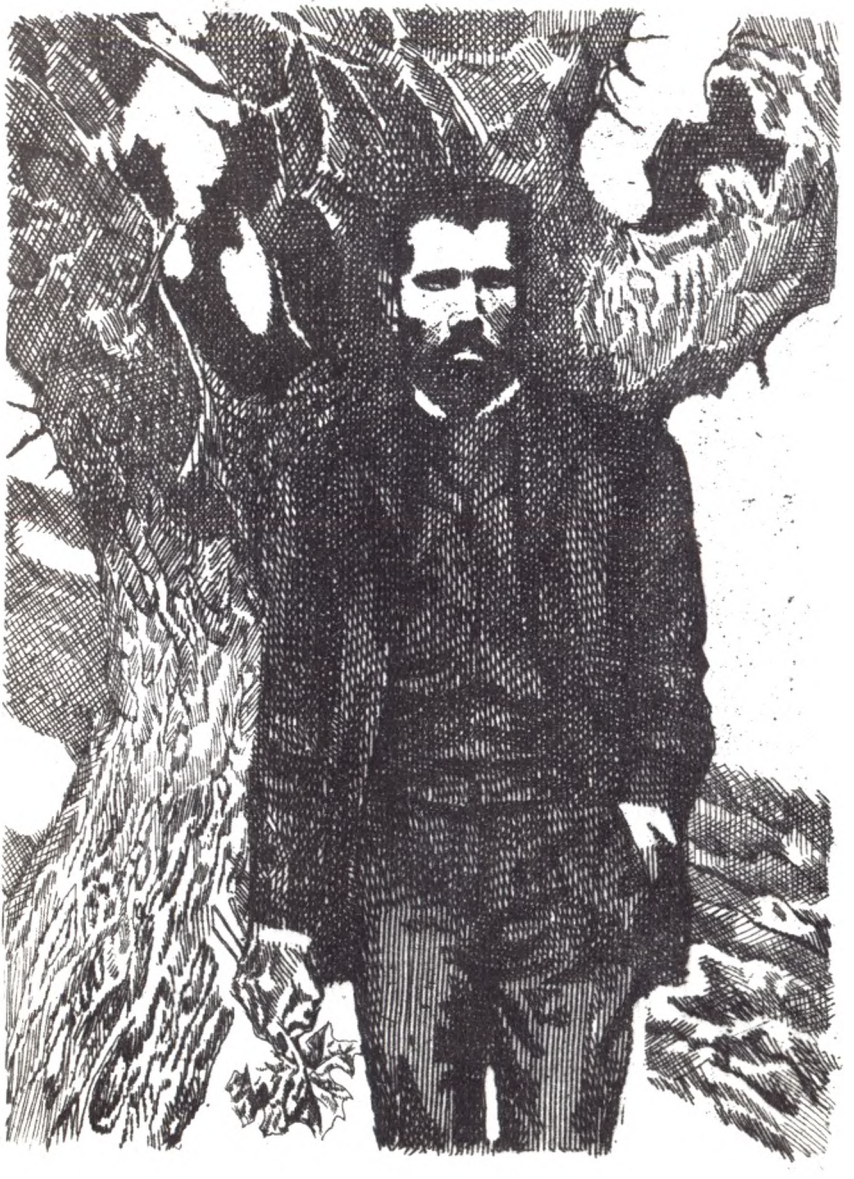


VASIL STEFANYK

MAPLE LEAVES AND OTHER STORIES

VASIL STEFANYK

Maple leaves and other stories



Bernard Shaw

VASIL STEFANYK

MAPLE LEAVES AND OTHER STORIES

KIEV
DNIPRO PUBLISHERS
1988

УІ
С79

ВАСИЛЬ СТЕФАНИК

КЛЕНОВІ ЛИСТКИ

Новели

Translated from the Ukrainian
by *Mary Skrypnyk*

Dnipro Publishers' books can be ordered from bookstores in your country which deal in Soviet literature, or directly through:

Mezhdunarodnaya Kniga
39/20 Dimitrov Street
Moscow, 113095
USSR

or

Ukrknyha Export Sales Dept
19 Lenin Street
Kiev, Ukrainian SSR
USSR

Printed in the USSR

С 4702590100—236 / М205(04)—88 КУ8.545.88

ISBN 5-308-00220-7

CONTENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vasil Stefanyk (1871—1936) was born into a wealthy peasant family in the village of Rusiv, Stanislaw (now Ivano-Frankivsk) Region. From 1892 to 1900, he studied at the medical department of Cracow University but didn't find medical science appealing to him. When Austro-Hungary was split up, Vasil Stefanyk found himself living on Polish territory. He maintained close contacts with the literary circles of the Soviet Ukraine where several of his books were published. Beginning from 1928, the writer received a pension from the government of the Soviet Ukraine. When Western Ukraine was reunited with the Soviet Ukraine in 1939, a museum commemorating the writer was founded at his birthplace.

Vasil Stefanyk began to publish his works in 1897. First, it was poems in prose, and then short stories. The first collection of novellas *The Little Blue Book* came out in 1899, followed by the collections *The Stone Cross* (1900), *The Road* (1901), *My Word* (1905), *The Land* (1926).

An outstanding master of the psychological story, Vasil Stefanyk brought into sharp focus the complex emotions of his personages and constructed his narrative on glaring socio-psychological contrasts. The finest examples are his stories *Maple Leaves* (1900) and *The Stone Cross* (1899).

MAPLE LEAVES

I

The bed was covered with linen, the godfathers sat on the front and back benches at the table, the children perched along the edge of the oven bed. They sat with their sleeves lowered, like a covey of quails at rest, but ready to fly at the slightest alarm. The godfathers, on the other hand, sat as if rooted, only their hands moved out to reach for the bread or the glass, but they did this unwillingly, as if they would rather have rested curled up into fists on their knees. The bread and vodka were being consumed without joy. The night lamp glimmered on the stove, turning their figures into huge, dark shadows stretching up into the ceiling where they curved around the beams, also immovable.

By the table stooped Ivan, the master of the house and the father of the child that had just been christened.

"Be so kind, and have another round. This isn't vodka, it's swamp water, but that's how it is with a poor peasant: that which is the worst in the world, that is for him to consume, that which is the most difficult task, that is for him to fulfill..."

"That's what we were born for," replied the godfathers devoutly. When the vodka had gone around again a full circle, Ivan leaned the glass alongside the bottle, for he was afraid it would fall to the floor, so small it was.

"Do have a bite," he urged. "Wouldn't you know that trouble like this would find me right in the harvest

season, in the very heat of it?! I haven't the slightest notion of what to do. Am I supposed to leave the harvest and look after my sick wife, cook the meals for the children, or am I supposed to leave them here in God's keeping and pull the scythe in hunger? For that's what it looks like, doesn't it? Nobody will come into a house at a time like this whatever the money. Here's a child for you Ivan, and be happy, because you haven't enough of them yet!"

"Don't complain, chum, and don't anger the Lord, for it is His will, not yours. And children, they are like froth on the water: something will snap and you may have to carry them all to the grave."

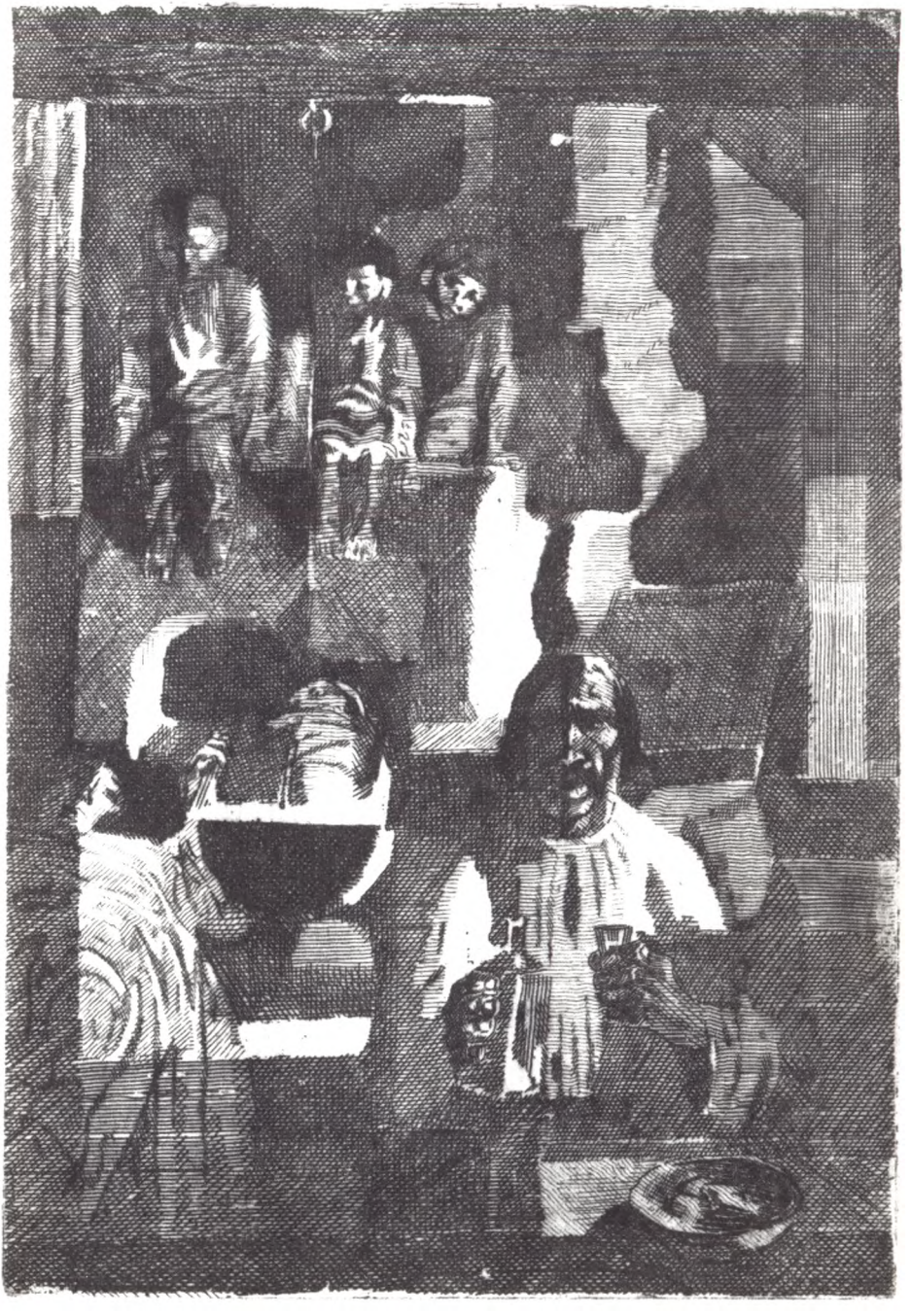
"Nothing will snap for me. It only snaps where there is one child. If you're poor, don't hanker after a woman, don't even look her way, if you know what's good for you. Then God won't bless you..."

"Now, cousin, that won't do, people must beget children."

"People might, but not paupers. That's why I say: if you're a pauper, don't multiply like a mouse, don't beget a brood of children, but be glad that you have a shirt on your back and a chunk of bread to eat, and that nobody hits you in the teeth. If you have all these things, what more can you want? Keep away from women."

"Now Ivan, give it a rest! Your wife, as is the custom, is in a condition where she shouldn't be listening to such talk. It won't help her health. Leave it for another, better time."

"I do beg your pardon for carrying on like this, but do you think that I care about her, or about the children, or about myself, for that matter? So help me, I don't! Let them be snatched away this moment and me along



with them! Ha, and what would we lose but this paradise on earth and all our possessions!"

The godfathers were silent. They didn't argue because they saw that they wouldn't convince Ivan. They wanted him to quickly talk himself out, for then he would let them go sooner to their beds.

Ivan got up from the table, stopped in the middle of the room, dropped his sleeves down over his arms like the children sitting on the oven bed and began to talk to them.

"Why don't you fly out of my mind? I'll open both the door and the windows for you. Out!..."

The children crouched back against the wall of the bed so they couldn't be seen.

"Ha, you locusts! Only bread, and more bread, and more bread! And where am I going to get all this bread?! You have to do a lot of tying for that twelfth sheaf, and a good deal of bending — and the pain in your back eats like a flame into your chest — and every straw stabs at your heart!"

This was to the children. Now he turned to his guests.

"And in the evening when you show yourself at the door of the house like a wisp, like a wrung-out washcloth, they are at you immediately, both your wife and the children: 'There's no bread!' So that you don't go, poor man, to take your well-earned rest, but drag out that flail and swing it far into the night so that tomorrow there would be something for the millstone. And finally that flail fells you down into the straw and there you lie like a wooden thing till morning when the dew soaks you to the skin. You've just opened your eyes and there it is eating at you, for it isn't enough that misery eats at you, this also has to find you in the night! You wash your

face and off again to the fields, so wretched that the sun dims before your eyes!"

"Don't worry about your children, Ivan, you are not alone. God is also their father."

"I'm not about to seize God by the scruff of the neck, but why does He allow them to come into the world, naked into its thorns? He brings them into this world without talent, allows them no manna from heaven, and the whole world cries: 'The peasant is a thief, a robber, a murderer!' They stand there, either one or another, in church; so smooth, even a fly couldn't crawl on them, and all they do is reproach and rebuke! 'You do not teach your children the fear of God,' they say, 'you yourself send them out to steal.' Ah, I couldn't possibly shame anyone like that! If my child were looked after by a wet nurse and a nanny and a housekeeper, and if people kept bringing me tributes, then I too, my priest, would know how to teach my children! But my children are growing up among the weeds, together with the chickens, and when something happens, like what has happened today, then no one knows whether they had a bite to eat all day. Have they stolen, or begged, have they eaten, I don't know! I reap your fields and forget not only my children but myself as well! You want me to cultivate your fields and to teach my children too? And where do you come in? That's it, you yourselves know what our life is like..."

"We know, neighbour, we know. How couldn't we know when we ourselves are stranded in the same way?"

"I look at my child, and give no thought to its growing up a good person, knowing how to do things well. I just watch to see if it can already keep on its feet, so that it can be put out to work — that's what I wait for.

I don't wait till it grows strong enough, till it gets a little sense in its head, that it lives a little beside me. Once the rich man or landlord open their jaws, I throw it to them just to get rid of it! After that it rounds up the cattle — it's feet one great bleeding wound. It is chilled by the morning dew, stung by the stubble, crying as it suffers through its days. You could go and round up the cattle for him and kiss his little feet, for you brought him into this world and remorse eats at your soul, but you pass by, even hide from him, so he wouldn't see you!"

Ivan grew purple in the face and began to gasp.

"And so it grows in the manger, or under the table or under the bench, chews on its tiny fists, washes itself in its tears. And when it grows up a little it will steal something, for it never knew good and the stolen article gives it a little joy. Here then, enters the gendarme. He puts you in chains, beats you up like an animal, for you're the father of a thief, therefore you are an accessory... You too, are a thief for life! But that isn't all; the end is not yet. Let your son — your child, and a thief — let him rot in prison, for you can't be sorry for a thief! Let him! But they will take his health, then send him to the hospital for curing, then send a letter to the reeve for the father to pay the costs. They throw you out of the house and under the fence like garbage. You pick yourself up, go to the reeve, kiss his hands and beg: 'Get me out of this punishment.' 'You are a poor man', he answers, 'and I could let you go. But what advantage would that be to me?' You humble yourself, curling up like that worm, and reply: 'I'll work a month for you without pay...' Am I right, folks, or am I not?! Am I telling the truth, or am I lying like a dog?!"

"You're right! The whole bit is exactly like that, not a word of what you've said is wrong!"

Ivan shook all over, feeling the entire weight of his terrible words.

"And don't say, folks, that I'm cawing over the heads of my children like that raven over carrion. Don't say it, folks, don't! I'm not just cawing, I'm telling the truth. It's my sorrow that you hear, my heart speaking!"

His eyes burned and a deep, terrible love for his children glowed there as he looked from one to the other around the room.

"Because it looks as if I've ill-treated my children worse that an evil enemy. But you can see that I haven't, can't you? I have just unfolded before my eyes their today, their tomorrows, a year, and another, and I've looked at my children, at what they'd be doing there. I went to them for a visit, as it were, and my blood ran cold at what I saw in store for them..."

He paused a minute.

"If only there were no oceans to that Canada, I'd put them all in a sack and walk there with them, no matter the distance — carry them far away from this wretchedness. I would walk the shores around those oceans..."

The godfathers who almost had forgotten about their rest, now, suddenly remembering, rose and left the house.

II

Morning.

The children were eating on the floor, scraping with their spoons and splattering their shirts. Beside them lay their mother, emaciated, yellow-skinned, doubled up, with her knees drawn up to her chest. Through her dark, uncombed hair flowed suffering and pain, her lips were tight with holding back her groans. The children,

with spoons in their mouths, turned to their mother, looked at her, then turned again to the bowl.

"Semenko, have you finished eating?"

"Yes," answered the six-year-old lad.

"Then take the whisk broom, sprinkle the floor, and sweep it up a bit. Mummy can't bend because she has a bad pain in her tummy. And don't raise too much dust."

"Now get out of my way, I can't sweep!"

The mother picked herself up and dragged herself to the bed.

"Now Semenko, wash yourself nicely, and Katerina and Maria, you wash also, and go to the well and get a jug of water, but don't fall in, watch how you bend over!"

"Semenko, go and pick a few cucumbers. Mother will pickle them, for I see that I'm going to be ill and you won't have anything to eat with your bread. Pick some dill too, and a few leaves off the cherry tree. Now mind, don't break the vines, pick the cucumbers close to the stem..."

"Semenko, take the shirts off the peg and hand them to me so that I could darn them. You're all walking around as black as a bunch of crows."

Semenko ran around and did everything his mother told him to do, pushing the younger children out of his way from time to time, complaining that the girls didn't know how to do anything except eat.

"They're still small, Semenko, when they grow up they'll wash your shirts for you."

"I'll hire myself out and my shirts will be washed for me. I won't need them."

"Don't look forward to working, my son, you'll weep through many a day."

"But Daddy grew up a servant and there's nothing wrong with him!"

"And you'll grow up a servant too, and your very skin will crack with the growing. But you're talking too much, Semenko, get ready to take your father his lunch. He must be so hungry by now, that his very eyes are aching from looking for you."

"I'll have to take Daddy's cane to chase the dogs away."

"And if you lose it, Daddy'll beat us both. Now don't go out bareheaded, at least take Daddy's hat."

"That hat always falls over my eyes and I can't see where I'm going!"

"Wash the jug and ladle some of the borshch into it."

"You don't have to teach me so much, I know what to do!"

"And Semenko, do be careful that the dogs don't bite you..."

III

The little feet pattered over the heavy layer of dust, leaving behing them a track like flower petals.

"Phew, this sun will burn me up before I get there. I'll push my hair up like a soldier, and then it will be much cooler."

He put the jug carefully on the road and gathered his hair up to the top of his head, then covered it up with the hat to look like a cropped soldier. The eyes shone with mischief and he skipped and hopped a few steps before the hair flopped down from below the hat into his eyes. "This is a very bad hat. Just wait till I hire out, I'll get myself a nice little hat..." He ran his tongue over his lips.

Walking on a little further, he again stopped and set the jug down on the road.

"I'm going to draw myself a large wheel with spokes."

He sat down in the middle of the dust and, using his father's cane, drew a large circle around himself. Then he began to fill in the spokes with himself as the hub. Having done this he gleefully jumped out of the circle and, picking up the jug, started off again.

Every gate merited his attention. He peered through them all to make sure there wasn't a dog in the yard, then slipped hurriedly by. Finally a dog bounded out from one of the yards and started after him. Semenko screeched with fright and sat down with the lunch. The cane also fell on the road. For a long time he sat there, huddled over, waiting for the dog to bite. After a while he got up enough courage to peer out over his knees to see a large black dog sitting peacefully beside him.

"Here, Gypsy, here, take some of my cornmeal cake, only don't bite because it hurts a lot, and your master will have to pay a large fine. Why he'll break your legs for you for that fine!"

He pinched pieces off the cake and threw them to the dog, laughing when he caught them in mid-air as they flew toward him. The dog's mouth was wide open and the lad opened his mouth wide as well.

"And who are you, you little rogue, feeding dogs along the road? What will you have left to take to the field?"

And some woman slapped him across the back of his neck.

"What else could I do when the dog wanted to tear me apart? And now you are beating me too?"

"And whose, my polite lad, might you be?"

"I'm Ivan's boy, but Mother had a baby and she's sick, so I have to carry the lunch, and the dogs bite me, and on top of that you hit me..."

"Oh, oh, and what a beating I gave you!... Where are you taking the lunch?"

"I'm taking it to Daddy, to the field by the pond."

"Then come with me, you little disaster, I'm also taking a lunch there."

They went on together.

"And who cooked the lunch?"

"Mother cooked it because I don't know how yet, and Maria and Katerina are even smaller that I am."

"Isn't your Mother sick?"

"Of course she's sick! She rolls on the floor and groans, you've no idea! I'm doing all the work..."

"What a worker you must be!"

"You don't know so you're talking nonsense. Go and ask my mother how smart I am! I know the whole Lord's Prayer, I do..."

The woman laughed and Semenko shrugged his shoulders and fell silent. The dog panted after him and he made as if he threw him bits of the cornmeal cake to keep him following them.

IV

Three days later.

Semenko and his sisters sat in the centre of the floor where a trough holding a tiny baby also stood. Beside them was a bowl of sliced cucumbers and bread. Mother lay on the bed, surrounded by green willow branches. A swarm of flies hovered above her.

"When you've finished eating sit quietly, because I have to take the baby to Vasilikha's to be fed. Daddy

said I should take it in the morning, at noon and in the afternoon, and he will take it himself in the evening."

"Semenko, don't break the baby's back!"

"I thought you were asleep. Daddy said I should give you a drink of cold water and a bun to eat. But Maria was such a quick girl that she grabbed that bun and has already taken a bite out of it. I gave her a licking and took it away. Will you eat it now?"

"No, I don't want it."

"Daddy also left a candle and said that if you were dying I should give it to you to hold in your hands and light it. But I don't know when I should do that..."

The mother looked at her son with her large, feverish dark eyes. An abyss of sadness, all her grief and helpless fear found expression in them, giving birth to two large, glittering tears. They rolled out onto her cheeks and froze.

"Daddy also cried this morning. How he beat his head against the wall! He was still crying when he took the scythe and left."

He picked up the baby and went out.

"Semenko, don't allow the stepmother to beat Katerina and Maria and Vasilko. Do you hear? Because the stepmother will beat you, she'll chase you away from food, won't give you clean shirts."

"I won't let her and I'll tell Daddy."

"That won't help at all, my dearest son, my most precious child! When you grow up, you must love each other very much, very, very much!... And you must help them, don't let them be hurt."

"When I go to work I'll be very strong and I won't allow it. I'll come and visit them every Sunday."

"Semenko, and please tell Daddy that Mother said that he must love you..."

"Eat the bun, Mommy..."

"Sing for baby so he won't cry..."

Semenko rocked the baby back and forth, but couldn't sing. So the mother wiped her dry lips with the palm of her hand and began.

Her whole soul flowed through her weak, broken voice, hovering tenderly over the children, caressing their little heads. The quiet, indistinct words spoke of maple leaves scattered over a barren meadow, with no one to pick them up, and they would never turn green. The song struggled to leave the house and fly out over that empty meadow after the leaves...

THE LITTLE BLUE BOOK

That Antin, who is over there shouting on the common, has always been ill-fated. Everything that passed through his hands turned into a calamity. If he bought a cow, it died; a pig, it got the swine measles. And it happened every time.

But when his wife died and after her his two boys, Antin changed into another person entirely. He drank, and drank, and drank. He squandered away his land, then his garden, and now he sold his house. He sold his house, then went to the reeve and got himself the blue employment book so that he could look for work, find employment of some kind.

He sat there, drunk, and enumerated loudly, so the whole village would hear, to whom he had sold his land, to whom his garden, and to whom his house.

"Sold — and that's that! Not mine any more — the

end! Not mi-i-ine! Ekh, if my grandfather should rise from his grave! Gracious Lord, four oxen — moving like those snails, twelve hectares of land, the finest house in the village! He had it all, but his nephew — just look!"

He showed the villagers his blue book.

"I'm drinking and I'll drink some more. I'm drinking with my own, not anybody else's. And he says to me: 'You've flushed away your land!' He stamps the book and scolds me. Ekh, I've seen better reeves than he is.

"If only he could die with the ease that I'm feeling here, right now!

"I'm leaving the house, leaving it for good. I've kissed the threshold, and I left. Not mine any more — and that's that! Beat me like a dog — get me away from what isn't mine any more! You can — please. It was mine, now it's not. I go outside and the woods are humming, saying: come back, Antin, to the house, come back, hey!"

Antin beat his chest with both fists so hard that the sound echoed through the village.

"You know, such despair came over me, such despair. I went back into the house. I sat awhile, sat, and then went out again — it's not mine any more, what is there to say, when it's not mine...

"May my enemies agonize as I did when I had to leave my home!

"I go outside — but no, I'm hallucinating. There's green moss growing on the roof, it has to be re-thatched. A stone, water — it won't be me who will thatch you, wretched creature. A stone — if only a stone, and that would end my despair."

On this Antin began to beat the ground with his fists as if a stone.

"I sat on the embankment around the house. My late wife had coated the walls and I carted the loads of loam in a wheelbarrow. I want to get up, but the embankment won't let me. I stand up — it won't let me go. And I feel terrible, yet I'm not sorry, no! But I am lost... I sit here and bellow, bellow as if someone was cutting belts out of my hide. People stand looking as I roar out my penance.

"See there, by the gate, is where the priest gave absolution. The whole world wept. A good woman, my wife, he said, hard-working...

"She must be turning in her grave, poor woman, for I'm a scoundrel. I've dissipated everything to the last thread, the linen as well. Do you hear, Maria, and you Vasilko, and you too, Yurchyk, your daddy will now go around in rags and carry water for the gentry..."

Here Antin pointed at the reeve's house.

"But the reeve's wife, she's a good woman. She brought me some bread for the road, but so the reeve wouldn't see. May the Lord God be good to her children, wherever they may be. May God give all of you better than he gave me...

"But on whose kindness am I trespassing, sitting here on a strange embankment? I'm going. I took a step and the windows began to weep. They wept like those small children. The woods alongside prompted and their tears cut across the windows, one by one. The house wept after me also. Like that child after its mother — so it wept.

"I wiped the windows with chaff so they wouldn't weep after me, for it was of no use, and then left.

"So easy, like chewing on a stone. The dark world now lies before me..."

Antin swung his arm around him.

"I still have some money, but I will drink. I'll drink with my people, spend it with them. Let them remember how I left the village.

"See, I have the little blue book in my bosom. This is my house, my land, my garden. I'm going with it to the ends of the world. The book is from the emperor, all doors are open to me. Everywhere. To the gentry, to the Jewry, to all beliefs."

ALONE — ALL ALONE

In that hut crawling up the hillside like an overturned beetle, lay an old woman. A bag at her side and a black, hard pillow beneath her head. Beside her, on the ground, lay a piece of bread and a small pitcher of water. The children, on leaving for work, left these for the old woman so that she would have something to eat and drink. It was a pitiful gesture, but they had nothing better that they could give her. And to sit by her on a hot busy day — God knew they couldn't do it.

The hut hummed with flies. They sat on the bread to eat and crawled into the pitcher to drink. After having eaten their fill they sat on the old woman, crawling into her eyes, her mouth. The old woman groaned, but was too weak to chase the flies away.

She lay on the ground and gazed with vacant eyes at the cross that had been carved out in the beam. With difficulty she pushed open her parched lips with a white tongue to dampen them.

The sun's rays, coming through the tiny window-panes, lit up the dim room. The colours of the rainbow played across her withered face. It was frightening to look at her in this light. The flies buzzed, varicoloured

lights roamed, together with the flies, over the old woman while she champed her lips and showed her white tongue. The room looked like some exorcised cave in which lay an abandoned sinner who was being punished from time immemorial and would continue to be punished forever.

When the sun had wound down to the old woman's feet, when it had reached the string that tied the bag, the old woman began to roll over the ground seeking the pitcher.

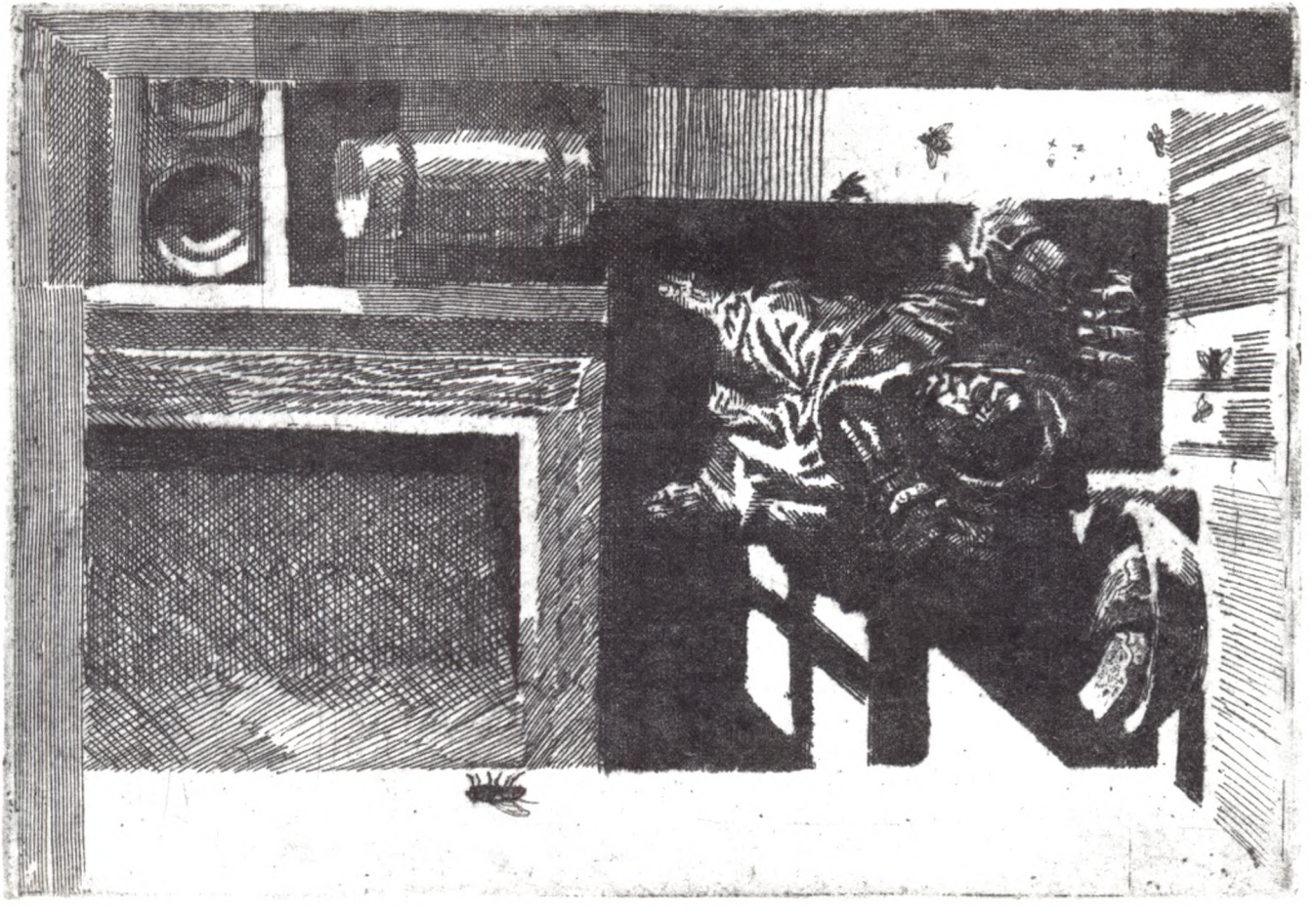
„Look, look, oho!"

The old woman subsided quietly, only her hand moved to chase away delirium.

From under the clay oven, Satan, with a long tail, appeared and sat himself beside her. The old woman turned away from him with difficulty. But Satan moved around to sit before her. He picked up his tail and stroked her face with it. The old woman just blinked her eyes and gritted her teeth.

Suddenly a whole cloud of little devils flew out of the oven. They hung over the woman like locusts over the sun or like a flock of crows over a forest. Then they fell upon her, crawling into her ears, her mouth, sat on her head. The old woman defended herself. She moved her forefinger to the middle one hoping to raise her hand to her forehead so she could cross herself. But the little devils all sat on her hand and wouldn't let her make the sign of the cross. The old devil shook his finger at her, warning that she shouldn't do anything foolish.

The old woman tried for a long time, but couldn't cross herself. At last Satan clasped her around the neck, laughing loudly, so much so that the old woman sprang to her knees and fell face forward toward the window.



Here a group of horsemen rode toward her — dressed in green uniforms, pipes in their mouths, on red horses. They were beginning to attack. This would be the end of her!

She closed her eyes. The ground in the house parted and the old woman, caught in the cavity, fell down. She flew further and further down. Somewhere near the bottom Satan caught up with her and began to fly with her, like the wind.

The old woman broke away and hit her head against the table.

Blood flowed. The old woman sobbed and died. Her head bent over against the leg of the table, she gazed askance, with wide, sightless eyes at the room. The devils stopped their skirmishing, only the flies luxuriated in the blood. They bloodied their wings and more and more red flies appeared in the house.

They sat on the black kettles below the oven and on the dishes on the sideboard which were painted with horsemen in green uniforms with pipes in their teeth. They spread the old woman's blood everywhere.

THE NEWS

The news that Hryts Letiuchy had drowned his younger daughter in the river swept through the village. He had wanted to drown the older girl as well, but gave in to her entreaties. His life had been one of deep misery since his wife died. He couldn't manage to look after himself and his children without a wife. No woman would marry him, for it wasn't only that there were children — there was also the wretchedness of poverty that came with them. For two whole years now, Hryts

has suffered alone with his two little girls. None knew of his suffering, how he lived, what he did, except perhaps his nearest neighbours. They told that Hryts hardly ever heated his house throughout the winter, but had spent the cold days huddled on the oven bed with his children.

Now the entire village was talking about him.

He had come home on evening and found his daughters on the oven bed.

"Daddy, we're hungry," said the elder, Handzunia.

"Then eat me, for I haven't anything to give you! There's only bread, stuff yourselves with it!"

And he threw them a crust of bread. Pouncing on it, they worried over it like whelps over a meatless bone.

"She gave you birth then left you on my head, may the earth disgorge her! There's a plague running rampant, may it break its neck, but it's not to be found around here. Even a plague is afraid to come into this house!"

The girls ignored their father's talk, for this went on every day and hour after hour and they were used to it. They sat on the oven bed munching at their bread and just looking at them was painful and heart-wrenching. God only knew how those small bones held together? Only the four dark eyes showed any life, any substance. It seemed as if those eyes must weigh like lead while the rest of the bodies, if not for the eyes, would scatter in the wind like feathers. Even now, as they chewed at the dry bread, it seemed that the bones in their faces would disintegrate.

Hryts gazed at them from his seat on the bench and thought: *Corpses,* and so frightened himself with this thought that he broke out in a cold sweat. He felt as if someone had placed a heavy stone on his chest. The

girls continued chewing greedily at their bread, while he fell to his knees on the earthen floor and prayed, though something compelled him to keep looking at them, his mind repeating the thought: *Corpses!*

During the next few days Hryts was afraid to remain in the house. He kept visiting his neighbours who now talked about how worried he seemed to be. His face turned black and his eyes sank so deeply into their sockets that they barely looked out onto the world, except perhaps, on that weight that was crushing his chest.

One evening Hryts came home, boiled the children some potatoes, salted them, and threw them on the oven bed for them to eat. After they had eaten, he said:

"Come down off the oven, we're going visiting."

The girls came down. Hryts dressed them in their tatters, took the younger child, Dotska, in his arms and Handzunia by the hand and left the house. They walked for a long time across the fields before stopping on a hilltop. The moonlit night showed the spreading river in the valley below, like a long strip of living silver. Hryts shivered. The glittering river chilled him and the stone in his chest became even heavier. Breathing hard, he barely had the strength to hold little Dotska.

They descended to the river. Hryts ground his teeth with such intensity that the sound reverberated across the valley. A long, hot belt of fire settled across his chest, searing his heart and mind. Nearing the bank of the river, he couldn't continue to walk slowly, but started to run, leaving Handzunia behind, running after him. Hryts quickly lifted Dotska high and with all his might, threw her into the river waters.

He immediately felt better and said quickly:

"I'll tell the gentry that there was no other way out; there was no food, nothing to heat the house with, no

one to wash clothes, their hair, nothing! I'll accept any punishment because I'm guilty, even the noose!"

Handzunia, standing by his side, said just as quickly:

"Daddy, don't drown me, don't drown me, don't!"

"No-no. I won't, but Dotska is already better off than you. Now go back to the village and I'll go and give myself up. See, follow this path right up the hill and when you come to the first house go in and tell them exactly what happened — that 'daddy wanted to drown me, but I begged him not to. He didn't and I have come hoping you will let me spend the night. And tomorrow,' tell them, 'maybe you can help me get work looking after someone's baby.' Now go, because it's night."

And Handzunia went.

"Handzunia, dear, come back, here's a switch for you, because if you were to meet a dog he may attack. You'll be safer with a switch to fend him off."

Handzunia took the switch and started off across the fields.

Hryts rolled up his pantlegs to cross the stream, the shortest way to the city being that way. He stepped into the water up to his ankles, then suddenly froze.

"In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, Amen. Our Father who art in Heaven..."

Turning back to the shore, he headed toward the bridge.

THE MEETING

The councillors began to slowly gather in the council room. Each one, before entering, gave his nose a good clearing, wiped it with his coat-tail, then used the palm of his hand for good measure. So, one after another, they joined their associates with a "Jesus be praised" and a

"Forever be praised" and took their place on the bench which surrounded the room.

About half of the councillors were already there: the eldest sitting closer to the table, the younger a bit further back. In the corner of the room, by the clay oven, lay two straw mats atop of the another and beside them — a black tin flask. This was the village hospital. And when the district doctor wrote a letter once or twice a year to the community, stating that he would visit the village at such and such a day, the reeve would summon the local policeman and say:

"Again, poor fellow, you'll have to clean up the bureau tomorrow, for you see, there's a letter that the doctor is coming. Wipe up the floor a bit, lay out the straw mattresses on the floor, cover them up with linen sheets and pour some of that smelly water in the flask around the corners — and we can close our eyes. There's an order that the hospital is to be used for cholera, and that's the way it has to be!"

So the policeman turned the bureau into a hospital once or twice a year. And when, after this, the councillors met in council, they all sneezed and remarked: "What a terrible smell!" Those who had served in the army said that the doctor had, no doubt, done a "reparation," put the patient to sleep, and that was why the nose was so affected. But Pavlo Dzinio had the best of it. He always dozed at the council meetings. When the councillors began to sneeze from the hospital stench, they would say:

"Pavlo is soft in the head. We only sneeze, but he goes to sleep. The doctor must be told that he shouldn't put the councillors to sleep, for the council will then be good for nothing."

Pavlo didn't defend himself, only looked at the coun-

cillors with frightened eyes, his face turning darker than usual. They had decided in the council that he was a fool and he became a butt of their ridicule.

At present the councillors sat on the benches and talked — slowly and lazily. Each sat as was most comfortable and as was habitual for him. Ivan Pavliuk, who sat right by the table and was the oldest, sagged into his stomach, folded his hands as if in prayer, placed them between his knees and spit between puffs of his pipe. His palms, nose and knees were neighbours with each other. He told them about his trip to the marketplace:

"Don't tell me about the market as it is now! The Jews and gentry have taken over the whole world. Who sells — the Jew, who buys — the gentry. Only here and there do the people sell something more solid — a calf, a heifer, maybe — but there are few oxen."

"Things are pretty tight! Eveyone thinks: 'I'll buy myself a calf, bring it up, pull some chaff together, maybe a pumpkin, and in the end, consider, something will grow out of it.' These are hard times!"

"True, they are hard. In olden times it happened that the priests nagged at the people that they shouldn't drink, shouldn't be idle, and now, you see, people don't drink and aren't idle, but still don't see a *kreutzer* * for all of that. The people have been pressed hard and at Easter few have even a bit of salt pork. It's so hard, I'm telling you, that it's as if you're trying to get it out of a stone, that *kreutzer*!"

"All is changed. Why in the old days even the cattle weren't the same. Now the cows are all piebald — Tyrolean, and then they were all white. I myself am not yet an old farmer, but through my wife I got a pair of white oxen — white as snow, and they had horns that couldn't

* *kreutzer* — an old German and Austrian coin

get through a gate. There were times when they ran like horses. And when I rode into town I had to bridle them. They said that they were Hungarian cattle, as they say about these now, that they're Tyrolean. But then even cattle were cheap. So it was, so!"

"They were sold cheap and were bought cheap, but it was better. You see, it's not only the cattle that are different, what about the pigs in the old days? There were, you see, all kinds — some with long bristles and tall on their legs, and now they are all white and smooth. When you stop at the pig market to look, it's as if it was sown with white blossoms. Only the buyers with their big bellies walk among them."

"There are, it seems, all kinds of them. But could you say that people are all alike? When I was in Kolomiya a while back, I look — and there's something like satan himself coming toward me, may God forgive. The face was all black and the hands too. I think to myself that if he ever stood on a bridge at night, then one would have to light up the water. The solemn truth! Some gent said that there are people like that under the sun."

"Well it's for sure that there are all kinds. My Vasil, when he was in Vienna serving in the army, said as how he saw pigs that had no ears or snouts. One couldn't even see their feet, only the body."

"There's everything in this world, but of misery the most..."

Here the reeve walked in and the conversation stopped.

"What's new in the town, Reeve?"

"If one only had the money it would be good in the town... I saw that the gentry went into restaurants to drink and eat all that was best and had the money for it.

If only one could become one of them for at least a week," said the reeve.

"It depends on the gent. Because there are some who sleep on straw and delouse themselves with their teeth. A waistcoat on top and no shirt underneath. He presses a bit of linen to his chest — and he's dressed! And more than one of them is so hungry that he'd eat linseed cake," said Prots, who had long ago served at the manor.

"And I was also at the clerk's, the one who's beyond the pasture. He chatted something at me and then it came out that if only, he said, there were fewer people in your village who used the post office to get newspapers. 'That,' he said, 'is deceitful. There seem to be,' he said, 'too many mouzhiks.' If only one-twentieth of them gave a coin for the paper, then it would make thousands and thousands paid out for nothing. 'Such a gent,' he said, 'will write everything himself, throw dust into one's eyes, smear and smooth it over and the foolish peasants, read this and lick their lips, that one day the landlord's lands would be theirs."

"And you, I suppose, stood there and nodded your head?" asked the young councillor, Petro Antoniv.

"No, as if I would get into a scuffle with him over some scoundrel who deceives people! It's true what the priest from the Hrusheva village said, that the people allow themselves to be incited by all kinds of criminals and then, he said, when it comes to something, they disappear and the foolish people find themselves in jail. And how many are beaten up and injured? I just don't like it when someone throws it in my face. As if I sold them out or betrayed them. As if I push myself to be elected. Choose whoever you want, I'll stand aside."

"You'd push yourself but we shout you away. You'd even take the sausage home to your children," said Petro Antoniv.

"Silence!" shouted the reeve, "silence, or I'll order that you be put in chains, you young snotty. Tell me, men, were we close friends?"

"You never wiped my nose and you can nod your head at what I say just as you did for the clerk."

The argument was beginning to turn into a fight and old Ivan stepped in:

"Petro, you wretch, don't be pig-headed. You know that youth should be silent before old age. One man is such that he is afraid of nothing, and another is afraid. I myself, men, have always supported the community and still do, but by God, I would not go along with your meetings. Once, in the fall, when I was in town, some angry one came up to me and said: come to the meeting and at least in your old age see how the peasants are uniting together. And I told him: 'by God, I will not go! It's good that they're banding together, because, as it is said, united we stand, but I won't go.' I told him that I had grown up and turned grey without ever having spent an hour in jail. Do I need this dishonour now, in my old age? Why, it seems to me that every child in the village would point at me and say: see, Uncle Ivan was in jail! So I won't go, that I won't. My Mykola goes, but I won't."

Somehow, old Ivan, in one way or another, prevented further argument. The anger, however, remained.

"But we are talking away and talking while you, Reeve, are not telling us why you have called us together," asked Ivan, so that the arguments wouldn't start again.

"I'm not going to call you together any more, once

I have what I want; I spit on the regime, let the snot-noses run things."

"Ah, but do you think that we won't be able to find another reeve? We'd be able to find enough to fill the entire district in this village alone," Petro needled.

"Well, our Brother Elder has something to say to the council," said the reeve.

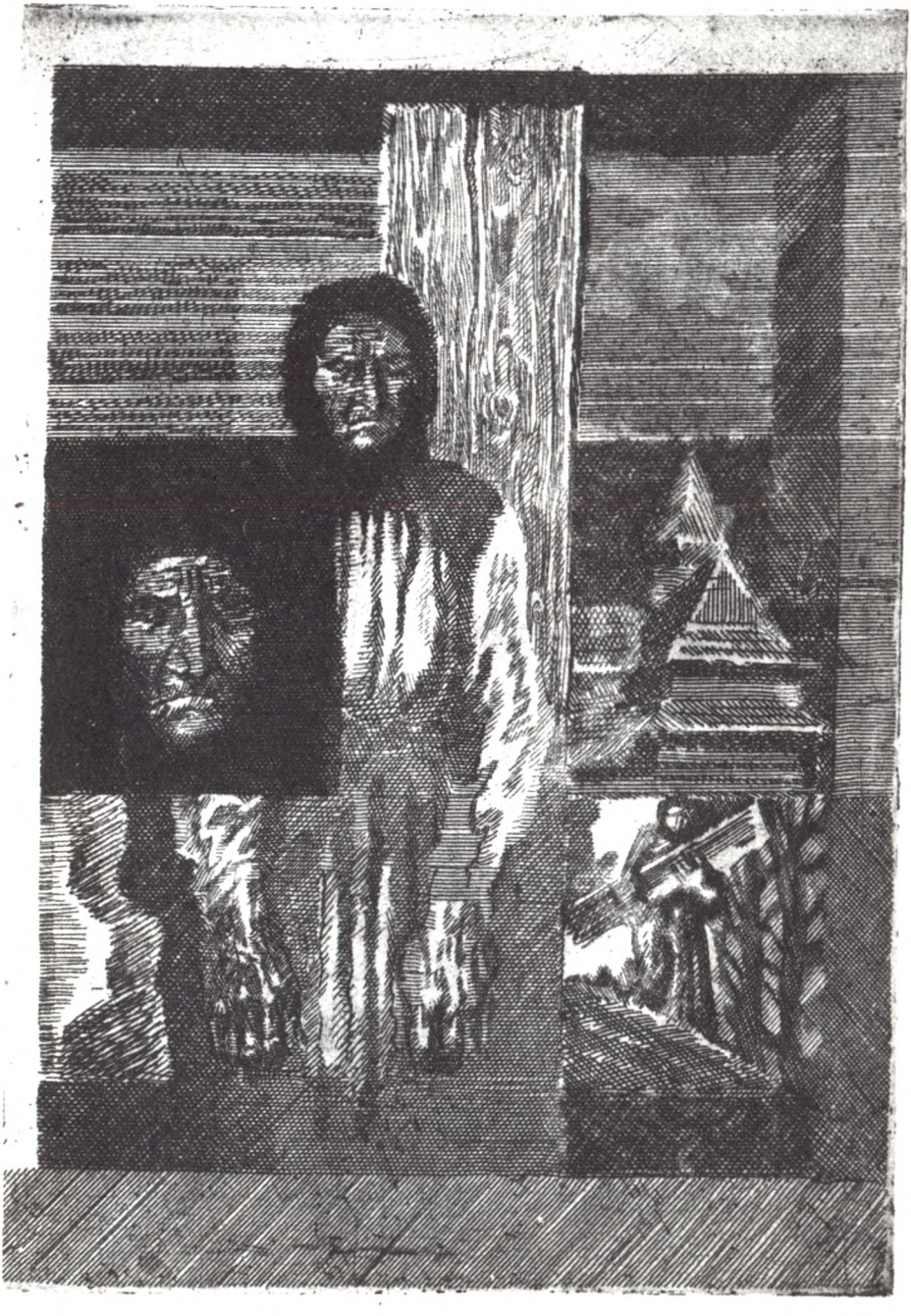
The Church Elder, Vasil, began to speak:

"I don't remember if it was Thursday, or Friday, when the clerk's son came running in to see me. 'Oh, Uncle,' he cried, 'I saw how old Romanykha carried a board away from the church.' So I went there the next day to look, and sure enough a board was missing, and from among those that were left over from the belfry yet. True, those boards have already rotted, but how could one take one from a church? And for such an old woman to take something that was not hers? I went to the priest and told him about it and he said that it should be told to the council, for, he said, one can't allow the church to be robbed! I wouldn't, doggone it, have said anything, if it was mine, but belonging to the church, one had to defend it," accused Vasil.

The councillors were silent, for who would have thought that old Romanykha was a thief. Never in the village had there been even a rumour that she stole.

A moment later Romanykha herself came in. Old, tattered, and blue in the face. She stood by the door and began to speak quickly, through tears:

"Good husbandmen, I stole that board, that I did, so you'd know how my son looks after me in my old age. Why I don't even have a bit of straw in the house to light a fire! I sit on the oven bed and freeze. I sew and spin yarn for the whole village with my fingers chilled to the bone. My eyes have gone bad, too. Whatever I



can now sew is just enough to keep body and soul together — there's not a *kreutzer* left for heat. I've given my son everything I had, leaving myself only a little corner, and he won't even come once a month to ask: 'What the devil have you been doing?' No, he doesn't, no!"

"But stealing from the church? Woman, your years are not long for this world, you've got to remember that you must take something with you to the other side. You're an old woman, so I'll say that you shouldn't be shut away or beaten, but that you should just give a *lev* * to the church and go with God. Just don't let me hear any more about any stealing," the reeve passed judgement.

Romanykha threw herself forward as though scalded:

"Oh, dear Reeve, why I'll die and won't have even one coin to give! Where will I get them, where, where?"

"You've got to!" was the answer.

The councillors were silent. They had heard that the old woman was destitute and knew that she didn't have a *kreutzer* to her name. But she had stolen and what was the truth, was the truth, and from the church yet! They were thinking already that maybe she should give a little at a time, a *kreutzer* or two, when Petro Antoniv spoke up:

"I would say, men, that we shouldn't punish such a poor widow. The church, I'm sure, cannot be heated by a widow's *lev*. I've heard it said that when a church fell apart in the past, a limitless lake would form in its place. If one could collect all those widows' bloody coins and put them in the church treasury, then not a single church would be able to restrain the widows' tears. This, I believe, would not be justice. Instead of the church giving

* *lev* — a monetary unit of Rumania

to the old woman, we try to take from her that last coin. I was at her place not long ago for some spun yarn. I came in and the house was colder than a barn. A burning wick on a small shelf cast a light no bigger than a kernel of wheat and that was all there was of a fire in the place. The old woman was sitting and rubbing her fingers, stiff from the cold. I would say, men, that we shouldn't ask her to pay that *lev*."

The reeve looked at Petro angrily, but for the councillors it was as if a stone had been lifted off their chests. All spoke up with one voice that the woman's *lev* wasn't needed. And old Ivan said: "may God forbid!" They also said that the widow's son be called in and then old Ivan began to scold:

"Hey, my lad, why she used to hide you below a bush while working in the field, so you would be cool. Why she cleaned you and clothed you and wept when you were recruited, and now you can't even throw her a handful of straw? Ekh, if only I were the reeve, I'd chain you to the last link in the chain!" he admonished.

LES'S FAMILY

Les, as was his habit, stole some barley from his wife and headed toward the tavern. He didn't walk, but ran toward his goal, casting backward glances as he did so.

"Oho, here she comes with the brats. May they break their necks! If only I could get in to the tavern, because if overtaken then again there would be an uproar heard through the entire village."

And he ran faster with the bag on his back. But his wife and sons caught up with him, grabbing at the bag just as he reached the tavern:

"Now don't try to escape, don't try to run off squandering my work away from the children!"

"And you, you abomination, again want to create a hubbub for all to hear! Have some pride!"

"Pride with such a husband I've never had and never will have! Give me that bag and get lost. If not we'll beat you. Together with the children, I'll beat you, right here before the whole village! Let there be repentance before the whole world. Give it to me!"

"You old bitch, have you gone mad? Why I will hang you and your brats!"

"Andriyko, son, just across the legs, just across the legs. Let him learn not to squander our bread among the taverns. Beat him in such a way that you break his legs. We could still make enough to look after a cripple, but no amount of work make enough for a drunkard!"

She was talking to her sons who were standing with switches in hand and looking timidly at their father. Andriyko was, perhaps, about ten years old and Ivanko, eight. They didn't have the courage to come closer and beat their father.

"Beat him, Andriyko! I'll hold his hands, but only his legs, only his legs!"

And she slapped Les across the face. He retaliated so hard that the blood ran. Now the boys ran up and began to lash at his legs with their switches.

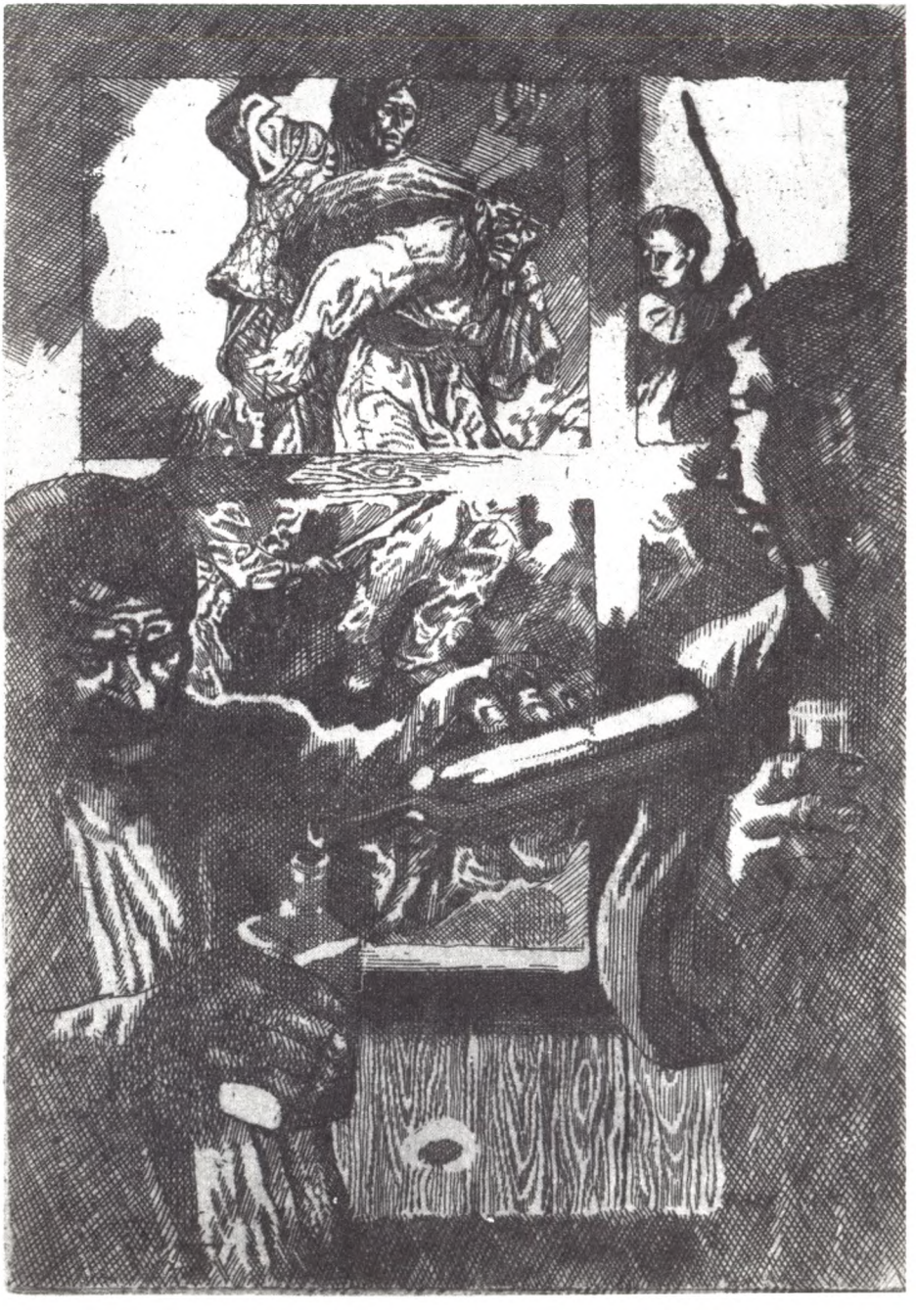
"Harder, son. Beat him on his legs, like that dog, so that he drags them behind him!"

And she spat blood, turning blue, but holding on to his hands.

The boys, now bold, ran about him like pups, beating him across the legs, then backing away and attacking again. They were almost playing, almost laughing.

A number of people had run out of the tavern.

"Hey, this is something no one has ever seen since the world began! Will you look at how they're beating



him? Why their mother's milk is still dry around their mouths. It's punishment before the whole world!"

The boys were using their switches in a frenzy while Les and his wife stood as if turned to stone, bloodied but unmoving.

"Hey, lads, you'll injure yourselves by your daddy..."

"You should have got longer switches so you could reach better..."

"Hit your daddy over the head, his brain, the crown..." This shout came from some drunk in front of the tavern.

Les threw the bag to the ground and stood there like a fool. He had not expected such an attack and didn't know what to do. At last he laid himself down on the ground and took off his jacket.

"Andriyko, and you too, Ivanko, come and beat me now, I won't make a move. You're still small and it's too hard for you to run back and forth. Come, beat me..."

The boys backed away and looked at their father in wonder. They slowly dropped their switches, then looked at their mother.

"Why aren't you telling them to beat me now that I'm lying down. Beat me!"

His wife began to wail, her cries resounding through the whole village.

"What am I, a human being, to blame for? I work hard in the fields with the children for a husk of bread, but whatever I earn, he carries to the Jews *. People, I can't make ends meet because of him, because I can't leave the house. If there's anything worthwile he takes it to the Jews for a drink. I can't earn enough for the children and for the taverns. Let him do whatever he wants, but I can't go on any more..."

* in those times, village innkeepers were basically of Jewish origin

"Well, beat me, I won't move a finger."

"Let the Lord beat you, my husband, for the years that you have wasted to no purpose and orphaned your children. Why you have beaten us so much that we are never free of our bruises, like those oxen of their yokes. I cannot even keep an earthen pot in the house because you break it. And how many times have the children and I slept freezing, because of all the windows that you have shattered? I'll say no more, let the Lord punish you for me and the children! Behold what a fate I've been given through my prayers! People, people, don't be surprised, for you don't know."

She slung the bag over her back and like a dejected hen dragged herself home with her children.

Les lay on the ground without moving.

"I'll go to jail, I'll go to jail forever. At once! No one has ever heard of such a thing and never will. I'll start something that will shake the world!"

He lay there and wheezed his determination.

His wife carried all their belongings out of the house to their neighbours. At night she lay down to sleep among the weeds in the garden with the children. She was afraid of Les who would come home drunk.

She spread a bag for the children to sleep on and covered them with a coat. For herself she bent above them in her peasant jacket.

"Children, children, what are we to do? I've made up a bed for you tonight that will be yours through your lifetime. You'll die and no one will ever remember you. Even my prayers will be of no help to you..."

She wept and she listened if Les had returned.

The heavens twinkled along with the stars. One shot from the sky. Les's wife crossed herself.

MUMMY'S BOY

On Saturday morning Mikhailo's wife rushed out beyond the doorstep of the house and spoke to herself in a ringing voice:

"Bah, I don't know where that brat could be! Rambling around somewhere, no doubt, rummaging around somewhere in the yard, like that chicken. But is there any way he can be kept in the house? I'd give the brat a wash, but he's not around."

After a moment she went to the barn to see if the youngster was with Mikhailo.

"Well, what can you be thinking of? You won't make the boy go into the house, but keep him here in the cold. Come Andriyko, into the house, and I'll give you an apple, so-o, so-o red!"

"Don't go, stupid, because mother is lying. Mother wants to wash you, so she's fooling you," said Mikhailo and burst into laughter.

"This man, I swear, has lost his mind. The child will freeze if he stays here with you. Don't listen to Daddy, Andriyko, for Daddy's a fool, but come into the house. I'll wash your hair and give you a bun and an apple, yes!"

"But what if you don't give them?"

"Come, come on, I swear I will."

And she took her child's hand and led him into the house.

"I'll give you a nice wash, comb your hair, and tomorrow you'll go to church with me. Mama will give you a nice little shirt and sash. Everyone will look and say: 'Just look at how handsome Andriyko is'!"

"And will you give me an apple, Ma?"

"Yes, yes, many."

"And a bun?"

"And a bun..."

"And take me to church?"

"I'll take you, I'll take you..."

"Then you can wash my hair."

The mother began to wash Andriyko's hair. Rivulets of water ran down behind his collar and Andriyko was barely able to keep from crying.

"Now quiet, stand quietly, and mother will wash your hair nicely, so nicely. Your face will be as clean as paper, your hair like flax. You'll be the finest lad of them all!"

"But it's biting..."

"Mother will clean you up and there'll be no more biting. You'll feel so good, just wait!"

"And when you've cleaned me, will you give me a bun and an apple and let me go outside?"

"Of course. I'll dress you and you'll go far — a way, way off..."

"Good, I'll go over to see Auntie's Ivan."

Mama finished washing Andriyko, then took him up in her lap to comb his hair.

"Ma, there's a cat by Daddy, and he catches lots of mice, then chokes them."

"Because mice eat the grain and make mischief..."

"What mischief?"

"So there wouldn't be anything to thresh or to mill."

"What do they eat?"

"Why, grain..."

"How?"

"Eh, one can't come to any end with you... Daddy will have to give you a haircut tonight, for just look at how shaggy your hair is."

"Just like a grown-up's, Ma?"

"How else? Aren't you my young man? You can see this yourself, but will never let me wash your hair. Just look in the mirror and see how nice you look."

Andriyko looked as if he'd been bathed. His hair fell in small, blonde streaks over his forehead and down

his neck. His eyes were blue, his lips red. His mother gave him an apple and a bun which he hid down in his shirt.

"I want to go to Auntie's."

"Then eat your apple first and then go, because the boys will take it away from you."

"I won't show it to them. Let me go to Auntie's."

"Then go, as you like."

She dressed him in his little boots, his jacket and his daddy's hat and let him go out.

"Take care you don't fall, or you'll get it..." she warned.

She then sat down to sew.

Not to worry, he's as smart as any grown up. And who does he take after? He's the image of Mikhailo. He immediately demands payment for a bath.

And the mother smiled and went on sewing.

If only he'd grow up healthy and well-mannered. He's three years old and already knows the Lord's prayer, yet such a mischief that he turns the house upside down. He is so troublesome sometime that one has to strike him. If one didn't, then nothing will become of him.

She lifted her head to look out of the window.

It's noon already and Mikhailo hasn't yet come in to eat. And the brat isn't back yet, either. Probably playing in the snow somewhere and come back coughing.

In the evening Mikhailo sat on the bench and held Andriyko on his lap. The fire blazed in the clay oven and lighted up the room with a rosy glow. The mother sat before it preparing supper.

"You've sunk, old man, to childishness. Leave the child alone and don't throw him around like a watermelon. Come to mother, Andriyko."

"But I don't want to."

"Whose are you — Daddy's or Mummy's?" asked Mikhailo.

"Daddy's."

"And who will you beat up?"

"Mummy."

"You little scatter-brain, I give you apples and buns and you want to beat me?"

"Daddy will buy you lots of apples, because you're Daddy's."

"Oh, sure he would but... You'd end up never having anything."

"Come on, show us how you'd ride a horse in the army?"

The boy straddled the poker and began to leap around the room.

"Enough, enough, Andriyko. Here is a straw for you to drink the froth on the milk with."

Andriyko stopped by the oven and began to suck at the milk.

"Now, Andriyko, what will you buy for Mummy?"

"Red boots."

"And Daddy?"

"I won't buy Daddy anything."

"You're a nice Mummy's boy."

Mikhailo again took him up in his lap.

"What is your name?"

"Andriyko Kosminka."

"And what may you be?"

"A Rusyn radical."

"Very good. And where will you be going?"

"To Canada."

"And what will you go on?"

"On a ship, as big as a house, over a wide ocean — wide, wide..."

"Will you take Daddy with you?"

"I'll take Daddy and I'll take Mummy, and Auntie's Ivan, and we'll all go..."

"Go on with you, stop training the child and giving him exams or he'll fall asleep before his supper."

"But just think how smart the brat is, he knows everything!"

Mitro was patching his wife's boots. Not really patching but sewing the pieces together. It would be a sin to give such tatters to a cobbler, besides there wasn't a *kreutzer* to spare as well. And his wife was absolutely

barefoot with nothing to put on to even bring water into the house. That's why Mitro had been working on the boots since early morning. He sat near the bench by the window, surrounded himself with old pieces of leather, waxed thread, and raged like a dog.

"By God, I'll throw them into the oven, hurl them into the fire and get rid of them! The leather has hardened, the threads break when going through — out on the manure pile and spit — that's where they belong!"

Thus muttering to the boots, Mitro continued, with great care, to mend them. He anxiously checked every thread he pushed through to make sure it hadn't broken. Because of this his work progressed very slowly and this maddened him.

"Iron isn't leather and it also gets worn down, so what's the use of complaining. It's four years since we bought them, four years this fall, and they've served their purpose. But they've got to serve another winter, whatever happens."

And he mended and raged and threatened a hundred times to throw them into the fire or on the manure pile.

Mitro's wife sat in the corner of the hearth mending their tattered clothes.

They've crumbled into chaff. One can't sew hemp, because one must eat, linen can't be bought because there's no money — it will come that we'll have to walk naked. You patch one spot, another appears. If one didn't wash them, maybe they wouldn't tear so much. I'm not even washing them properly any more, but a cobweb remains a cobweb! God knows how to mend them already, from what end to set about it?

These thoughts were passing through her mind as she sat over her tatters. Her woebegone face was bent diligently over the torn shirts, but without hope. The heavy, tattered linen, with it's threadbare red embroidery resembled an army uniform in wartime. And she, like a poor, compassionate nurse, with sorrow and resignation, tried in one way or another to help the unfortunate wounded.

Well, we'll weather this winter somehow, but the summer, only God knows.

And she led her grey thread around the patches, thinking about her miserable life.

Mitro's mother was lying on the oven bed. A morsel of a woman — no bigger than a ten-year-old child. She coughed without stopping.

"Lord, Lord, find me death so that I don't wallow in such bitterness. I've already, I think, atoned for all the sins that I've sinned... Some are dying who have every right to live, leaving their wealth and property, while I remain like that solid rock which noone can break up. Lord, Lord, why am I being punished so cruelly?"

And she burst into another fit of coughing.

The children sat around their grandmother. When their grandmother turned blue and gasped from coughing, they looked at her with interested eyes, pointing their fingers at her and saying: "Look, look, Grandma is dying." And when the grandmother stopped coughing, she always answered: "No such luck, children, death has forgotten me."

But Mitro had finally grown sick and tired of fighting with the hardened boots. He hurled them under the bench and began to scold:

"If I were preparing you for death, I'd feel much better. Neither boots, neither clothing, neither food — there's nothing I can provide for you. Go barefoot for a while, then maybe you'll be more quickly snatched away."

He sat down at the table.

"How about getting me something to eat, my wife. You know that I haven't had a thing in my mouth all day."

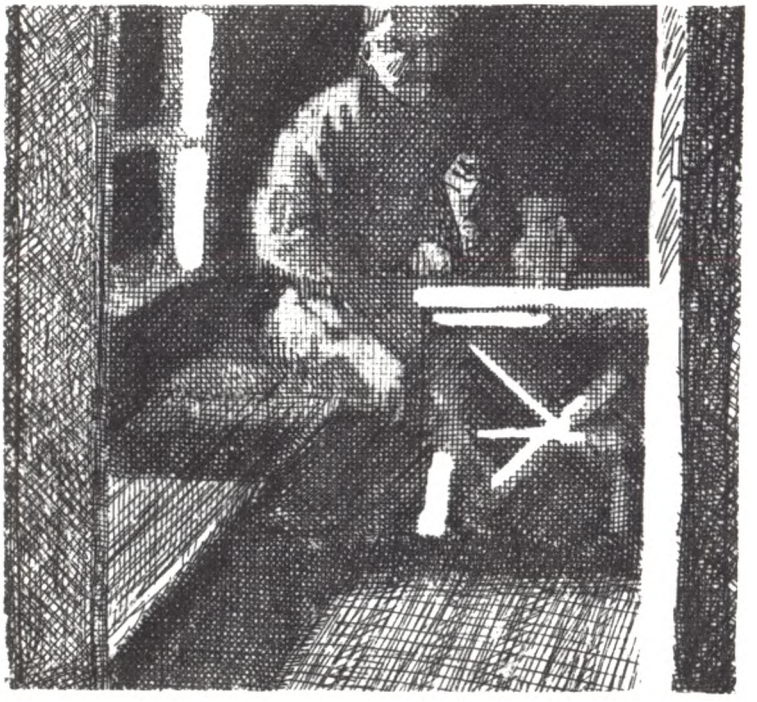
His wife got up from her corner and handed him some potatoes. She was like a frightened ewe.

Mitro peeled the potatoes, dipped them in salt, and chewed on bread.

"Well, you're certainly feeding me... But I'll feed

you in such a way that you'll die of it. What about of borshch, or noodles, or a horned devil, or something... She thrusts a potato at me — to choke on! I can't even drag my feet around anymore!"

"And what can she cook for you, son? There's no oil, no flour, so what can she cook!"



"Your say, Mother, is finished. Just sit up there on the oven bed and cough. I have received no property from you, no oxen or cows have I taken, so be quiet. Or better still, think about how I'm going to bury you. You're so passionately awaiting your death that it's always: 'Lord, Lord, bring me death,' and it's all my burden to carry..."

The grandmother wanted to weep, but burst out coughing.

"By God, I'll go deaf," said Mitro. "Here, you young scamp, why are you hanging on to the hooks, do you want to break the pots? If only you'd hang there forever..."

And he started beating the boy.

The children began to scream, the grandmother continued coughing.

"A bird wouldn't sit on this house!" fumed Mitro.

"But why are you picking on the children, are they to blame that the boots have hardened?"

"You bitch, you've produced them, nurtured them and now you're even barking for them. I'll cut you all to pieces..."

He picked up a boot from under the bench and began to beat his wife with it. Finally he pulled on his jacket and swept out of the house.

"May I never have to return to this house," he called back from the threshold.

"Go, go, and listen about Canada! You think I will go somewhere to the ends of the world with the children?..." his wife called after him.

Mitro's wife made a fire in the clay oven. The house filled with smoke and she kept wiping her watering eyes, burning from the smoke.

The grandmother groaned on the oven bed.

"If only summer would come quickly. We'd scatter out to work and wouldn't torment each other in this crowded space. The sun would separate us out on the fields. Now there's hell in this house. Oh God, dear God, don't keep me long in this world for you see that there's no way to live..."

The children ran around the house. But when a sound was heard from the hallway, they ran to the oven bed to their grandmother. Their expressions then became tired

and depressed. They constantly pretended docility, being afraid of their father's beatings. But when the father didn't come in, they again climbed down from the oven bed to run about on the ground.

So do pigeons come down on a threshing floor in a flock. But when the peasant creaks open his house door they abandon the grain, and frightened, rise into the sky.

THE STONE CROSS

I

For as far back as the villagers remembered Ivan Didukh as a farmer, he had always had only one horse and a small wagon with a tongue of oak. He harnessed the horse on the near side and himself next to the furrow. For the horse he had a breast-band collar of leather, and for himself Ivan had a small breast-band of rope. He didn't need a collar, because he was better able, perhaps, to brake with his left hand, than with a collar.

When pulling sheaves from the field, or the manure to the field, the veins stood out on the horse and Ivan alike. When going uphill, the traces on both, equally, were strung tautly, like chords; going downhill, they dragged equally over the ground. Going up the horse strained, as though walking on ice, and Ivan's forehead looked as if someone had hit him across it with a whip, so big and livid was the vein that swelled across his temples. Coming down, the horse looked as if Ivan had hung him by the collar for some offence, while Ivan's left hand was enlaced in a web of blue veins, like chains of blue steel.

Often in the morning, before the sun had even come up, Ivan would be on his way out to the field over the dusty roadway. He didn't wear his breast-band then, but walked alongside the horse and held the wagon tongue, so to speak, under his arm. Both the horse and Ivan walked with vigour, for both had rested during the night, and when it happened that they had to go downhill, they trotted. Running down, they left behind them the imprint of wagon wheels, horseshoes and Ivan's broad feet in the dust.

The roadside weeds and grasses swayed and shook as the wagon passed, sprinkling dew over their tracks. But sometimes, just as they gained their greatest momentum, right in the middle of the incline, Ivan would begin to limp and stop the horse. He would seat himself by the roadside, take his foot in his hands and spit on it, looking for the spot where the thorn had entered.

"One should really scrape this foot with a hoe, not wash it with spittle," he would fume in angry frustration.

"Grandpa Ivan, how about taking a whip to that furrow nag? Make him run, since he eats oats..."

This was from someone who, watching Ivan's difficulties from his own field, poked fun at him. But Ivan had long ago become accustomed to such jokers and calmly continued to pull at the thorn. When he couldn't get it out, he would pound the spot with his fist, and getting up, would say:

"Don't worry, you'll rot in there and come out by yourself. I haven't the time to fool around with you..."

Another name for Ivan in the village was *Pereloma-*

---

* *Perelomaniy* — the broken one

niy *. He had a problem with his back and always walked bent over, as if two steel hooks were pulling his body down to the ground. The wind, he said, had done this to him.

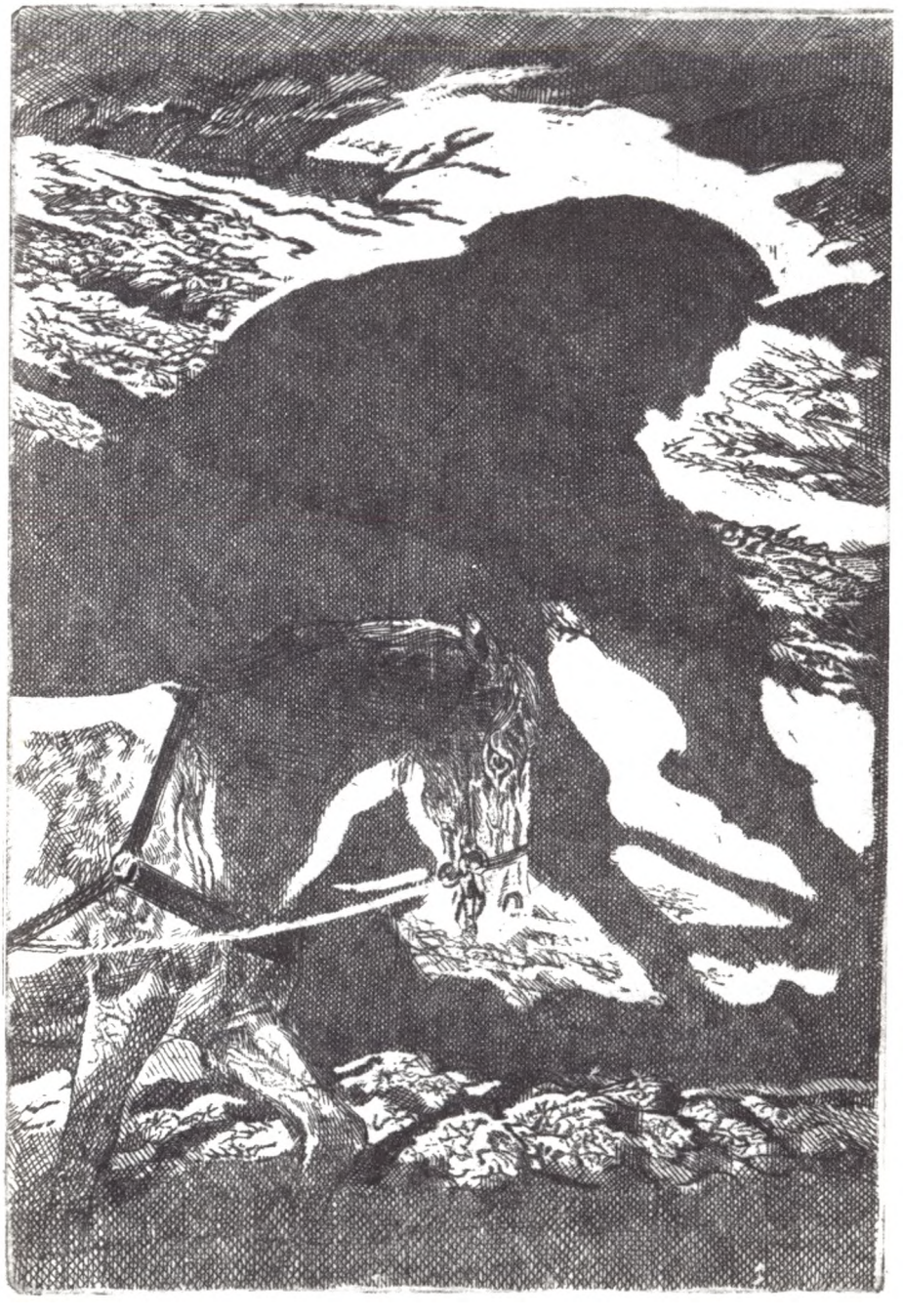
When he came home from army service, both his mother and father had died, leaving him only a broken-down hut. As for property, all his father had left him was a slice of hillside, the highest and worst land in the entire village. The women of the village went up there to dig for sand, and the entire hill yawned with ravines and caves into the heavens, like some frightful giant. Nobody ploughed or planted there, nor were there any boundaries dividing it up. Ivan alone began to work and seed his plot. Together with his horse he pulled the load of manure to the bottom of the hill, then Ivan would carry it up in a sack the rest of the way. Sometimes his voice could be heard in the lower meadows shouting loudly:

"Ekh, you, I'll throw you down so hard that you'll fall apart a thread at a time, you're so heavy!"

But he never did throw it, for he couldn't spare the sack, and always lowered it gently from his back to the ground. One evening he told his wife and children the following story:

"The sun is burning hot and not only burning, but throwing fire, and I'm crawling up the hill with the manure, practically pulling the skin off my knees. The sweat is pouring out of every hair, and my mouth is so salty that it tastes bitter. I barely made it to the top. But on the top such a sweet breeze swept over me, so light, you wouldn't believe it. But do you know, a minute later, it was as though a knife were stabbing me across the middle — I thought it was the end!"

It was after this happened that Ivan began to always



walk bent over in the middle, and people began to call him *Perelomaniy.*

But even though that hill bent his body, it gave good results. Ivan hammered in stakes and poles, carried up solid squares of turf, laying them around his holding so that the autumn and spring rains wouldn't wash away the manure and carry it into the gullies. His entire life was spent on that hill.

The older he got, the harder it was for him, broken as he was, to come down the hill.

"Such a doggone hill, that it pushes you down headlong!" he complained.

Many a time, when the setting sun still found Ivan on top of the hill, it carried his shadow with the hill far out into the lower meadows. The shadow portrayed Ivan as a huge giant, bent in the middle. Ivan then pointed his finger at his shadow and said to the hill:

"Well, by God, you've really crippled me! But as long as my feet can carry me, you've got to produce bread! High time you earned the sun you eat and the rain you drink."

On other fields, that Ivan had bought with money earned in the army, his wife and sons worked. The task of working the hill Ivan left mainly for himself.

Ivan was also known in the village for the fact that he attended church but once a year, at Easter, and because of the way he trained his chickens. He trained them so well that not one of them ventured to step into the yard and scratch in the manure pile. If one so much as scratched once, she perished by a blow from the shovel or whip. And even if his wife prostrated herself before him, it didn't help.

And then there was also the fact that he never once ate at the table. He always sat on the bench.

"First I was a hireling, then I served ten years in the army, and never knew a table. Food just doesn't seem to taste right for me at a table."

Such was Ivan, odd in his nature and in his work.

II

Ivan's house was full of guests — neighbours, villagers and their wives. Ivan had sold everything he had because his sons and his wife had resolved to go to Canada, and the old man had finally given in.

Ivan had invited the entire village.

He stood before his guests, holding a measure of vodka in his right hand, petrified it seemed, for he couldn't utter a word.

"Thank you kindly, good people, that you are treating me as a *gazda* and my wife as a *gazdinya* *..." He got no further, and he didn't drink to anybody, only stared dully ahead of him, nodding his head as though saying a prayer and confirming each word as he said it.

Sometimes a deep undercurrent forces a large stone out of the water and places it on the shore, and it remains there, heavy and lifeless. The sun scales away fragments of ancient silt and slime and paints tiny phosphorescent stars on its surface. The stone glimmers with lifeless gleams reflected by the rising and setting sun, and with stony eyes gazes at the living water and grieves that it no longer feels its weight as it had for ages. It gazes at the water from the shore as at lost happiness.

So Ivan looked at his guests, like that stone at the water. Shaking his grey hair, like a mane forged of steel threads, he continued:

* *gazda* and *gazdinya* — master and mistress of a household

"Yes, I thank you kindly, and may God give yow whatever you ask of him. May God give you good health, Grandpa Mikhailo..."

He handed old Mikhailo a glass and they kissed each other's hands.

"*Kum* * Ivan, may God grant you a long life in this world, and may the merciful Lord carry you successfully to your destination and help you to establish yourself anew!"

"If only God would grant it... Friends, please help yourselves... I thought I'd seat you at my table at my son's wedding, but it's not to be. The time has now come that what our grandfathers and fathers didn't know, we have to know. So God wills! But do help yourselves, friends, and forgive if anything's lacking."

He picked up a glass and approached the women who sat at the other end of the table near the bed.

"*Kuma* Timofiykha **, I want to drink to you. I look at you and, as someone said, I'm reminded of my youthful years. Ho, ho! But you were a mighty strong girl, just like a man! Many's the night I wasted dancing, and you beside me,— straight as a spinning rod! Ah, *kuma,* where have they gone, those years of ours! Come now, let's have a drink and forgive me for recalling the dancing in my old age... Please..."

He glanced at his old woman, weeping among the other women, and pulled a handkerchief from out of his shirt.

"Come, old girl, here is a handkerchief. Wipe your tears, for I don't want to see any crying here! Look after our guests, there'll be time enough to weep, so much that your eyes will leak out."

---

* *kum* — godfather; also "chum," "friend"

** *kuma* — godmother; Timofiykha — wife of Timofiy

He returned to the men shaking his head.

"I'd say something, but better to stay silent, in respect of the holy pictures in this house and of you, too, my friends. But just the same, God forbid that any good soul should ever lapse into a woman's way of thinking! See, just look how she's crying, and against whom? Why me, of course! Why against me, wife of mine? Am I uprooting you out of your house in your old age? Keep quiet and stop whimpering, or I'll pull your grey locks and you'll go to that America looking like a Jewess, with your hair cropped."

"Friend Ivan, do leave your wife alone, after all she's not an enemy of yours, nor is she an enemy to her children, she's sorrowing for her family and for her village, too."

"Timofiykha, if you don't know what you're talking about, then don't talk foolishness! So she's grieving and I, I suppose, am going there skipping?"

He ground his teeth, like millstones together, shook his fist like a bludgeon at his wife, and beat his chest.

"Take that axe and strike me here in my liver, and maybe it will break that bitter spleen, for I cannot stand it! People, I am full of such sorrow, such grief, I can't take in what's happening to me!"

III

"Please, good friends, help yourselves without ceremony and do forgive, because we are already on our way. And don't be surprised at me an old man, that I'm a bit hard on my wife, but it's not for nothing, no, not for nothing. This would never have been, if it wasn't for her and my sons. My sons, take note, are literate, and when they got some kind of paper into their hands, some map,

they got after my old woman, and sawed away, and sawed away at me, till they cut me down. For two years we heard nothing else in this house but Canada, and more Canada. And when they began on me, I saw that they would eat at me in my old age if I don't go, so I've sold everything to the last crumb. My sons don't want to be hirelings after I'm gone, and they say: 'You're our father, so take us to land, and give us bread; for if you divide between us, there'll be no going anywhere for us.' Let the Lord help them eat that bread, to me it's the same where I die. Yet, how can I, broken as I am, go anywhere? I'm worked out, my bones are brittle, by the time I pull body and soul together in the morning, I've groaned at least ten times!"

"It's past, Ivan, and what's gone is gone, don't allow the grief to go to your head. And maybe, when you've shown us the road, we'll all follow you. This country is not worth letting grief take over your heart. This land can't support so many people nor take so much misery. The peasant can't do it, the land can't do it — neither can. There are no locusts, but neither is there any wheat. But the taxes pile up: when once you paid a *lev*, now it's five, when once you ate a bit of salted pork, now it's potatoes. Oh, they've got us, they've so got us in their clutches that no one will ever be able to get us out of them. There's nothing left but to run. But one day this land will see disaster because the people will end up slaughtering one another. You, Ivan, have nothing to grieve for!..."

"Thank you for these words, but I cannot accept them. Certainly the people will slaughter one another. For isn't God angry at those who would sell the land? Nowadays nobody needs land, give them bills of sale and give them banks. The young landowners are smarter,

they're not in such a hurry to take over the land. Just look at that old fiddle, my wife, could she be allowed to look after any venture?! She's like that hollow tree, give it a poke, and it keels over! And do you think she'll make it to where we're going? She'll fall over somewhere by the wayside where the dogs will tear her to pieces, and we'll be driven along without even being allowed to stop and take a look at her! How could God bless such children? Come here, old woman!"

His wife, old and withered, stepped forward.

"Katerina, what are you thinking about, poor woman? Where will I lay you into your grave? Or will the fish eat you? But there isn't even enough of you to give a decent fish a bite. Just look!" And he stretched the skin on his wife's hand and showed it to the people.

"Just skin and bones. And where, my friends, could this go from the oven bed? You were a fine home-maker, you worked hard and weren't wasteful, and now, in your old age, you're taking to the road. Look, look where your road is and where your Canada is? There!"

And he pointed through the window at the cemetery.

"You didn't really want to go to that Canada, but here we are, going out into the world, drifting about in our old age like those leaves out on the field. God knows what's awaiting us... so I'd like to ask your forgiveness here, before our people. We took our marriage vows before them, and I'd like to ask your forgiveness before them before we die. Maybe they'll throw you into the sea when I'm not looking, or maybe they'll throw me in, and you won't see, so forgive me, old woman, for any sorrow I may have caused you, or if I wronged you at any time; forgive me for the first time, the second time, and the third time."

They kissed. The old woman fell into Ivan's arms, and he said:

"Poor woman, I'm taking you to a far-away grave..."

But nobody heard these words, because from the women's side of the table the sobbing rose like a gust of wind from among sharp swords and bowed the peasants' heads to their chests.

IV

"And now, old woman, look after your women-friends. See to it that they have everything, and have enough yourself, so that I'd see you drunk at least once in your life.

"And you, my friends, I've two more favours to ask of you. Someday, perhaps, my sons will write that my wife and I are gone. So I'd beg of you to arrange for mass for us, and to gather together, as you have today, for a dinner, and say the Lord's prayer for us. Maybe the Lord will write off a few of our sins. I'll leave the money with Yakiv, because he is a young and honest man, and won't pocket the old man's pennies."

"We'll arrange for mass, of course we will, and we'll say a prayer, too..."

"Don't be amazed and don't laugh at an old man. I'm a bit ashamed to tell you this, but it seems to me it would be a sin if I didn't tell you. You know, I've erected a stone cross on my hilltop for myself. It was a bitter journey getting it to the hill, and equally bitter getting it to the top, but there it is. It's so heavy that the hill will never throw it off, it will have to hold it up there, as it held me. I wanted to leave some memory of myself behind."

He folded his hands and pressed them against his lips.

"I'm grieving so for that hill, like a child for a mother's breast. I gave it my life and crippled myself on it. If I could, I'd put it under my arm and take it with me into the world. I yearn over the smallest thing in the village, over the smallest child, but I'll never get over yearning for that hilltop."

His eyes clouded over with grief, and his face trembled like the black ploughed earth trembles under the rays of the sun.

"Lying in the barn last night, I thought and thought: 'merciful God, have I really sinned so deeply that You see fit to drive me out on the world's waters? All my life I've only worked, and worked! More than once, when the day ended, I would fall on my knees in the field and pray fervently to God! Lord, don't ever desert me without a piece of black bread, and I will always work, unless I can no longer move hand or foot...'

"Then I was overcome with such grief that I gnawed at my knuckles and tore my hair, rolling about in the straw, like that animal. The devil himself must have got into me, for I don't know how or when I found myself under the pear tree with a rope. Another moment and I would have hung myself. But the merciful Lord knows what he is doing. I remembered my cross, and came to myself. Oh, did I run, did I ever run to my hill! Within an hour I was sitting under the cross. I sat there for a long time — and after awhile I felt somehow better.

"You see, I'm standing here before you, talking to you, and that hilltop never leaves my mind. I keep seeing it and seeing it, and I will keep on seeing it to my dying day. I'll forget everything, but I'll never forget that hill. The songs I knew — I forgot on that hilltop, the strength I had — I left it up there, too."

A tear rolled down his cheek, like a pearl down a cliff-side.

"I would beg of you, friends, that when you bless your fields on the Holy Sunday, that you shouldn't pass up my hilltop. Let one of the younger ones run up and sprinkle the cross with holy water, for you know that the priest will not climb up there. I beg this of you most sincerely, that you should never leave out my cross. I'll remember you to God in the other world, if you'll carry out an old man's bidding."

He spoke as though he would like to prostrate himself before them, as though with his kind, grey eyes, he would forever fix his entreaty in the hearts of his guests.

"Ivan, godfather of my child, do put your grief aside, throw it off. We will all remember you, for now and always. You were a decent man, you never offended anyone, never ploughed over or sowed over into anyone else's land, never took a kernel that didn't belong to you. No, never! People will always remember you and will never forget your cross on the Holy Sunday."

So Mikhailo cheered Ivan.

V

"Well, my good friends, I've already told you everything, and now, let those who care for me have a drink with me. The sun is already over the hill and you haven't had a measure of vodka with me yet. As long as I'm still in my house and have guests at my table, I'll drink with them, and those who don't dislike me will drink too."

So the drinking began, the kind of drinking that turns grown men into foolish boys. Later Ivan, already

drunk, asked for musicians to play for the young folk, who had by this time filled the entire yard.

"Hey now, all of you, you've got to dance so that the earth rumbles, and so that not a blade of grass is left on the threshing ground!"

In the house all drank, all talked, and nobody listened. Everybody spoke at once, for there were words that had to be said; they had to be said, even if they vanished with the wind.

"When I groomed it, then it was groomed; when it was black, it shone as if I'd sprinkled it with silver, when white, it was as though I'd polished it with butter. My horses were always looked after, the Kaiser himself could have sat on them. And money, did I have money!"

"If I should find myself in the middle of some desert — where only God and myself would be there! I'd go about like a wild beast, if only I didn't have to see those tavern-keepers, the gentry, or those priests! I could then be called a gentleman myself! Then this land could collapse. Let it collapse right now and I wouldn't care. What for? Our fathers were tormented and beaten and harnessed into the yoke of slavery, and for us there isn't even a piece of bread to eat... Ekh, if I only had my way..."

"A tax collector hadn't yet been found who could drag anything in taxes out of him, oh no! There was the Czech, the German, the Pole — shit, if you'll excuse the word, is what they got from him! But when the Mazur * came, he even found the coat off his back under the cherry tree. I'm telling you, the Mazur is disaster, burn his eyes out and it wouldn't be a sin..."

---

* the Mazur — native of one of the north-eastern Polish provinces

There was a lot of all kinds of talk, but it scattered itself in every direction like rotting trees in an old forest.

Over the hubbub, the uproar and wailing, and the plaintive merriment of the violin, broke the voices of Ivan and old Mikhailo raised in song. It was the kind of singing often heard at weddings after the old men had reached the urge to express themselves in singing the old songs. The words of the songs rise out of the old throats with some difficulty, as though not only their hands, but their throats too, had grown callouses. They emerge, those words, like the yellow leaves of autumn which are blown about by the wind over frost-covered ground, and from time to time get caught up along the gullies, where their ragged edges quiver in anticipation of death.

That is how Mikhailo and Ivan sang — about their youthful years which they overtook on a cedar bridge, and which wouldn't come back to them even for a visit.

Whenever they raised their voices on a high note, they clasped hands, but so tightly that their joints crackled, and when they came to a very mournful part, they leaned toward each other, forehead to forehead, and grieved. They flung their arms about each other's necks, kissed, beat their fists against and on the table, their rustly voices burdening them with such sorrow that finally, they couldn't utter a word except: "Oh, Ivan, my brother!", or "Oh, Mikhailo, my friend!"

VI

"Father, do you hear, it's time to go to the station and you're singing as if you had all the time in the world!"

Ivan opened his eyes wide, but in such an odd manner

that his son paled and took a step backward. Then Ivan put his head in his hands and went, it seemed, into deep thought. Rousing himself, finally, he got up from the table, went up to his wife and took hold of her sleeve.

"Come along, old woman, march — one, two, three! Come, we'll get dressed up like the gentry, and go and live like the rich!"

They both went out.

When they re-entered the house, the entire company broke into sobs. It was as though a cloud of tears hanging over the village had burst, as though human misery had broken through a dam on the Danube — that is how they wept. The women wrung their hands, holding them over Ivan's old wife as if to shield her from something that might fall from above and crush her on the spot. Mikhailo seized Ivan by the shoulders and shook him violently, shrieking as though mad.

"Hey, if you're a *gazda* throw those tatters off yourself, or I'll wallop you like a whore!"

But Ivan didn't even look at him. He seized his wife around the neck and began to whirl her in a dance.

"Play me a polka, the way you do for the gentry. I've got the money!"

The people stood, stupefied, while Ivan swung his wife around as if he had not thought of releasing her alive from his embrace.

His sons ran in and forcibly carried them both out of the house. Outside in the yard Ivan continued to dance some kind of polka, and his wife clutched at the doorpost with her hands, saying:

"How many times have I stepped over this threshold, how often have my feet worn you down!"

And she lovingly stroked the old threshold she had stepped over so many times.

VII

The fences along the roadside shuddered and fell — the whole village had turned out to see Ivan off. He walked beside his old wife, bent over, dressed in a cheap grey suit, continuing every moment to break into a polka.

Only after they had all stopped before the cross that Ivan had put up on the hill, did he recover somewhat and showed it to his wife:

"See our little cross, old woman? Your name is carved on it, too. Don't worry, they are both there, yours and mine..."

HOLY NIGHT

Blue as that umbilical cord, she sat on the oven bed on a bundle of rags, and unrestrainedly beat her head against the wall.

The old woman's son sat on a bench alongside.

"Even if I sold myself, I couldn't get you any firewood anywhere, and even if I were to steal it, I'd be caught. Sit on the oven bed, wrap yourself up in your tatters as well as you can, and wait for warmth. I have small children and they, too, poor souls, are growing weak from the cold. Here, I've brought you bread and a bit of vodka and a white shirt, tattered, but clean, so that you would at least mark the holiday with piety. And maybe some of the folks will bring you something. And don't keep beating your head against the wall, for you won't beat anything out of it."

"But son, I can't bear the frost and this terrible cold. I can feel the chill in my very bones. I'm beating my head against the wall because if I didn't I'd become paralyzed."

"Has the swelling gone down in your legs?"

"My legs, son, are like those buckets — full; they cannot be bent, nor can they be moved."

She showed her feet to her son: swollen, blue and shiny, like two glass beams.

"I can't get a night's sleep, the nights are so long. So long that it seems that there are ten of them in one. I go through all my prayers, remembering even those from childhood, and still the day doesn't come. It's also bitterly sad to sit here in this freezing cavern all alone."

"If only God would have mercy and shorten your torment and any long illness, that you might be taken quickly."

"Ah, my son, I await that death as one awaits one's own mother. I keep staring into every corner at night, hoping it will appear before me, for once it appears, then surely it will come soon. But it doesn't appear."

"Yes, death will come, but when? But I've left the horses standing; here, take off that dirty shirt and let me help you into this clean one."

"Child, I'll freeze if you put that white shirt on me. I'm glad that I've warmed this one up, and as someone said, happy with my lice that I've bred myself, for they will bite and at least warm up my skin."

"You must be losing your mind — you're certainly not going to sit in this dirt for Christmas!"

He changed his mother's shirt.

"Your bones stick out of your skin like swords. May it be soon."

"That's what I say too, son, may it be soon."

"Then celebrate in good health."

"Go, go, for you're in the service of the landlord!"

She shivered from the cold and again began to beat her head against the wall.

"At least I've got a good child. He looks after me and doesn't forget. He was never ashamed that his mother carried a sack. I bless you, my son, and wish you well."

And she made the sign of the cross with her hand, continuing to beat her head against the wall lightly, as if with happiness that she had a good son.

"Jesus be praised!"

"Forever be praised."

"I've brought you some sweetened wheat, Grandma, and sweet bread so that you would remember my Maria in your prayers."

"May God forgive, poor creature, I'll say a prayer for your Maria."

Her blue hands made the sign of the cross.

"Jesus be praised!"

"Forever be praised."

"I've brought you some dumplings and ask you to say a prayer for my first daughter."

"May God forgive, Andriy, I'll say a prayer for your Katerina."

She whispered prayers.

"Jesus be praised!"

"Forever be praised."

"I've brought you some fish, Grandma, and to ask you to bow down in worship for our mother. Other people are holidaying, but with us it's as if the body is still lying there, we still weep. It was only last year that our Christmas supper was prepared for us."

"Certainly, little orphans, I'll bow in worship for your mother!"

The girl walked out weeping. The old woman blew the dust off the oven surface, kissed the ground, and prostrated herself in prayer.

The people brought a lot of dishes.

Descending darkness caught at the eyes, and the old woman was no more to be seen, only her prayers from the oven bed drifted into the four corners of the house.

The branches of the pear tree tugged at the windows so that the panes rattled.

"Sing me a carol, little pear tree, sing me a carol, for nobody will come here this evening, this important evening, to carol for me. Only you will carol for this old woman."

She held the bottle of vodka in her hands.

"I'll drink a bit of vodka at a time, and you will carol a nice carol for me, and for my son, because he does not neglect his mother."

She drank.

"If it wasn't for him I wouldn't be found till spring, when the stench from the oven bed would reach out into the roadway."

She drank.

"How about this one, little pear, that says:

A new joy arose, never known before,
When over the cradle a bright star shone
forth..."

With ragged voice she sang the carol to its end.

"Now the whole world and all people carol and feast, while I have only the pear tree. There's just the two of us. Now how about this old one, little pear, for my Mitro:

I wish you good fortune, good health
forever,
The wind blew and gently bent the maple tree."

She screeched out the words as though someone was tearing stripes out of her skin.

"This is the one my old man liked to carol. You see, old man, I'm drinking without you, feasting and carolling. Your little pear tree is carolling with me, I'm not with you any more, I'm not! I'm not your wife any more..."

She drank.

"No, I'm not yours any more. I was able to get along without you. I sewed myself some sacks and went out among the people. Once I crossed the threshold with a sack, I no longer belonged to you, there was no sense."

She drank.

"But when I went out on the road with my sack for the first time, Mitro, I sensed that you were turning in your grave, and I was ashamed in the bright light of the holy sun, and turned back and prayed the old prayers in your house. Such is the wife that you left behind."

She drank.

"And now, my husband, the dogs in every village know me. I chase them away from me with your cane. But it's with the bread that I begged for that I raised your son. He brings his mother food, he puts a shirt on his mother's back, he does not cast her off. For him, old man, all your sins should be forgiven, for him alone. Because for your wife you will receive no favours from God."

She drank again.

"Am I ever drunk, old man, a real scullery-maid! If you could only see me now, your heart would rejoice. Would you ever beat me, yes, you sure would! Grab my braids and my head between your knees — then try to break me in two. You beat your beggar wife and she spread your memory in a sack throughout the world!

Beat her, like a bitch, beat her, so that in your house she woludn't waste the bread of your ancestors!"

She drank what was left.

"So force your wife, grab her by the hair and give it to the old woman — so, and so..."

She beat her head against the wall as if demented.

"Like this, and this, let death take the local old bag!"

THE ROAD

"I'm going, I'm going, mother."

"Don't go, son, don't go..."

But he went because it stretched before his eyes, bright and distant.

He passed every gate, all the white windows.

He loved the road, he never left it.

During the day it was without end, like the sun's rays, and at night all the stars slept over it.

The earth blossomed and its flowers smiled at him. He picked them and tucked them into his flowing locks.

Every blossom threw a single pearl at his feet.

His eyes were merry, his brow unclouded, like that well beside a dusty road.

Until he came across people.

Beaten into the earth to their knees, they fell and rose in insensible numbers.

Their blackened hands wiped the sweat from their foreheads and with large hands they grasped at the earth.

Exhaustion felled them, they dragged their children down with them and bellowed with pain.

They raised themselves, then fell again.

The night laid them down to sleep like pebbles, side by side.

Terrible faces turned to the sky, like a sea of heads against a sea of stars.

The earth groaned beneath the beating of their hearts, and the wind fled beyond the mountains.

He read their faces and the great song of battle within them.

From their lips he licked the words, from their foreheads, thoughts, and from their hearts, emotions. And when the sun was born in blood and kissed their eyes between their long lashes, then his heart gave birth to a song.

It burst into his soul like a storm, agitated like a mother's word.

He became strong and proud. The wind bowed all the blossoms before him.

He stepped further along his chosen road.

Like cloth, it bent beneath his feet.

He passed all gates, the white windows that attracted.

Again he saw people.

They stood in line. Before them — a full-stemmed sea of gold, behind them — children in the shadow of the sheaves.

They were burned by fire, steel wept in their hands.

The faded desert of the heavens hung heartlessly above them.

All were in white shirts, as if on holiday.

But the sheaves disappeared from among the children, and the fire ate into their white heads.

They penetrated again into the yellow fields.

He read their despair and their powerlessness.

Their foreheads were furrowed, their lips dry and pale, their hearts filled with bile.

The song in his soul turned bitter, like decaying wheat.

His eyes became troubled and his forehead resembled the waters of a well, disturbed by the roadside.

His strength and his pride fell on a difficult road.

He was poisoned.

He continued along the road like a bird that was unaware of its wings.

On a newly-ploughed field by a pleasant meadow stood his love. The earth rejoiced in her white footsteps.

Like a powerless child he stretched out his arms toward her.

"Come!"

"I can't, because you are poison."

He staggered, and after swallowing his sentence, he placed the remnants of his song on the black, ploughed earth, and dragged himself further. He walked like a shadow of a decaying oak in the setting sun.

The road was dark, like for a blind young cripple.

One day he stumbled across his mother's grave.

He wept, dry-eyed, and fell.

Burrowing his forehead into the grave, he begged his mother to call him as she did when he was a child.

To say one little word.

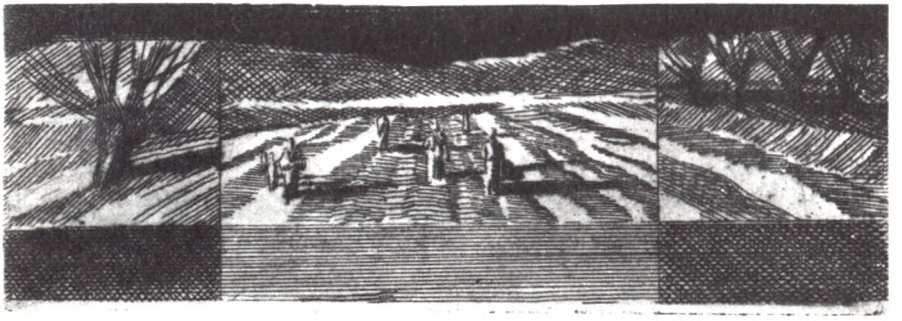
He begged a long time.

Then he leaned his head against the cross and felt its frosty chill.

He shuddered, kissed the grave with a small apple tree and wove on, nameless and alone.

"Dear God, present me with the rest of the road I must travel, for I cannot walk any further!"

And he leapt from grave mound to grave mound like that autumn tumbling weed.



Only after he had passed a hundred graves, the one hundred and first became his.

He fell upon it as he did long ago on his mother's breast.

THE BASARABS

I

Toma Basarab hung himself in the corn bin at noon exactly. But his wife gave out with such screams that all the neighbouring men dropped their flails and all the women flew out of their cottages to converge in Toma's yard. Daring Antin, he who pulled teeth for a *szóstka* *, crawled into the bin, and God knows how he did it, but he pulled Toma out, still breathing. By this time the yard was full of women and children. They stood and looked on in great fright.

"Now why are you standing about as if in mourning? Help me carry him into the house. What stupid people — do you think he'll bite you?"

* *szóstka* — six-cent piece in old Austrian currency

Toma was carried into the house and the crowd went out of the gate and began to judge the event in its own way.

"The Basarabs are again beginning to hang themselves; there's not much going in their heads."

"Why, it's just three years since Les tightened the rope. Lord, what a storm there was that day! An entire corner was lifted from my house."

"The Basarabs have already fixed that they suicide one after another."

"I remember when Mikola Basarab hung himself, and after him, Ivan Basarab, and before a year had gone, Vasil hung himself on a small cherry tree at daybreak. He shook all its blossoms off, his hair was full of white blossoms. That's three already, and I still count myself a young man — I'm maybe, and maybe not, thirty-five years old."

"You remember that, but I remember how their great grandfather hung himself off a rafter. He was secretly a wealthy man, dried his money on a linen sheet and never walked anywhere. He had a black horse that always jumped over the gate, and he always carried a whip. People said that he drove people to serfdom and tore their flesh with that whip. But one morning a rumour spread that the old ataman was hanging from a rafter. I was still small, but I remember as if today, the swarm of people in his yard. When he was cut down and being carried into the house, he looked so awful that the women cried out in fright. From the men, nothing, they only said: 'Eh, now you won't be taking our skin off in pieces, now that He's hoisted you up on a rafter!' Later, after a day or two, such a storm came up, such winds, that trees were uprooted and roofs were lifted off the houses..."

"People point out that the graves of the Basarabs are in common ground. They were buried behind the trench, not in the cemetery itself. These graves are behind the old and behind the new cemeteries, and only the Basarabs are buried there."

"Do you think that the priest has the right to bury such in a cemetery? Even if he left all his property, he can't do it. How can he put one who is so damned among people?"

"Well, now the Basarabs will lower their heads. They'll go around dejected and unhappy."

"If only he wouldn't drag others after him, because they are all of like mind. Just look, one does away with himself, look again, and there are ten more following. They are all tied together. Calamity has them all tied to the same string..."

"It's into the seventh gyration that they will be so strangled, and when the seventh gyration has passed — there won't be any more strength left. Somewhere one of them has earned this before God. That's punishment, folks, to punish into the seventh bone! There is no greater punishment before God on earth...

"One can see by the way they are that God is punishing them. He's given them property — they're rich, and brains — then all of a sudden He takes it all away and heaves them up on a rafter."

"Why, you only have to look at their eyes. They're not eyes. It's like a black wound on the forehead that lives and rots. In one, there is the look of ruin — he looks at you and sees nothing, because that eye isn't for looking. And on the second one, only one is alive, all else around it is stone — the forehead is stone, the face is stone, everything. And this Toma, did he ever look at a man like he should? It looks as if his eye is turned on

you, but it is really looking somewhere into itself, somewhere into endless depths."

"The eye was looking at that long-ago sin, which carried punishment with it. It is put inside them so that all would see it and so they would have no peace, so they would feel the punishment."

"These Basarabs are born for human penance; they grow wealthy and lose their souls."

"A heavy sin they bear in that family and have to wear it out, even if all of them die to no purpose."

"A sin, folk, a sin never passes you by, it has to be paid! It is visited on your cattle, it will burn your stacks, fall in hail on a growing field, and take a man's soul and give it eternal suffering..."

The women listened and almost crossed themselves; the children sat among them while the men talked long about sins, then finally wound their way to the tavern.

II

All the Basarabs gathered at Semenekha Basarab's house, because she was the oldest and wealthiest of the family. Toma was also brought. Semenekha prepared food and drink and sat her relations around a big table, giving Toma an important place.

"Toma, don't cry any more, that's enough out of you; here, sit down and let's be happy that we are all together. Sit down, my family, and may good fortune sit with you. If only Semion were here, he would know how to tempt and encourage you. Mikola, do you remember how he broke a bottle of vodka over your head and threw the dumplings out to the dogs because you wouldn't drink with him?

"There was no joking with him, Grandma; you either drank or perished."

"I'll drink to you, Toma, because you are my favourite. I'll get drunk! An old woman doesn't need much to start singing like a young one...

"Ey, Toma, Toma, if only I'd been born in your time! Come on, drink, don't lower your eyes under the table. If only you wouldn't lower eyes, but gaze upward, you'd find it easier on your soul. Drink to Uncle Mikola..."

She stood before the table, tall, grey and straight. Her eyes were large, grey and wise. She looked out of them as if there wasn't a corner of the world that she didn't know, and that by rolling up her sleeves would do in it what a good housewife would — clear it up, adorn it, put it in order.

"Grandma, it's good to eat and drink in your home, for even though you don't say it, your eyes make us welcome."

"That's how it is with me. I have eyes to laugh with, to jest with. I don't have them, and mother didn't make them, for tears. If only you would chase away that black mist that darkens the world out of your eyes! I have in my eyes, my children, my fields, my cattle, my barns. So why should they become overcast with worry? If worry comes, then I shed tears, weep myself out, then wipe my face."

"All characters are the same, Grandma. There are some that even if you feed them honey or give them a meadow in the finest spring, they'll still weep."

"Ey, Basarabs! Do you have no children, no land, no cattle? Is darkness all you have, cataracts and long black hair that covers up the sun? God punishes you because you should be looking at His sun; take joy in your children and the green stalks of grain; caressing a happy face. Toma, do help yourself and don't be angry at an old woman. Grandma carried you to chris-

tening, Grandma cried when you went into the army, Grandma threw rice at your wedding, Grandma is not your enemy. Because you wanted to lose your soul, that's why I'm angry with you. But come, let's eat what I have prepared first, for I don't want that my work should go for nothing, then we'll talk.

"My great and upright family! I rejoice in you as in nothing else: that you do not forget me, that you love me, that you are drinking at my table and speak agreeable words."

A glimmer of happiness flashed over the guests, the way the sun sometimes casts a glitter over a dark, deep stream. All eyes were raised to look at the old woman.

"Ey, Basarabs, just look at all those eyes, nothing but sadness and grief!"

"Grandma, don't say such things, because we are all so content with your words, it's as if we were drinking sweet wine. We would, Grandma, have you in our homes in turn, so that we could be happy with you."

"So, I, an old woman, should bring happiness into your homes? As if they don't embroider your shirts, as if they don't wash the heads of your children? You don't see anything, you don't see because you are blind. God has punished you with blindness..."

"Grandma, how about us getting up for a smoke from our pipes, for why should we be sitting at the table when the body can take no more?"

"Get up, get up and smoke, while I sit myself beside Toma and ask him what it was that so oppressed his soul..."

III

Toma was a small, lean man, with long black hair that fell in soft, smooth locks over a broad forehead. His eyes, dark hazel, wandered below his forehead like over boundless plains, as if not able to find their way over them. A swarthy, frightened face, like a child's. He pushed himself away from the table and sat down beside Grandma Semenekha.

"Tell us, Toma, why you find it so hard to live in this world, why you want to leave your children, your wife and your family? Don't be shy, tell us what is eating you, reveal it, then maybe we can give you advice?"

All turned toward Toma.

"Tell us, tell us, don't keep anything back, you'll feel much better."

"There's nothing to keep back," disclaimed Toma. "I kept quiet as long as I could, now you all know."

"But we don't know anything. You tell us, because if you don't, then we'll think that your wife is bad, or your children a failure, or that we ourselves have made you miserable in some way. And then have some compassion for us, too. You know that when one of our family suicides, another follows shortly. Even now there may be one among us who, having heard of your mishap, is already thinking of doing away with himself," said grey-haired Les.

The Basarabs, in guilt, lowered their heads.

"Come Toma, quiet down, don't cry, don't cry..."

"I don't know from where or why, but I've been getting such thoughts that they give me no peace. You argue one way, your thoughts another; you try to break through, to chase them away, but like dogs, they whine about your head. Nobody, good people, puts a noose around his neck from well-being."

"Well, when you get into such a confused state of mind, why don't you tell your wife or go to church?"

"That's no use, Grandma. When they beset me they won't let me move a step from the place they have decided to hold me. If you only knew, if you only knew! They bind me in such a way that there are no chains in the world that can bind as deeply. I even hear how they clank beside me... Clank, clank, clank, rattle... When they get started the head begins to burst into four and the ears seem to open up like a mouth, they so love to listen to their jangle. At night I turn over to cover one ear, but the other then opens up to grind the bones in my head. I cover my head with the pillow and it rattles the chains over the pillow. And it seems to say, scooping the thoughts in my head like with a light shovel: 'Come, come with me and it will feel so good, so good." I grab at the bed and hold on so tight that the flesh on my hands almost splits, like something alive being dragged in all directions..."

"Why are you saying this, why remember such things?" cried Toma's wife.

"Don't be frightened, woman, because they have now turned away from me completely. I feel so light, it's as if I'm new-born. I just want you to know what suffering one goes through to take one's life. Such a man really must be saved! Because during his lifetime yet, evil drives out his soul, in a manner of digging at it. It tears at the flesh, separates the bones to make inroads into your soul to get it out of you. What torment, what pain — over such suffering one would allow one's foot or hand to be cut off!"

"Well, when it comes at you at night, where does it grab you?"

"You can tell ahead that it's coming, and it doesn't

ask if it's day or night, sunny or cloudy. You can get up in the morning, say a prayer, then make your way out of doors. You stand on the doorstep and turn to stone. The sun is shining, people are bustling about their houses, and you stand there. Why are you standing? You stand there because something has poked you in the head, on the side, very lightly. From the head it goes into your throat, then your eyes, then your forehead. And you know that from somewhere behind the hills, beyond the clear sky, and even behind the sun, a black cloud will appear. You can't tell how you know this, that it will come, but for three days you will hear its roaring as it crackles under the sky. Even when you turn your whole mind against it, it runs away from you like that shepherd who leaves his sheep, leaving you so alone, so frightened... You grit your teeth and wait."

"I know Toma, I understand that it's just like that," said Mikola Basarab.

"Mikola, have you gone mad or what has got into you?"

"It's nothing, I just said it..."

The Basarabs looked at him with suspicion and became silent.

"People, don't be frightened of what Toma is telling you, because when he's told you, you will know how it attaches itself to a christian. It must have been some great-great grandfather who, fighting the Turks, killed seven small children, pierced them with his lance like chicks. And so God punished him, because he instantly stopped fighting and went around with those children thirteen years. Well, not really with *them,* because they rotted, but he always carried that lance and it always looked to him that he was carrying those children. It's from this time that punishment has been visited on the

Basarabs. When I was getting ready to marry Semion, my mother told me this and advised me not to marry him. It's for the sin of killing these children that you are doing penance, but it only strikes one of you from time to time. Not every Basarab carries this sin, God only visits one among you with remorse. That's why you shouldn't be frightened, just remember what Toma has told you, how that sin acts until it's redeemed. You can't tell anything by the flesh, because the flesh will endure everything, it's the conscience that is tormented. It can be seen on a tree, so tall that it reaches the clouds. You split it and it's all worm-eaten; you don't see the worm, but it's been eaten away from top to bottom. That's how the conscience is eaten at from generation to generation."

"A conscience eaten at is a punishment above all punishments."

"Then tell us, Toma, how it eats at you? There's no help for it, we've got to hear it to the end."

"It torments you, but doesn't say why. If I had killed or set a fire, it would see it; but I am not to blame, yet I'm being punished. So when such a cloud comes across the sky, the time has come to do away with oneself. You walk beside water and it pulls at you, kisses you, embraces you, smooths your forehead, while your forehead is like a hot coal, a burning coal. You want to jump into that water like into heaven, but somewhere in your mind a word arises: run, run, run! And you're driven from the water like a hundred horses, your breath taken away, your head bursting, for it's going mad. Only then is it mad. You look at a willow and again you stop. Your hands become so happy that they jump about on their own, without any reason, all by themselves. They grab at the branches, try them out, wrestle with them, and

you seem to be standing aside, as if you are not doing this, only your hands. Then again the word appears: run, run! The hands seem to take fire, they fall, drained, and again you run. If your eyes should light on someone, a woman or a child, it again cries out: run! But it talks to them and smiles, but always as if it isn't me talking, and it pushes me to where there are no people. It comes to that, that you recall a pear tree that you had seen as a child, or a peg, or a hook, or a rafter — all are recollected. It drives a man in a thousand directions at once and you don't know which way to turn. Then it leaves you, suddenly it leaves you. An hour passes, or two, or a day, and again it returns. The heart congeals, the eyes weep — so weep that they almost leak out. But the tears are not seen, the crying is not heard. It leads you on again, and tortures you anew. More than once I drank a whole quart of vodka and swallowed one pepper after another to try and eat it out, but nothing helped...

"And yesterday it smothered me so that I completely lost my reason, my eyes and my hands. It happened right at noon. When it came it showed me the rafter in the corn bin. Every bit of it was shown, every knot. I didn't even resist, because there was no way out. I just unwound the oxen rope out of the manger and climbed into the bin. I felt so peaceful, so confident! I attached the rope and tried it out, to see if it held well, and knew everything, how to make a loop, how high to draw it up. Today I wonder at myself, how peacefully and happily I was preparing my death. But now, thank God, it's left me, and I am so glad, so glad..."

The Basarabs sat as if in numb-like sleep.

"Sins, folk, sins, one must pray to God."

"Doctors say that there is some kind of nerve, that

it gets ill just like a man. It's somewhere in a man and takes away his reason when it gets sick."

"Ekh, what do the doctors know."

"Hey, go out after Mikola, where has he gone?" asked Semenekha.

The Basarabs stirred, but none moved from their places. They seemed petrified.

"Now go out after Mikola, I say... Where has he gone?"

The women began to lament. The men jumped up and rushed out in a group.

"Quietly, quietly, for who knows yet, don't start an uproar..."

SUCH A GENTLEMAN

He was but a petty squire in a small town peopled with many Jews. The town was situated in the centre of a number of villages, like an ossified village, like a carcass, smelly — like a garbage dump for the entire area. On market days it came alive, made colourful through its surrounding villages, and merriment. A puppet stage graces a corner of the market-place; some terrible musicians play on it, horrible beasts show their teeth on its curtains, and some kind of wax maiden beats on some metallic plates. Before the stage, and looking on, stand the village people in assorted dress.

The entire crowd directs its gaze at the wooden clown who has run out on the roof of the stage and, waving his arms, invites them to come in. Laughter, noise and tears from laughter. A wooden girl appears beside the clown and they embrace. There is so much laughter in the market that the Jewish tradesmen turn numb and the

gentry in their offices jump out of their chairs. All the laughter from the villages had come to the market. The older peasants are pulling at their sons and daughters to look after purchases, but these aren't even thinking of leaving the comedy. Only in the evening does the mass disperse and leave an abandoned, ugly, market-place to the play of the Jewish children.

Our petty squire lives in this town. He is on pension, has no children, nor has he a wife. Grey himself, he wears a grey hat and a grey suit. All day he sits in his store and does not speak. When other of the gentry try to talk to him, he drinks from his glass of beer and forgets to answer them. The oldest visitor, the town elder, also makes no headway with him. The squire sits quietly in his store all day and waits for the peasantry to come in. And if sometime a peasant woman is directed to his store for a wine that settles the stomach, or for some strong black sugar that loosens the chest, then she stands before the store and hasn't the courage to go in. Then our squire runs out of the store and says:

"Why don't you come in? Don't be afraid! Come in and tell me what you want and I'll help you."

"But, if you please, Sir, I'm afraid to go among the gentry."

"You are foolish, Mistress, you have the right to go anywhere for your money."

The peasant woman then enters and the squire attends her as if she came to him as a visitor. She wants to kiss all the hands of the gentry, but hasn't the courage.

"Don't kiss them, don't lick their hands. You're a housewife, a much better housewife than any lady, because you have your own property."

The peasant woman stands and looks at the squire in wonderment.

"Now tell me what you need and say it boldly. It's already time that Ukrainian housewives knew their own worth. Don't kiss the gentry, because they live off you, they are your servants."

The gentry guffawed, the peasant woman is now truly alarmed, and the squire looks at the gentry in anger — great anger. He then wraps up the woman's purchases and sees her out of the store. Outside the store he exhorts her not to kiss the hands of the gentry; that she must come to her senses and have regard for herself, because the gentry were thieves and robbers. The peasant woman laughs, thanks him for his help and leaves. The squire returns to his store and looks haughtily at the gentry as he whistles to himself, so merrily that his face looks more youthful, his eyes brighter.

"You are stirring up the peasantry. I'll tell them to arrest you," said the town elder, laughing.

The squire drinks his beer and doesn't even look his way.

"And who would have thought that there was such an anarchist in this Mister Sytnyk?"

The squire remains silent.

"And he was once one of us, socialized, played cards. Now, in his old age he shows his Moscow soul. A Muscovite is always a Muscovite."

The gentry laughed, entertained, while Sytnyk's eyes gleamed red with anger.

"I don't want to drink any more blood like you do, nor stuff my windows with pillows in the afternoon, to sleep. I will be dying one of these days soon and want to meet my God, to some degree, pure of heart."

"To the bath-house, Mister Sytnyk, to the bath-house for twenty cents, ho-ho!"

"There'll be a bath-house for you one day, and what a bath-house!"

"Well, if you stir up the people, take a scythe in hand and the peasantry to follow, then there could be a bath-house, but then, you're not that vicious."

The squire bustled forward for two peasants had entered the store and stopped inside the doorway.

"What would you like? Don't stand there like thieves! You are your own men, proprietors."

"If you please, Sir, we would like to drink a glass of wine, for they say that it's very good here, good for the stomach...

"Come with me into another room, you'll sit down, tell what you want, like people..." said Mister Sytnyk.

"What for, Sir, we'll stand here... Why sit down, there's no time."

"See how ignorant you people are. The German is also a country man, but look at him when he comes in here. He comes straight in, sits down — and that's that!"

The squire shows how the German comes in and sits down.

The gentry burst into laughter, the peasants stand there at sixes and sevens, their heads lowered, not knowing what to do.

"Come, don't be cattle, come immediately. Are you afraid of the gentry? Why they're your servants! You feed them, clothe them and crawl before them!"

The peasants turn red, perspire with shame and follow the squire. They sit down at a table in the other room, silent. He rings.

"Please bring us a litre of wine... Please drink and don't look around as if you have fallen among thieves. I'm a man like yourselves, of your blood and bone."

"God give you good health, Sir."

"The gentry have taken me into their circle. I was in their service and forgot about you. I played cards with them..."

"The gentry have their own pleasures, the peasants theirs — to each his own."

"No, it's not like that, it's like that now, that if you're a Ukrainian then you have to stay with the Ukrainians, and if you don't, then you're a scoundrel, ruffian and brigand. You understand?"

"It's true that everyone should stay with his own kind."

"You see, you see! I wasn't such a scoundrel in my youth. I had one portrait in my house. I had bought it somewhere and hung it, a painting of some Ukrainian Metropolitan. But one of the gentry once said to me: 'I'll come to visit you.' and I said: 'Please, do come,' and went home, took the portrait off the wall and hid it under the bed. The gentry visited me often and I always hid the potrait."

"Well Sir, a man's afraid that he doesn't do anything wrong, that he doesn't lose his position, for the gentry don't like the peasants..."

"You know, I took that portrait off the wall and put it back for at least twenty years. At the end I felt sorry for him. When I looked at him he looked as if he's angry with me. Not really angry, but as if he would cry, there on the wall. I imagined that when I wasn't home he wept loudly through the whole house..."

"Is such a thing possible, that a portrait weeps?"

"You don't understand me, I just imagined that he wept. More than once I crept to my windows to listen if he wept. Once I left the casino after midnight and was on my way home. I came to the windows and listened — weeping, I listened more closely — yes, weeping... I was terrified. I didn't know whether to go into the house or turn back. I stood there and stood there, trembling and afraid. Finally, I gathered up courage..."

"It was the midnight itself, Sir, which is most dangerous, evil is at its strongest then."

"But you don't understand me, it was my conscience that was bothering me, that tormented me so much that I imagined I heard it. I entered the house, barely standing on my feet, and hear nothing. I lit a candle, afraid to look at the portrait. I lie down, dying to look at the portrait, but hadn't the courage... I glanced quickly and it was tearful. I became feverish, with bouts of shivering and chattering teeth..."

"But that was frightening, Sir, to be alone in the house with such a portrait, and after midnight."

"I was ill a long time, thought that this would be the end of me. I called our priest, told him everything, preparing for death... But God spared me. After my illness I immediately left the government and went on pension,

saying to myself that I will never again be ashamed of my people, will live with them and will defend them. I'm ill already and won't be able to help for long, but while I am still able to get about, I'll follow you like that sinner, and beg of you, don't spurn me..."

"We thank you, Sir, for so kindly talking to us, if only there were more gentry like you. May God give you a comfortable old age..."

"No, it's you I should thank because I ignored your grievances as if they didn't exist. I didn't have that awareness..."

The squire burst into tears and the peasants looked at him and said:

"Sir, give it peace, don't worry, we are not angry with you. What is it to us how the gentry live, they have their rights and we have ours."

"You don't understand me. You don't understand me at all! I want that you should be people..."

"But Sir, we try to be as hard as we can, and we listen to you for you are educated and can show us the way."

"Yes, yes, one must know the way."

"A good gentleman, this man must be."

"It seems so. A bit of a drunk, but a good man—"

"There are some among the gentry who, when drunk, cry just like the peasants..."

"Yes, yes, there are soft-hearted ones among them, too," they exchanged as they wended their way home.

THE NANNY

The little nanny, Parasya, sat holding a child in her lap; around her sat other nannies, both girls and boys. The group looked as if someone had shaken a large number of wild apples to the ground and they lay there, tumbled about.

Parasya suggested that they play at a funeral and that they should lament.

"Why a funeral? Why lament?"

"I'll tell you why. I heard my father say last night that he didn't want this child in the house, that it wasn't ours, but belonged to a Muscovite Hussar. And father said to mother that she should either kill it or bury it, for he didn't want it. And mother said: 'How can I bury a living child?' And father said: 'Then kill it first, then bury it.' That's why I'm here so early this morning, waiting for you when you are still sleeping, because Dad shouted 'Get out of here with this bastard.'"

Little Maxim, who was always interested in hussars, threw his child out of his lap and began to examine the other child in great detail.

At last he said:

"This baby is like every other baby. Your father must be mad."

"But how does your father intend to kill the baby?"

"It's no effort to kill anything so small. He'll kill it and then bury it."

"And then your mother will wail, ai, ai!"

"Let's wail, but only the girls. The boys keep quiet because they don't wail."

The girls began wailing as was traditional for women, the common rang with their funeral song.

A neighbouring woman, Dmytrikha, shouted from behind her gate:

"What's with you? Have you girls gone crazy, with your wailing? It's a sin to wail when there is no corpse.

"Grandma, this hussar's child is supposed to die, it's going to be killed, so it's no sin to wail."

The woman crossed herself; the children continued to wail.

MY WORD

Between pale lips, and quietly, I will tell you about myself. You will hear no complaints, no sorrow or happiness in my words.

I left my mother wearing a white shirt, and I myself was as pure.

My white shirt was laughed at. I was hurt and wounded.

So I walked noiselessly, like a white cat.

I sensed my worthlessness in my noiseless movements and my child's blood dripped from my heart.

And I slept in a rented house, among filthy bodies joined in degradation.

A leaf from a white birch on heap of refuse.

I took my mother's shirt off. My childhood world and ancestral peasant background was left behind me.

Before me was a new world, new and dark.

I caught at its coat-tails, but it gazed haughtily back at me.

Like that little beggar.

I went dumb with pain, and was silent for many, many years.

My words remained unspoken, my tears unshed, my laughter unfinished.

They lay upon me like that heavy stone from a broken cross on a grave in a foreign land.

I found friends.

They had reconciled with the new world. I told them about the one I left and about the new one, which wronged us.

They said I was lying.

But I persisted and fell into quagmire, but didn't give up.

They called me a liar again and deserted me.

And when I wept, my mother lamented:

"Why don't you be yourself, for the gentry won't accept you. You shouldn't have deserted me!"

And I was left like that fallen tree in an open field.

I sat in the middle of the fields.

My thoughts unwound in long furrows over the fertile, cultivated earth.

They inhaled of the earth and fed me with solitude.

They also brought salty sweat and quiet song, which wafted after the ploughman, the plough and the driver. And they filled me with that tranquility that dreams over the yokes of the oxen pulling the plough.

I also saw the small fires between the little shepherds and the sheep scattered across the field.

Here I'll stay, ruling like that turbulent wind and sing my song.

I created for myself a world of my own.

To my right are the blue fields and black furrows, a white plough, a song and salty sweat.

To my left a black machine that groans imprecations from a scarlet mouth.

And in my heart my world is of woven silk, silver-ornamented and heaped with pearls.

In my own kingdom.

I'll carve out my world like a stone.

My word I will sharpen on the flint-stone of my conscience and soaked in poisonous herbs, release it to the left...

I'll fracture my word into bright sun's rays, soak in in every floweret, and release it to the right.

And my stone I will carve at constantly, constantly! Then I'll place it on my grave, a lifeless splendour.

And the cherry tree over my head will accept all my pains into its blossoms.

Yet in my world I'm alive, I live!

Like an insane I walk the clouds of my fantasies.

One hundred times I release the power of my conscience to search my fortunes in far-off worlds.

Over the quiet stream of my past flow the shackles of my heart's desires, so as to catch every bright gesture of my life.

But the shackles break and cannot catch anything.

They return to me, exhausted and empty-handed — like the peasants from the fields.

And I, saddened, dream in the clouds.

But when the thunder rolls, I again raise my head.

And I fly, I soar on dark clouds.

Like a golden arrow I cut through the luminous heights.

The stars hide in my dark hair, like in a dark cloud.

The cold shadows fall from my eyes to earth in a warm rain.

But I cannot reach the sun.

Like that old soldier wandering around stoically, so I wander.

But the wings heal and again I fly to the sun, toward happiness.

And again I cut through the vaults of the sky and fall.

I was fortunate.

When I looked into my mother's eyes as a child and saw how they reflected the pure, unclouded rays of happiness — I was fortunate.

Now death has placed its palm over those eyes.

And I seek happiness beneath the heavens and fall...

ВАСИЛИЙ СЕМЕНОВИЧ СТЕФАНИК

КЛЕНОВЫЕ ЛИСТЬЯ

Новеллы

Перевод с украинского
М. Ф. Скрипник

Киев, издательство
художественной литературы
«Днипро», 1988.

(На английском языке)

Редактор В. О. Баришев
Ілюстрації Г. В. Якутовича
Художнє оформлення А. П. Відоняка
Художній редактор І. М. Гаврилюк
Технічний редактор Н. К. Достатня
Коректор А. К. Вінярська

ИБ № 4270

Здано до складання 16.06.87.
Підписано до друку 05.11.87.
Формат $60\times90^{1}/_{16}$. Папір офсетний.
Гарнітура балтика. Друк офсетний.
Умовн. друк. арк. 6,5. Умовн. фарбовідб. 6,938.
Обл.-вид. арк. 4,785. Тираж 3000 пр.
Зам. 7—186. Ціна 95 к.

Видавництво
художньої літератури «Дніпро»
252601, Київ-МСП, вул. Володимирська, 42.

З діапозитивів тексту
Головного підприємства
на Київській фабриці «Жовтень»
252053, Київ, вул. Артема, 25.