MIKHAILO STELMAKH

LET THE BLOOD OF MAN NOT FLOW

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Let the Blood of Man Not Flow is a novel of the stirring events of the year 1920 in the Ukraine. The action unfolds at an unrelenting pace, the whole novel taking place within the space of forty-eight hours and concentrated around one central event, the division of land.

The novel opens with a dramatic scene. Vasil Pidoprigora, the chairman of the land commission of the poor peasants committee, has been brutally killed, and the people have to choose another chairman as honest and honourable as the late Vasil.

This is no easy task. The poor peasants need the land, it is the source of life for them, but the kulaks will

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Михайло Стельмах
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With this work the reader will make the acquaintance of one of the most important representatives of the literature of the Soviet Ukraine, the second largest of the fifteen republics of the Soviet Union. The Ukraine occupies a huge territory and has a population of about fifty million people. The republic has a highly developed industry, agriculture and science.

The literature, theatre and fine arts of the Ukraine have strong traditions going far back into history, traditions which express all that is best in the national culture as well as the historical contacts with Russian culture that have grown up over the ages.

Ukrainian literature of the Soviet period, too, is rich in works among which the post-war writing of poet and prose-writer Mikhailo Stelmakh takes pride of place. Each new work of his adds yet another jewel to the treasure-house of multinational Soviet culture.

Mikhailo Stelmakh was born in 1912 into the family of a poor Ukrainian peasant. Throughout his childhood and youth the future writer tasted both want and the hard-earned bread of a hired hand, and when the first collective farm was founded in his village it was he who led the youth brigade made up of former farm labourers. The Soviet system gave this poor peasant's son the opportunity to receive an education, and Stelmakh studied at the Vinnitsa Teachers Training College until 1933, after which he taught in villages of Podolye and the Chernigov region.

Stelmakh's first poem was published in 1936. Five years later he published his first book of poems which was followed by other anthologies, and a collection of short stories.

Stelmakh is, however, first and foremost a writer of longer prose works, of the novels to which he turned later, matured by the richness of his life experience.

During the Second World War he was a gunner, and was wounded twice in battle. It was at this period, snatching a few moments between battles and while lying in hospital,

that Stelmakh thought out the novel which he called *A Big Family*, the story of the emerging of the peasant from his selfish, narrow shell with its petty-owner's mentality into the spacious world of collective endeavour.

Working on the life-stories of the people of one Ukrainian village, he wrote a cycle of novels showing the great changes, transformations even, that have taken place in the life of the people since the revolution. The first of this cycle, *A Big Family* (1949-1951), brought its author fame and a State Prize.

Let the Blood of Man Not Flow is the second work in the cycle, which stands as an independent novel on its own.

The humanitarian ideals and content of the book are evident from its very title. The philosophy behind it is instrumental in expressing through the writer's imagery his humane outlook, the outlook of a revolutionary who ardently desires for the sake of and in the name of humanity to conquer all that is immical to that humanity.

Let the Blood of Man Not Flow is a novel of the stormy events of the year 1920 in the Ukraine; of the allotment of land to the peasants and of the joy of working that land. At the same time this is a novel of the experience of our age and of its conflicts and contradictions.

The book takes us to a Ukrainian village, where Vasil Pidoprigora, chairman of the land commission of the poor peasants' committee has been killed by bandits. The village has to choose a new chairman, but the bandits, who have taken cover in the woods, are a threat not only to the new chairman but to the whole village:

Rivers of blood are poured at the turning points of history, and here in sorrow are remembered all those who shed their blood when the new world was born in travail.

The reader will not fail to notice the points of view expressed and the positions held by the characters in the novel: by Svirid Miroshnichenko, for instance, or Timofei Goritsvit, or to see in what way they are different from Danilo Pidoprigora or Polikarp Sergienko.

Let the Blood of Man Not Flow is a call to the conscience, reason and feelings of the living. It is they who carry the responsibility of ensuring that the land so abundantly sprinkled with blood should not stagnate in hatred but should become cleaner, brighter and more beautiful.

"This is a ruthless and kind book," said Konstantin Simonov, "just as a man can be both ruthless and kind when he knows in the name of what and against whom he is struggling."

The chief characteristics of Mikhailo Stelmakh's trilogy of

historical and revolutionary novels are a desire to grasp the essence of the process of history to convey the spirit of the working people and the richness of their inner life, the nobility of their ideas and the justice of their hopes.

The action of the next novel, *Bread and Salt* (1958), is linked with the revolution in Russia in 1905 and with the effect which it had upon the life of the village.

The book opens with a description of the hard road trodden by Ukrainian migrants to the distant wastes of Siberia. Burdened by want they have left their own land, suffering need and hunger, but their hopes that life will be better in that distant land are not realised. For the moment they do not see that there is another way, the revolutionary way, but they come to it later when they take land from the old landowners and become its new masters as is described in the novel *Let the Blood of Man Not Flow.*

The author finds the most original forms of expression, forms which make his prose akin to poetry and give us the right to call his style lyrical-romantic.

For the whole trilogy, *A Big Family, Let the Blood of Man Not Flow* and *Bread and Salt,* the author was granted the highest literary award in the Soviet Union: the Lenin Prize.

Having completed, as it were, his excursion into the past Stelmakh then returned to our own time. *Truth and Falsehood,* a novel which appeared in 1961, tells of people and events in 1945 once the war was over. In the philosophy behind it, in the problems explored and the style in which it is written this book is closely connected with the trilogy. The author seems in it to be summing up the experience as a writer gained during his work on the three previous novels.

The basic content and artistic form of this novel are complex. There is much in our legends and folk-tales, dating from all periods of history, on the subject of those eternal enemies, truth and falsehood, and the idea of the work is connected with this rich oral tradition. Although the author writes in a highly poetical style the story itself is realistic. The book is a wide canvas of life where heroes are frequently typical of our contemporaries. Through them the author embodies the idea upon which the novel is based, the tale of triumph of truth over falsehood.

The scene once again is set in a Ukrainian village. The hero of the novel, Marko Bessmertny, a man of rare moral qualities, who has lived a life full of dramatic events, returns from the war. He starts to work for the rehabilitation of his native

village, boldly fighting all kinds of falsehoods whatever guise they assume.

What does the writer mean when he speaks of truth and falsehood? Truth is love for one's fellow-man, a life dedicated to others. The essence of falsehood is antagonistic to truth, although it is sometimes decked out in alluring attire. The creator of all that is good on earth and the supreme judge of falsehood is the working people. The author follows this theme throughout the novel, where the idea of Good merges with the image of the Earth and with the concept of work for the benefit of mankind.

Mikhailo Stelmakh holds dear that by which the Soviet people lives: its work, its achievement, its wants, demands, and vital needs. Stelmakh's books are popular in their very essence. Their imagery and poetry remind us of the songs of Ukrainian folk musicians and bards, the Kobzars, of the poems by Taras Shevchenko, Ivan Franko, Lesya Ukrainka. The roots of Stelmakh's works are firmly grounded in the national traditions of Ukrainian literature and art. But their subject matter, ideology and humaneness have made them popular with readers of all the nationalities peopling the Soviet Union. Written in Ukrainian, Stelmakh's books have been translated into Estonian, Lithuanian, Moldavian, they are read in Argentina, Guatemala, Britain, Japan, Finland, and Brazil.

As one reads Stelmakh it often seems that one is hearing the story rather than reading it, so clear are the voices of the earth and of human hearts, of poetry, folk songs, tales and the author himself, and all these different voices are blended into one whole as in a piece of music.

His books are full of lofty poetic imagery, and their romantic tone is natural when the story of the fate of a nation is told. This is, once again, traditional for Ukrainian literature, for it was in the same tone that Juri Yanovsky wrote about the Civil War in *Riders* and Oles Gonchar about the Second World War in *The Standard-Bearers*.

Works like those of Stelmakh bear eloquent witness to the variety within the different streams which go to make up the whole of Soviet literature.

Since 1941 Mikhailo Stelmakh has published more than 20 books: lyric verse, poems for children, filmscripts, plays, short stories, novels and collections of folk stories.

Not long ago he brought out two new works, the novels *The Geese Are Flying* and *Fair Evening*, telling of his first childhood impressions and the shaping of his world outlook.

In the novel *The Geese Are Flying* there are striking

portraits of people in the old Ukrainian village; ploughmen and craftsmen with their perpetual want and those who exploited them — smugly prosperous men with stone hearts. It is the story of a boy from a poor family, his joys, cares and adventures.

From the very start the reader seems to enter a world of folk stories. The expressive language of the child's grandfather and mother is transformed in the boy's imagination into a world of animistic notions, delightful in its spontaneity.

The boy's memory preserved for the future writer the images of people he saw and those characteristics that were to serve as a basis for his magnificent realistic portraits.

A hard wisdom was formed in the long and bitter experience of village life. To be the shepherd of someone else's flock was the most that a poor boy like Mikhailo could hope for in life as things stood before the revolution, and it was as a shepherd boy that he worked. But the revolution and Soviet power spelled an entirely different future for him.

The hero of Stelmakh's autobiographical stories is not so much little Mikhailo but the revolutionary epoch itself, the epoch which brought so many changes to the life of the people.

In his new novel *Thinking of You* (1970) the writer returns once more to an event of importance in the life of the people, to the Civil War, collectivisation and the Second World War. But the book is not simply a chronicle of bygone days. Its essential task is to reveal the way the people feel the concepts of good and evil, love, friendship, and patriotism.

Two stylistic streams are combined in the novel, the epic and the lyric. The lyric is concerned with the hero, Bogdan Romanishin, teacher and poet, a lover of folk songs, of human endeavour and of all that is beautiful in life. His words sound like a solemn oath: "If all the gold and treasures in the world were to be laid at my feet, I would not leave my native land and become someone's servant, because what is important to me is not my own skin but all that is great and good."

The poetry of the works of Mikhailo Stelmakh is built on the language of the people; in its turns of phrase, its intonations and its very character it is close to the nature of his motherland, the customs of his people, to their songs and their folk-tales. It is in their poetic approach to natural phenomena and their desire to create for themselves and for others something good and beautiful and inspiring, as in the rich imaginativeness of their speech, that the talent of the common people,

long oppressed by the harsh circumstances of life in the pre-revolutionary village found expression.

Their hearts were pure and full of wisdom that though sometimes born of grief was always full of courage and humanity.

In the poetic imagery of *Fair Evening* the "people of the day" are contrasted with the "people of the night". Here, too, in artistic manner peculiar to him the author exposes the servants of falsehood.

Stelmakh's books with their landscapes, their music and their romantic symbolism are like a stirring song about the tillers of the soil, then closeness to Nature, their human beauty, their giftedness and faith in the future.

With a common ideological and philosophical basis, the best works of Soviet literature bear the imprint of their authors' creative personality which gives each of them an individual colouring. Mikhailo Stelmakh's artistic individuality is further enriched by the wealth of experience he draws from the traditions of national Ukrainian culture.

Yuri Lukin

LET THE BLOOD OF MAN NOT FLOW

Starting with the day he was given a fine, well-fed cow from the manor herd, Stepan Kushnir always brought a piece of butter wrapped in a cloth when he came to meetings of the "Kombed", the committee of poor peasants. He would stand beside the massive bow-legged table which had once reflected the sparkle of rich chandeliers, and with a piece of broken scythe would earnestly slice off shavings of butter into a small earthenware bowl in which a burning wick gave a feeble light. That bowl was shaped like a doll's head or like a rounded crown of a root.

The men sitting on benches round the room cracked jokes about Stepan as they filled the air with the acrid smoke of home-grown tobacco.

"That man will die fasting all because of that butter lamp."

"Stepan knows what he's doing it for: he wants to make sure of getting into Heaven."

"He hasn't a chance, the petticoat chaser."

"Take a bit, Stepan, just to butter your lips."

"He'll manage without, the girls like them well enough as they are!"

Stepan, a mettlesome chap, as sturdy as an acorn, would only flash his jolly little eyes at them, straighten out the spongy black wick and wipe his fingers on his fair hair. Then, his face growing serious, he would turn to the door and stride out to keep watch, to see that no counter-revolutionary scum was trying to listen to the discussion of poor peasants' affairs.

As soon as his keen eye caught some shadow slinking round the former manor house in the darkness of the autumn night, Stepan would swoop down on it like a whirlwind, and more than once the voice of Miroshnichenko, or maybe some representative from the district centre, was interrupted by cooing tones from outside: "Move away, now, away from our window."

A ripple of laughter would run through the meeting.

"That's Stepan, doing propaganda work among the moneybags again."

Outside in the darkness the dove-like cooing would continue.

"Beat it. Keep your distance from our windows, or you may not get home again."

The men would fall silent and, grinning, turn their heads towards the open door through which they could see Stepan's propaganda work at its most explicit—with fists now—for, after all, he had not sacrificed his butter to bring light to this half-ruined manor house for the benefit of some kulak bastard, had he?

On this day, however, he came with empty hands and sat on the sagging verandah, leaning against an ornate pillar like a dark shadow in his hopeless grief. His red, stubby-fingered hands, that were like maple leaves in autumn, trembled and drummed on the lifeless marble, or slapped down angrily on the threadbare knees of his Sunday trousers. His world had darkened, and pain clawed at his heart.

The peasants passed him in silence, and his grief was reflected on their faces. Because two days before, early in the morning, bandits had shot down Stepan's best friend, Vasil Pidoprigora, shot him down with a machine-gun. They wanted to kill his mother too, but one of them said she had one foot in the grave anyway, let her live to wail over her son, so that the Kombed could hear her. They were sorry his wife was not in. Then they threw down on Vasil's chest the list of people to get land under the new division and drove a long nail through it into his still warm heart.

The list was put into the grave together with the stubborn, blue-eyed Vasil so that on the Day of Judgement God and man should know for what he had lost his life.

They took the nail out of the wounded heart and placed it in his mother's lifeless fingers—let her remember that she too had a son once. But that nail was too much for her heart to bear, for her hands to hold, hands which had held the baby Vasil to her breast and caressed him, hands that had stroked his head in comfort when somebody hurt him, hands that had lain trembling on his shoulders when he first went to work as a labourer, hands that had been folded in whispered prayer before the icon that her son would return from the war. And now, as those hands touched the nail, rusty with dried blood, the strength drained from her legs, she fell on her knees and there was madness in her staring eyes. All her hard life, gathered day by day into her spirit like bee-bread into a honey-comb, burst out and flowed away like a handful of fine sand, as though it had never been.

Old Bogdanikha did not wail and lament over her son; she did not wet his grave with tears; strangely, with those grief-stricken people about her, she very, very softly sang an Easter song, a song from long-past years which she used to sing as a young girl in the holiday crowd before the church.

*Once I planted cornflowers blue,**
Fair, fair cornflowers blue,
Hoed them well and watered too,
Fair, fair, watered too.
Then I picked them wet with dew,
Fair, fair, wet with dew.
Cornflower, little cornflower sweet,
Fair, fair, cornflower sweet,
Looking up the sun to greet,
Fair, fair—

The refrain of this Easter song mingled in the hut with the funeral knell which could no longer reach the mother's heart. That was why she was not allowed to go to the cemetery, to follow the maple coffin swaying on bowed shoulders.

The willows by the roadside leaned over, reached out to Vasil with green arms, and whispered sadly, for the last time, dropping their bitter tears upon his face. Olga, Vasil's widow, walked behind the coffin, sobbing and wailing, while in the empty hut an old woman still tended her cornflower, her Vasilyok, the flower which would never more bring light to her home or her heart.

"It's an ill omen," the old women's whisper ran through the village.

"Sow what you want, but on your own land," snapped Nastya Denisenko, a woman with sharply jutting breasts and incurably spiteful eyes, listening to the mother's song from her side of the wattle fence.

"They aren't satisfied with dividing the landlord's estate; they'll be reaching out for the farmers' land next."

"Avaunt, avaunt, Satan.... In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." Old Mother Danko crossed herself as she heard the knell. "So now they're burying him, poor soul."

"Have you heard, there were some sort of queer signs on that committee list Vasil had?"

"Blood, not signs!"

"Well, it might be blood, too, I don't know, I didn't see it.

* Cornflower in Slav tongues is *vasilyok*, one of the variations of the name Vasil.— *Tr.*

But one thing I do know, the tsar's got a million soldiers over there in England, I heard that myself, and saw it in a dream, too."

"But didn't the Bolsheviks kill the tsar?" the old woman's puckered mouth with its countless wrinkles trembled.

"How could they kill him? They tried to shoot him, but angels shielded him from the bullets. Like the Virgin of Pochayev did for the Cossacks."

"Aye, well, nobody shielded Vasil, Lord have mercy on his soul, sinful though it was."

Sadly the crowd trailed away from the cemetery, which was dilapidated by war and the inroads of cattle, leaving Stepan and Olga alone by the fresh grave. Her lithe body swaying from side to side, the woman sobbed broken-heartedly at the head of the grave with its dry wooden cross which was closer to Vasil's curly hair now than her loving young hands. The wing-like eyebrows above her black eyes strained upwards, as though they would fly away. They frowned down on the ground for a moment, then soared up again in a broken line, shaking off the dust of the grave.

Stepan neither comforted Olga nor wept himself, although his whole body felt weak and nerveless. Pictures passed before his eyes, piercing him with pain, pictures of the days and years side by side with Vasil—as boys guarding a flock of yellow goslings that were as fluffy as willow catkins against the raids of kites, and later as soldiers in the trenches, choking from greenish German gas.

Right up to yesterday that foreign poison had never ceased to gurgle and swell in Vasil's chest. Yet it was not this, it was blunt bullets made in Austria and fired from a bandit's machine-gun that had torn his spirit from his body, and now it flew through the white clouds to the very sun, seeking a new home and a new land.

Fighting his pain, Stepan gazed with heavy-lidded eyes at the white clouds floating in the sky like patches of foam. But his gaze was drawn back to the dark earth of the grave. Its surface was already dry and greyish, except where it was moist with tears.

"Oh, Vasil, Vasil, how can we do without you," was all that Stepan said again and again, appealing to his friend, knowing, yet still unable to comprehend, that his friend was gone.

When dusk dropped its grey veil over the first autumn gold on the trees, Stepan and Olga returned to the village. Olga

swayed as she walked, staring before her with unseeing eyes, but Stepan's mind was piercingly conscious of the smug, malicious faces rising up or hanging motionless over every kulak gate, gloating faces full of unspoken thoughts.

Ha-ha, been looking at the earth humping up in the graveyard?

Mind you don't get borne there behind a cross too.

It was enough, however, for Stepan to meet a pair of eyes and the malicious sparkle disappeared, replaced by feigned indifference or even a pretence of sympathy. Only shaggy-browed Yakov Danko, "Twister Danko", made no pretence at anything, either because he regarded people as just so much cattle which he dealt in on the black market, or because Stepan had spent all his childhood years slaving on his father's farm. When Danko saw Stepan and Olga, his beefy face with the high cheekbones beamed with a nasty leer.

"Coupling up already? From funeral to wedding, maybe? With Soviet power anything goes!"

Stepan flew to the gate, and hit the man's fat red-veined cheek with his hard open palm. All he remembered afterwards was seeing Danko's right cheek and even the stubble on his temple turn fiery red, and the spot of colour in his trembling left cheek stand out more sharply than ever.

"Take this for the funeral, and this for the wedding," Stepan shouted, slapping the man's left cheek to bring it to the same fiery red as the right.

Danko brandished his fist.

"Want to follow that pal of yours? I'll spill your guts for this!"

"We'll see whose guts it is!"

"That we will!"

"Twister Danko!"

"Some commune, with not a pair of pants between you!"

They came to grips over the gate in a clinch so frenzied that first one then the other was lifted up from the ground. Sinews and boards cracked, their caps flew off and their hair stood on end. Then Danko, seizing his chance, leaped over the gate, hoping to bear Stepan down with his weight. But Stepan kept his feet, and cursing, they now fought in the street, raising clouds of dust. Danko's green-grey eyes were bloodshot, his red face was wet; Stepan was pale, with drops of sweat beading his dark, quivering nostrils.

It took Svirid Miroshnichenko all his great strength to pull the wild-eyed, dishevelled men apart. He gave Stepan a

shake, just for appearances' sake, and squeezed Danko's neck till his head sagged limply on to his shoulder.

"Pardon me if I've crushed you a bit." Miroshnichenko gave Danko a sideways look, his gnarled fingers playing with the buttons of his shirt through the opening of which a flapper, tattooed in blue on his powerful seaman's chest peeped out.

"You're all the same gang!" snarled Danko spitting out blood and hatred, and fingered his neck tenderly.

"Helped him out, and still he's not satisfied," Miroshnichenko said, staring at Stepan, who was edging closer to Danko again. "I'll have to think twice before I save your hide again, Danko."

"*You'd* save me, goddam your soul." Danko's bruised and swollen face came alive with rage.

"What's eating you now?" Miroshnichenko asked. The home-made button on his faded shirt slipped from its hole, displaying the laughing blue mouth of the frivolous beauty trapped for life by this ex-sailor from the cruiser *Zhemchug*.

"What? You don't know what?" hissed Danko. "Don't you fix the grain deliveries? Think you can flay the same sheep twice?"

"All right, I do the grain assessing," Miroshnichenko said warily. He tossed back his hair, and seemed to level all the lines on his forehead at Danko.

"Threatening to cut off part of my land?"

Danko's grey-green eyes bored into Miroshnichenko's. Maybe Vasil's death had made this sailor's heart quake? If so, Danko would not grudge him one of his cows, so that his kids should no longer have to choke over their tasteless porridge with never a drop of milk in it.

But the glare Miroshnichenko gave him seemed to go right through him.

"I don't threaten, I'm going to do it."

"You are?" Danko croaked, and stretched his hand to his chest as though he had the ex-sailor's girl there to feel.

"I'll be doing it for your own good, maybe it'll make a man of you instead of the vermin you are." Miroshnichenko shook his round head, set proudly on its powerful neck.

"You—will you really slice it off, Svirid?" Danko's voice held disappointment, a plea, and even a touch of hope.

"I certainly will," Svirid promised without anger.

"And may the devil slice you day and night and never stop! You wait till Petlyara comes, he'll settle your hash!"

"Run to the priest and have him sing a requiem for your

Petlyura!" Miroshnichenko's grey eyes that held the blue sparkle of the sea became angry. He walked up to Danko and that worthy edged towards his gate, his back scraping the high fence. "That's more like it. Hold your tongue, before it gets you into more trouble! Come on, Stepan." He turned and marched down the street, leaving clear prints of his big, nail-studded German boots in the dust.

Stepan, looking like a ruffled cock-sparrow, followed reluctantly, glancing back over his shoulder at Danko's house.

"Well, who won?" asked Svirid without turning. He was afraid of laughing out loud at Stepan's bristling belligerence.

"A draw," Stepan replied with ill grace. "He's strong under all his fat, damn him."

"You've got to use your brains to beat the strong ones," Miroshnichenko nudged Stepan in the ribs.

In silence they passed Vasil Pidoprigora's cottage, alert to any sounds of life that might come from that dead house. Stepan felt ill at ease, he seemed to be hearing the song again: "Once I planted cornflowers blue...."

But no sound came from Vasil's house or yard, although his old mother was there crouching beside the woodpile, a lonely figure bent with grief. She seemed to be rocking a baby in her empty, tired arms.

II

Miroshnichenko raised the bowl with its dimly burning wick above his head, let his eyes range attentively over the meeting and gave an involuntary start. What a likeness between Miron Pidoprigora, the forester, and his cousin Vasil! Miron was sitting beside his brother Olexandr; his broad forehead was seamed with thought and shadowed with fear, and he kept moving his shoulders uneasily. What a pity the likeness stopped there. Miron was not made of the same stuff as Vasil.

"Olexandr, why've you left your post on the road?" asked Svirid suspiciously.

Olexandr rose from the bench and stood awkward and guilty, staring at the floor, shifting his old shotgun from hand to hand, unable to get out any answer.

"Well—gone deaf all of a sudden?"

"It's this way," he said at last without raising his eyes. "I just had to come."

"Was your house on fire or something?"

"No, no fire. I just had to come," Olexandr shifted his

shotgun even more nervously as though it were scorching his fingers.

"But why?"

Olexandr took off his cap, hung it over the mouth of his gun and raised shamed eyes to Miroshnichenko.

"I want to hear again where my land's going to be. I keep on thinking, what if the list's been changed?"

There was a burst of laughter and Miron tugged at his brother's coat—why did he have to go and blurt everything out, as if he were at confession?

"And supposing there was an enemy attack?" Miroshnichenko smiled, and immediately he frowned again.

"Oh no, not where I'm posted. An hour ago Red Cossacks came along, I threw down six sheaves of oats from the barn for them myself."

"Many of them?"

"Fifty, maybe. And there's more coming. Brave chaps they are, and good horses they've got, too. Looks like they're after one of those bands."

"That's good."

The meeting livened up.

"Maybe some day we'll be able to sleep peacefully in our beds."

Miroshnichenko flushed slightly at that, as though the words were directed especially at him. Almost every night he shivered in a barn, in a hay-stack or under the shocks in the field. He felt he carried the very smell of straw about with him. He looked at Olexandr and his back tingled with the remembered feel of these stacks and shocks which sheltered him.

"Your land, Olexandr, is still in the same place. And now, back you go to your post. Fine sort of guards we've got!"

"Please, let me stop for the voting, since I'm here," Olexandr pleaded like a schoolboy. Miroshnichenko had a sharp answer trembling on the tip of his tongue, but he bit it back.

"All right, then, nothing to be done with you, I suppose. But have you brought any more of the guard with you?"

"No, never a one," Olexandr brightened up, and the cap or his gun muzzle gave a little hop in sympathy. "I've beer round them all. Karpets wanted to go off, but I drove him to the bridge, near gave him a shove with my gun-butt to learn him a bit of discipline. So that's that."

"Look at him, all set for a fight, he is!" That came from Ivan Bondar. The broad, leathery face with the short

moustache he turned on Olexandr was alight with mischievous laughter.

"I'm the way I'm made, Ivan Timofeyevich," said Olexandr and settled down comfortably beside the motionless Miron, whose forehead was still creased with alarm and thought.

Miroshnichenko put the bowl with the floating wick on the massive manor-house table, pushed back the hair falling over his eyes, and placed his palm on his chest, covering the curls of the tattooed girl. In the dim light he saw the weather-beaten faces, the shaggy heads of these stepsons of the soil, waiting, tense and motionless, to hear him speak.

All their lives, their gnarled hands had tended the golden grain. From childhood they had known the feel of the master's whip on their backs, their master's ox-plough ropes had rubbed their hands raw, those hands which afterwards, rough with blood-filled blisters, had swung the heavy flails. That is why farm labourers had longer arms than anyone else, that is why the tillers of the soil longed and thirsted so for land—their only heaven on earth.

Rich land and poor, kind land and cruel, it drew them with the warm rattle of plump wheat grains, drove them in cold fetters to Siberia, caressed them with wheat-ears soft as a young girl's hair and welted their backs with German and Haidamak whips. Surely it was not going to cheat them now?

Miroshnichenko knew well enough that Kamenets-Podolsk and Proskurov were lousy with Petlyura's men, he knew it was not for nothing that the doltish Hetman Skoropadsky had left his luxurious villa in Switzerland to go begging to the British and the French, he knew it was a bad sign that the men he had appointed as Ministers in what he called his Ukrainian People's Republic had gone to "Black Baron Wrangel" in the Crimea. They might plough the fields with shells, sow them with bones, and water them with blood, but they could hardly expect a harvest. Hardly! Because the peasants already had the feel of their long-awaited land in their blood, and not even death could wrench them away from their own land. They even pictured paradise as so much land that could be ploughed, sowed and perhaps laid out in heavenly gardens.

Miroshnichenko had often dreamed his fondest dream when he was at sea, or in the cold crew quarters, or in the barracks of the marine detachments which had so few survivors, or with the partisans in the woods, that one fine sunny day—it had to be sunny—some kind, learned people

would summon him, a man with two St. George crosses, place papers in his hands and say, "There, Svirid, this you have earned with your sweat and blood—your own land. Take it and live in paradise."

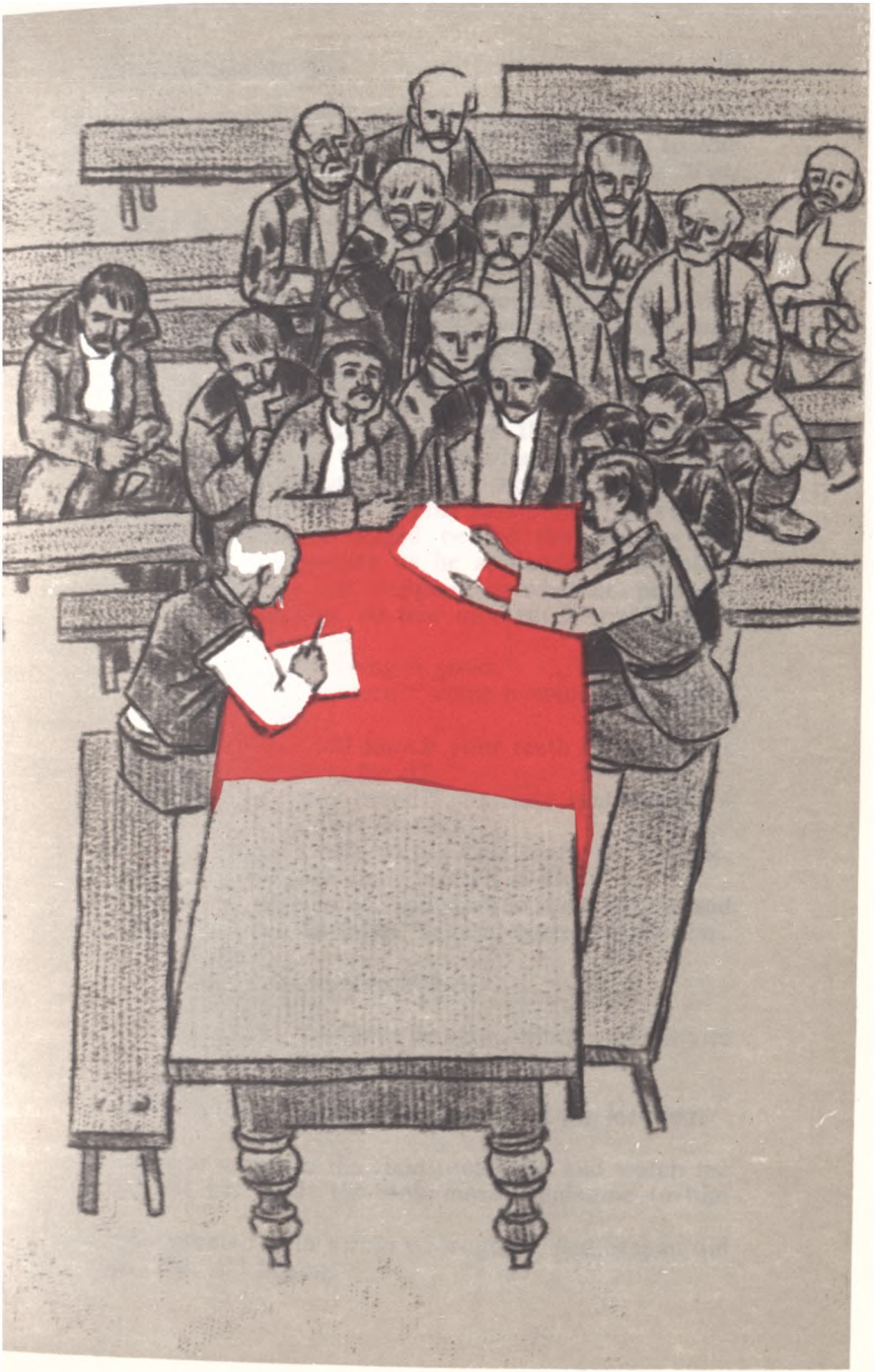
But now in his village it was he himself—he grinned wrily -who had to be this kind, learned man. The kulaks called him a plunderer, a thief and a Judas, they tried both threats and bribes of money and grain. Well, after all, there was nothing new about that sort of thing. It was a pity, though, that there were no title deeds to the land, they would have made the law more impressive for both the poor peasants and the kulaks. He had brought the matter up with the district Party committee, but had found scant sympathy.

"Don't be a fool! Where'll we get paper for your title deeds? With newspapers printed on wrapping paper and decisions typed on the backs of documents from the archives? Our instructions on one side and the tsar's eagle on the other shaking a stick at them! Two systems rubbing shoulders on the same bit of paper...."

There was much that passed through Miroshnichenko's mind in this moment before he spoke the best words of his life. For everybody there are words which are his life's best. For one they may cease with a childish lisp of "Mummie", after that, life mauls and bruises him until nothing but foulness issues from his mouth. In another they are born of the sweet, tender passion for the girl whom he has led to the altar, himself in top-boots borrowed for the occasion. A third may speak them on his death-bed for his children to remember their whole lives long.

Miroshnichenko had never been able to speak his best words to his mother, for the day of his birth had been the day of her death. Nor had he been fated to fling wide the doors of his stubborn, unyielding heart to any girl, for his marriage to a young widow had sprung not from love, but from compassion. She had given him two children and then he had followed her coffin to the cemetery with sorrow but without tears.

Svirid Miroshnichenko was well read on the subject of revolution, but his words were not taken from books, they were simple and direct—the best words, indeed, for those whose toil and whose sufferings were of the soil, for the men sitting on benches and window-sills, or squatting on the floor of the manor house from whose walls the surviving bas-relief plaster ladies looked down their noses with suspicion.



"Comrades, the district executive committee has today confirmed our division of the land. According to the new laws we are now its real owners. You hear that, folks?"

"We hear it, Svirid, we hear it," came back from the audience, and people bent their heads to the new law and the land.

"Well, then—" The words he was speaking, words which warmed his spirit, halted their flow for an instant and pulsed in his breast like another heart. "At sunrise tomorrow we begin marking out the new boundaries. Everyone bring his own markers to the fields. That clear?"

He stopped, waiting in silence as though wondering whether he himself really understood what he had just said. He wished he could listen to his own words from outside.

The silence was rent by clapping and a babel of voices. Only Miron Pidoprigora lagged behind the others, then looked round apprehensively as he applauded, wondering whether the rest were still clapping, or whether, perhaps, people were noticing him. At that moment Stepan's voice floated in from outside.

"Get out, go while the going is good."

"Are you the big noise here?" came a voice that rasped with ill-concealed anger.

"Big or small, I can still knock your teeth out like peas from a pod. You're asking for it!"

"I spit on all your lousy breed!" someone spat loudly.

"Go and spit in your own *borshch*!"

So Miroshnichenko's best words faded into the prosaic. First he frowned, then he smiled. Such is life.

Stepan Kushnir, pale-faced, appeared in the doorway and leaned silently against the lintel. Several voices hailed him.

"Who was there?"

"That scoundrel Safron Varchuk."

"What did you tell him?"

"What d'you think? Told him he was a bloody traitor and he'd better not come spying at our meeting."

"What did he say to that?"

"That he'd come to take a look at me, not the meeting."

"And you?"

"Told him to come to the field tomorrow and watch me measuring off his land. I'll look more handsome to him then."

That was greeted with a roar of laughter. But Stepan did not laugh. Nor did Miron.

Miroshnichenko raised his big hand and there was silence.

"Now that Vasil is dead—may the earth lie lightly upon him—we shall have to choose a new chairman of the land commission. You know as well as I do the sort of man we need for this job. He must know the land and also know how to treat people right."

"What about you, Svirid Yakovlevich, can't you take on both jobs?" lisped dry, twig-like Polikarp Sergienko, rising in his seat. His peaked face expressed respect for Miroshnichenko mingled with a secret thought not difficult to guess. Let one man take all the honour and all the responsibility too. Svirid's used to it, he's been a marked man all these years. I'm sorry for him, of course, but if that is the cross laid on him, he must bear it.

Miroshnichenko turned away from Polikarp, whose face fell at once. Miroshnichenko's angry, he might change the list tomorrow, Polikarp thought miserably. He'll give me the leavings, the worst bit that he could have easily palmed off on someone not so poor. Yes, he'll do just that, he may be one of us, still he's a chief and a communard besides. And Polikarp knew perfectly well that there was no love lost between the communards and the Bolsheviks just then. The Bolsheviks were for giving the poor peasants more land, and the communards wanted to give them less, all they cared about was their commune.

Polikarp cast a rapid glance over the benches, wondering if he couldn't get some distant relative elected chairman of the land commission, somebody who would act as a relative should and favour him a bit. But names were already being called out, scattering his thoughts.

"Timofi Goritsvit!"

"Stepan Kushnir!"

"No, Kushnir's too young and hot-headed!"

"Let him get married first!"

"That's easy enough!"

"Ivan Bondar!"

"Oh, good folks, don't you go and choose my man!" called Mariyka Bondar from the corridor. Usually so full of fight, she now sounded thoroughly scared. Carefully, for she was heavy with child, she walked in from the darkness and stood hesitating on the threshold.

"What do you want at the meeting, my good woman? Nothing for you to do at home?" shouted Olexandr Pidoprigora indignantly. "Who's ever heard of females barging in when we are discussing serious matters?"

"What do I want? The same as you, Olexandr—land," Mariyka snapped back, and stubborn lines showed round her small, arched nose.

"You won't be left out." Olexandr glanced at the bulge under her faded apron.

"No, but I won't get all I should. My Ivan wrote down that there are only three of us in the family."

"But isn't that right, Mariyka?" asked Miroshnichenko in some surprise—he was an old friend of Bondar's.

"Svirid Yakovlevich!" Mariyka shook her head in blushing reproach, and to make everything clear slipped her hand under her apron. "Don't you know that I'm in my eighth month, begging your pardon of course?"

"Don't you listen to the blasted woman! She'd talk the hind leg off a donkey, and make it think it owed her the front one too," shouted the exasperated husband. "In one day, she's clapped on a whole month. She'd produce a seven months' infant if she could, to get land portioned out for it."

The roar of laughter shook the benches and floor and rattled the windows. Only the plaster ladies on the walls remained unmoved. Mariyka stood frozen on the threshold, her face a patchy red with humiliation and anger. She wanted to hurl deafening abuse into all those grinning faces, but felt it better to start with her husband.

"Have you ever seen the like of him?" She pointed at Ivan. "He's not a man, he's a living plague. He'll say things that strike you to the heart, no pity for father or mother, for young or old! And don't you go and choose him, or you'll rue the day, as I've been doing from the first!"

At that moment Mariyka actually believed that it was not she who tormented Ivan but the other way about, and tears of sincere self-pity rose in her eyes. As far back as she could remember, everything and everybody had been against her. At home she used to get terrible beatings from her father, a hopeless drunkard; on the estate that beast the overseer had always had his knife into her because she ran away from him in the evenings; the girls who were better off had laughed at her poor clothes and none of the lads would send matchmakers to her—for her little patch of land had been too small to attract suitors.

But now with the new government everything was changed—so why shouldn't another person be counted in Ivan's family, especially with Svirid in charge of everything? What difference did it make, whether it squawked in the cradle now or began in two months' time? What mattered

was that she had felt it quicken on the very day when talk about the land began again. And wasn't that a sign from Heaven? If the unborn soul could already feel for the land, why should it not get its portion? That was why she pestered Ivan with threats and pleas to put down four people in the list. But there was no justice in the world. There hadn't been any when the landlords had power, and now the peasants had power it was just the same. If Miroshnichenko had had to bear children, he would not have asked stupid questions, he would have put down a portion right away and a good one, too. Wouldn't have grudged it.

Mariyka dashed the tears from her eyes and with studied clumsiness carried her heavy body out into the corridor, so all might see that a new life was just about to come into the world. Ivan spat in annoyance.

"Now wouldn't you call her a she-devil? Tell her there's salt or kerosene on sale somewhere and she'll run like a young filly." He wondered what would be the best way to ward off her attack when he got home.

While he was pondering, a forest of hands went up. Polikarp Sergienko with a sigh raised his too. Too bad he hadn't managed to propose even a very distant relative. Why couldn't he have thought of that before? But despite his regrets, he voted most zealously for all the candidates in turn, for how could you guess which one would be elected? Better be on good terms with every one of them.

Timofi Goritsvit was elected almost unanimously, although he protested, saying he couldn't write or read a word and wasn't anything of a speaker, either.

"Well then, you can just get down to it and learn." The elderly blacksmith Kirilo Ivanishin slapped him heartily on the back. "Get up, you devil, and thank people for the honour they've done you." And with his huge hand, horny from iron and fire, he gave Timofi a forceful shove.

Tall, dour Timofi rose awkwardly with a humble smile that left his eyes sombre, and would have sat down again immediately had not Ivanishin prevented him.

"Wait a bit, Timofi." He let his eyes rove over the benches. "For the sake of our great truth, our justice, let our chairman of the land commission now eat a handful of earth—so he should always remember what he is chosen for. Or shall we trust Timofi without it?"

"We'll trust him!" Polikarp Sergienko was quick to get it out first—let Goritsvit know who was for him, body and soul.

"Timofi's the right sort!" came from all round, and even Mariyka Bondar, who had thrust her head in for a second from the dark corridor, nodded in approval.

"You hear that? The village has trusted you with the land. You know how it's to be divided?" Ivanishin looked hard at Goritsvit with eyes that seemed to hold a spark from his furnace.

"Sure! So you don't get a single extra furrow," said Timofi slowly.

"Why did I have to elect you!" Kirilo spread out his hands in mock despair and laughed with the rest as he pulled Goritsvit down beside him. "Didn't expect you to round on me like that, you devil!"

Meanwhile, Miron Pidoprigora had risen to his feet. "Svirid Yakovlevich, who'll I go to now to change my share of the land—Timofi or you?" he mumbled through his whiskers.

"Change it?" Miroshnichenko repeated in surprise. "Why do you want to change it, old man?"

Miron gave a gesture of despair. "It's that woman of mine, she's worrying the life out of me. And what does she want, anyway? But nag she must and nag she will."

Olexandr glanced at his brother in mistrustful surprise, shrugged, and was apparently about to speak, but Miron with a dull, piteous look implored silence.

"What does your wife want now?" asked Miroshnichenko, frowning. "She's been here day in day out pestering us not to forget you, with you living there right by the forest—what's wrong now?"

"There, you see what she's like? There's more spite than woman in her, good people! And what she wants—there's no end to it!" Slyly he led up to his goal by this roundabout route, hoping to win sympathy, Miroshnichenko's too. "Women—there's no satisfying them. In the old days she'd wear bast shoes, even at Easter, and think nothing of it. Well, I got her good boots for holidays, and what does she do? Starts wearing them all the time, she's even wearing them now, though the snow's not come yet. 'Fear the wrath of God,' I tell her, 'if you've no fear of your husband. How will I ever be able to keep you in boots?' But she, begging your pardon, she just lays back her ears and won't move, stubborn as any donkey. 'Boots warm my blood,' she says. To hear her you'd think the sun wasn't warmer than her boots. 'You wouldn't like a pair of fancy shoes besides, would you?' I ask her to shut her up. But she never had a

twinge. 'Sure I would,' she says. 'But with a man like you I'll sooner get consumption than a pair of fancy shoes.'"

"Maybe she is right?" laughed Ivan Bondar, relieved to hear Mariyka giggling in the corridor.

"Well, she won't get shoes, of course, she's no fine lady," said Miron, observing that the assembly listened with sympathy—all but his brother, who frowned and bit his lip.

"And now you've told us all about the boots—what's the rest of it, Miron?" Miroshnichenko asked with a searching look.

"Oh, the rest." The forester wilted a little as he came to the most difficult part. "Well, you see, it's this way. I've got land apportioned, and I'm grateful to the good people, but that woman of mine, she's set against the land that's been Denisenko's."

"And what about you?"

"What can I do with her if she's got her mind set!"

"All right, if you don't want it you needn't take it," snapped Miroshnichenko. He quite understood Miron's game which was silently supported by quite a few poor peasants who went in fear of the kulaks.

"And what'll I get in exchange, Svirid?" asked Miron, a chill running down him, and again his brow knitted in apprehension.

"What'll you get?" Ivanishin repeated slyly, leaning over towards Miron as though to lay hands on him. "Nuts, that's what! Scared, are you?"

Miron turned towards the smith, bristling.

"That wasn't funny! I've had those insults all my life," he said brusquely. "And I'm not scared either. Life may cost cheap these days, but it's not for me to follow my cousin. Our family's got orphans enough and I don't want my own children to be in the same boat. Give me land from the estate—as one who's had a loss."

"*You've* had a loss?" Bondar exploded, but he heard a warning sigh from Mariyka in the corridor. He would have liked to say that Miron's own brother was a henchman of Petlyura's, slaughtering people, but the thought of Vasil restrained him. "Thrown your conscience to the wolves in the forest, Miron? Keep on a bit more and you'll get nothing."

"You haven't the right, Ivan, and you're not such a big shot at this meeting either," Miron protested. "Is it anything special I'm asking? If you give me kulak land, I'll be the one to be bumped off in the woods. I don't live right here in the

village, you know. And my bit might be handier for someone else to take if you give me estate land instead."

"Clever, isn't he!"

"There're plenty more like him!"

"And look at him, putting the blame on his wife, and her so meek and mild you'd never know she was there."

"That's what I thought till I married her," Miron retorted.

Timofi gave Miron a look of disgust, frowned, then thrust his fist into the forester's back.

"Don't whine like a whipped dog in front of everyone if you want to be a real man. I'll change with you."

"You mean you'll take the Denisenko land?" said Miron, looking mistrustfully at Timofi.

"I'll take it, since you insist," sighed Timofi, the lines gathering round his eyes.

"And you'll give me estate land?" Still afraid to believe it, the forester caught Goritsvit's sleeve.

"What else?"

"Well, thank you for that, thank you kindly, Timofi," Miron actually bowed and drops of sweat rolled down the lines of his face, now grown cheerful, even gay. "There are still good people left in the world. And if it hadn't been for that woman of mine, I'd not have been bothering you. D'you think it was easy for me, talking like that?"

Miron sat down, glanced shamefacedly at Olexandr, caught his venomous look and leaned over for whispered justification.

"Everyone's got to think for himself, in matters like these. How else? Timofi knew what he was doing, too, when he changed with me. He's no fool, he knows the estate land's exhausted, it's got poor now, worse than Denisenko's. And since Timofi's responsible for all the land that bit of mine will be just one more sin to a sinner. Eh?"

"You ought to be hanged for a sinner yourself, and a stinking one, too! Here's a man did you a good turn, and you try to make out he played a dirty trick!" Olexandr turned abruptly away from his brother and brought the butt of his gun down on the floor with a thump.

Miron blinked; how could anyone forget that caution was the only thing to keep a peasant in safety these days? Land, yes, that was the great thing, but all the same you had to keep a wary eye open, a very wary eye. The way people could change, a real wonder it was! You'd talk to folks in the street, and it seemed like the same things worried them as worried you. But at the meeting they would deny it all, and treat you like a

fool. In other words, if you wanted to be smarter than the rest you had to use your brains. Or maybe you'd get on better these days if you made out you were a fool, acted stupid-like, as if someone had sandbagged you from behind a corner? If only you could guess which government would come out on top, then you'd know what to do. What if the tsar really was alive, and in England, and thinking of coming back? Even though he was the Lord's Anointed, Miron would feel easier if he was resting in peace, properly dead and buried.

Apprehensions, musings and sorrow for Vasil filled Miron's head with a dull ache, and he did not even hear people rise after Svirid Miroshnichenko's closing words.

The babble of talk died away outside the door. Svirid blew out the flame in the bowl and as he did so, Mariyka Bondar crept up to him.

"It's only me, Svirid," she whispered in the darkness, lest he be startled.

"Well, what are you up to now?" mumbled Svirid embarrassed. "Where's Ivan?"

"Oh, the devil can fly away with him for all I care." She made an angry gesture and struck her hand painfully against one of the still warm benches.

"That's women for you," said Svirid with a shake of his head. "Don't you remember how wonderful he seemed once?"

"Little that's wonderful about him now," Mariyka snapped. "You heard the way he talked to me in front of everyone, didn't you?"

"That's because he's honest to the bone."

"Fools are always honest." She caught her breath. "And what did his honesty get him? Blisters on his hands and an empty cow shed. I want us to be farmers, not beggars."

"Well, come on outside, if someone sees us here the devil alone knows what talk they'll start in the village," Svirid said with a chuckle. He knew there was no shutting up the woman before she'd had her say.

Mariyka went to the door submissively and there, hardly noticing what she was doing, almost embraced him.

"Svirid, you're like a brother to us, the closest friend we've got and our best counsellor. There's none of our family as close to us as you are. And now that you're the one who settles things, how can you refuse just a tiny bit of land for my child that's to come? It needn't be a full allotment,

just a bit of whatever's left over!" The faint gleam of autumn stars was reflected in her tear-filled eyes.

"Ah, Mariyka, you'll be the ruin of me yet!"

He laid a large hand on his forehead, recalling those times when he came to the Bondars from the forests, from the partisans, and the Bondars unhesitatingly shared bread and salt with him in the darkness, hoping for better days to come. And now here they were, the better days, and he was treating the Bondars just the same as those who had driven him away from their door with curses.

"Svirid," Mariyka again pleaded piteously, and stopped short her whole attention turned inward, to the awakening joy within her. She seized Miroshnichenko's hand and without shame pressed it to her stomach. "Can you feel it? It's moving."

A resilient thud and then another sent warmth into his broad palm. A new life was there, calling to him, and this new life too needed land.

Now the autumn stars in Mariyka's eyes were stars of happiness, her face lost its ingrained look of wariness and mistrust and glowed softly in the darkness. For a moment Miroshnichenko relived the gladness and anxiety he used to feel watching his wife's thickening waistline. And again as in those long past years emotion gripped his heart; he felt that he now loved his wife much more than when she was alive and met him coming from the dark forests, her eyes wild with fear, fear for him and for their children.

Mariyka watched him uneasily, wondering what he was thinking, whether she should plead with him again, or whether she had said enough.

"Life..." said Miroshnichenko slowly, his eyes fixed somewhere over her head. Then he picked up Mariyka's roughened hand, raised it to his lips and kissed it, as a child kisses the hand of its mother.

"Oh, Svirid—why?" she whispered, thrilled, and misunderstanding the feeling that moved him. "Why do you do that, my dear?" She felt almost as thrilled, frightened and ashamed as when Ivan had first tried to make love to her.

Dear Lord in Heaven, nobody had ever kissed her hand in all her life, not even her own daughter. For this gesture of tenderness alone she would gladly follow Svirid to the end of the world. But at once she drove such wicked thoughts away: heavens, that was how women lost their hearts, melted by pity and tenderness.

And Svirid, who had given up trying to understand the woman, was saying the very thing she had so wanted to hear only a few minutes before.

"Very well, Mariyka, come to the fields tomorrow. See you don't oversleep. I'll get Timofi Goritsvit to measure you off a bit extra. That's all I can do for the present, later we'll see. I'm doing wrong for you as it is."

Mariyka laughed, making eyes at him.

"Don't worry, Svirid. If I was a bit younger, now—!"

"Whatever will you say next?" Miroshnichenko raised his brows in surprise. "Look out, or I'll tell Ivan."

"I'm as scared of him as of last year's thunder," Mariyka flung back and her lips set in a hard line. Now what could you make of a man like that? One minute he kisses your hand, and the next he acts the saint!

III

The vast quietness of September lay over the land.

The village, an enchanted place of indigo cottages scattered about the valley, slumbered beneath the star-filled sky. Beside each cottage, tall sunflowers looked alertly eastward. The night carried a fragrance of damp roadside dust and ripe gardens mingled with the tartness of hemp. Now and then the sweep over a well would creak sleepily, or an apple wet with dew would thump on the ground beside a sagging fence, spilling its rich juice on the grass. Then again silence would descend, the silence of sound sleep, while the broad-leaved sunflowers held out their seed-laden heads to the east as though in offering.

It was hard to believe that there could still be war on earth, that inhuman malice in its last convulsions was spilling rivers of human blood, that people of high learning but low morals were going cap in hand to other lands, begging for money and weapons to fetter again the people who had reared up in revolt.

Timofi Goritsvit and Svirid Miroshnichenko walked silently along the street. On a night like this there was no need for words; they need only look in one another's eyes to understand everything. In the sky the Milky Way turned to the south, meeting the horizon in silvery dust.

Soft,harmonious singing came from the highway, and then the jingle of stirrups. Saddled horses were grazing by the roadside under an ancient lime-tree, and sitting or lying by its thick trunk, the arms' span of two men, a number of soldiers

were singing—not army songs, not marching choruses, but an old song about the swan that floated on a blue sea, and the maiden who waited in vain for her sweetheart and turned into a tall slender poplar, tall enough to see across the blue sea where her love had gone.

A late moon rose over the distant fields, birds preparing for their autumn flight stirred restlessly in the hollows behind the vegetable gardens, and the plaintive song floated on beneath the thick lime-trees with the silver of the moon just touching their crowns.

Swim, fair swan, upon the stream
In plumage white and tender,
Reach up to the floating clouds,
Poplar tall and slender.
Ask God in the lofty blue
How long I must wait,
Sorrowful and lonely here,
Watching by the gate.
Raise your head and gaze afar
O'er the waters deep.
In that land lies happiness,
Here I can but weep.

There was sadness and a passionate longing for love in those young voices. Somewhere beyond the rapids, beside cherry orchards mutilated by war, beside red guelder roses and the black ashes of fires, those men had left their sweethearts and mounted army or estate horses to become tempered in battle, some fighting their way to the blue sea, others to the muddy Vistula. And in battle they forgot the tenderness born on the steppe, in the forest, or on the landlord's farm when working beside a sweet, blushing girl reaping or binding or raking hay. Yes, this was forgotten, but only to rise again with redoubled strength in song, when a free moment came for it.

"How true!" Timofi spoke suddenly and sighed, deeply stirred by the song.

"What's true? Talking yesterday again?" Svirid was used to the strange ways of his friend who often came out with an answer long after you'd forgotten asking the question.

"No, not yesterday, Svirid—it's that song. It's about all of us."

"What's there about us in it, old chap?" Svirid said with a smile, not sure what Timofi meant.

"That about the land and people being divided into two halves. In one part our happiness and in the other our grief. When will that be done with?"

"Maybe we'll settle them before the year is out," said Svirid, wondering at Timofi's words.

"Aren't you too quick," said Timofi thoughtfully.

"D'you think we shan't be able to beat Wrangel and Petlyura by winter?"

"Oh, them—maybe we'll beat *them* all right, but when shall we beat our age-long poverty? You can't do that with guns."

"That's true enough," Svirid agreed. "Only the plough can do that."

"Halt! Who goes there?" came a sharp challenge from behind a tree. Then the alert figure of a Cossack with a gleaming carbine in his hands loomed before them on the road.

"I'm the Kombed chairman, and this is the chairman of the land commission."

"Been having a meeting?" The Cossack lowered his carbine. "About the land?"

"Yes, the land. Are you after that band?"

"What else? Time to pull out the rotten teeth, roots and all."

"That would be good."

The moon-silver fell more lavishly on the dew-covered trees and road, picking out the saddled horses; and the muted voices of the Cossacks still sang of the rapids, the bowed cherry-trees, the red guelder roses and the black ashes, yearning for the distant home where their father or mother, or sweetheart, perhaps, awaited them. There was the steppe lake, too, in those songs, the lake where the bucket floated for three days on the water; there was the poor boatman dragging barges up the river with aching head and back; there was the horse hanging his head in grief for his Cossack master and there was the girl whose feet her Cossack warmed with his fur cap. Ancient sorrow and ancient hope blended together in the young voices and flowed along the old road, wringing and gladdening hearts.

"People never sing with such feeling as they do in war," sighed Svirid, recalling his life in the forest with the partisans.

The two friends halted by the Goritsvit house and leaned their arms on the gate.

"Well, how do you feel about it, Timofi?" Svirid suddenly asked, referring to nothing in particular and yet to a very great deal.

He loved Timofi deeply, he was drawn strongly to this silent, handsome man with the melancholy eyes. And Timofi for his part would have gone through fire and water for Svirid, but never, even after a glass or two, had he said a word of this. Svirid at such times might shake his head, bring his fist down on the table and pour out his feelings.

"Timofi, why the hell am I so fond of a silent stump like you?"

The corners of Timofi's mouth would twitch. "Maybe it's because I let you do all the talking even when we're drinking."

It was true that he never interrupted his friend but always listened quietly, sometimes with amazement, feeling not the slightest doubt that under the present regime Miroshnichenko would rise to be at the head of a district at the very least. Timofi himself had no such ambitions. Others could sit in golden palaces like princes for all he cared, he would not envy them. For himself he wished one thing only—to be the master of his land, to plough, sow, reap, bind and thresh. Enough to eat and boots on his feet—give him that and he would be happy.

Slow footsteps and the tapping of a stick rang loudly on the dry road. From the golden sediment of the moon's rays there emerged like some biblical prophet a grey-haired, grey-bearded figure—Timofi's father who lived by the backwater. The old man stopped silently before Svirid and his son, then still in silence raised his stick and brought it down on Timofi's shoulder.

"So you're wanting to be a chief now, you devil's brat!" he wheezed, his curly beard rippling like ripe oats with his words. "Don't want to be one of the ordinary folks any more?"

"They made me, I didn't ask for it," Timofi answered, calmly pushing the stick aside. "But first, good evening."

"Good evening, damn you," the old man fumed. "Maybe you're itching for those high officials' pants with the leather seat on them?"

"The very idea! They're plain indecent," the son replied.

"How big a shot will you be without those pants? What are they putting you in charge of?"

"I'm to measure out land for the people," Timofi answered with dignity.

"Measure out the land, huh?" cried the old man in mingled surprise and indignation. His hands gripped the top of his stick and his grey beard fell over them. "Couldn't they find someone older, and with more sense, too? You're only a kid."

Timofi gave Svirid an eloquent look and turned away from the old man to hide his smile.

"In things like that, it isn't age that counts, it's whether a man's straight and honest," said Svirid, coming to his friend's rescue.

"He's honest all right. My son has never done a crooked thing in his life, Svirid. He's too young for this job though, the land likes to be handled by older people who know it through and through."

"But Grandad, you can't say he's that young, your Timofi's all of thirty-five!"

"Thirty-five, indeed," the old man snorted. "You do everything mighty quick these days, and you count the years quick too, like you were all of a rush to get somewhere, to the devil, maybe. We didn't reckon years that way in my day."

"How did you do it, Dad?"

The old man thrust his right hand into his beard where it stirred like a little brown animal in a thicket of grey.

"How? Have you forgotten, Timofi? It was the man that mattered, not his years. That first time I took you to the Varchuks to work, they looked you up and they looked you down, feeling all over you with their eyes, and then they asked me, 'How old is your lad?' And what did I answer them? I told them, 'He's a herdsboy.' So you went to the herd. And when I signed you on to work on the estate from St. Valentine's to St. Semyon's Day, they wanted to know the same—'How old is your lad?' 'He's a teamster now,' I told them. And whenever they asked your years, I told them your work. 'He's a ploughman,' I'd say, or 'He's already a mower.' Some grow old and grey and still can't be called mowers, but you were taking the lead with the scythe in the meadows before you ever joined the dancing on the village green at night. And that's how your age was reckoned until you were called up. They've a newfangled way of reckoning age now—a lad can aim to be an official before he's worn out his first pair of pants.... What's in your mind, Timofi? After an easy life, are you?"

"Not so easy, at that," Timofi answered sullenly. "And I'm an official till the first frosts, no longer. I'll measure out the land, fair and honest, and then take up the plough."

"Till the first frosts? A sort of seasonal labourer again, huh?" the old man said acidly. Although he looked like a prophet and always opened the reading of the Acts of the Apostles at the Easter service, his tongue was feared in the village, from end to end. He knew how to read the Holy Book and how to get under a man's skin too.

"There's no pleasing you, I can see," said Timofi, frowning.

"What do you mean by that?" the old man flared up and raised his stick belligerently.

"The people chose me but you don't like it, and threaten me with that stick of yours—"

"That's so you'll remember there's others higher than you are. So you don't go rotten like that moonshine tippler from the district office."

"And now it doesn't suit you that I'll only be running things till the first frost."

"You can do enough wrong in the time, enough never to look honest folks in the face again. To make a good official, Timofi, the main thing is—keep close to the plough. And then there'll be plenty of bread and fairness for all. There's no fairness in those pants alone. Thirty-five though you may be, take what your father says without offence." The old man sighed and then added softly, "Well, son, you'll be no longer sleeping at home nights. Land—that's a prickly job, smells of blood. Come and see me on the quiet so nobody should see. You hear me?"

"Sure, Father. Let's go into the house, shall we?"

"No, we don't want to disturb your folks, let them sleep till God's good light wakens them. How's Dmitro? Send him over on Sunday, will you? I need a couple of hives made."

"All right."

"Will you give me land as well, Timofi? I'll be satisfied even if it's no more than what I gave you when you came of age, I want no interest on it."

"Interest you'll get, and plenty."

"You don't say! Doing your father a favour, eh?" The old man's face brightened.

"You'll get the same as all."

"Just look at that! Aren't people free-handed now! I only wish the peasant s soul doesn't leave his body over this land.... Tell me, Svirid, what about the Poles, and Petlyura?"

"Done for, at the last gasp. The Poles have asked for peace."

"You're not lying?"

"I learned my speech from you, Grandad."

"Go on with you, rascal! Want to make me out as big a liar as yourself!"

Svirid and Timofi laughed; the old man shook his beard in mock reproach.

"And they just laugh, the officials!" He gave a scornful look at the two friends. "Well, time to be getting home. Good night!"

He gave them his hand, covered with rope-like veins, and bore away his biblical sheaf of grey hair that smelt of autumn leaves and the honeysediment of hives down the moonlit street. He could hear stifled laughter behind him. Laughing at him they were, the scamps!

The old man brought his stick down hard and had the satisfaction of hearing the laughter cease. "Officials indeed! The way things change is certainly amazing, but maybe it's only right because everything hinges on the land. The squires had their own officials when the land belonged to them, but now that it's been handed to the peasants we've got to have officials from among our own sort. Only why must they try and look different in those pants of theirs? No, there's no better wear in summertime than plain homespun trousers."

Busy with his thoughts, the old man did not notice that he was speaking them aloud. There are people who, speaking their thoughts aloud, address themselves alone. Old Goritsvit had a happier character; if he thought of the soil then he talked to it, if he looked at the stars he spoke to them, and walking among his hives he found words for the bees too. He saw nothing strange in this, everything about him was alive and heeded the voice of man. The village was bathed in a flood-tide of moonlight and although the dew already lay thick, belated drops still fell and the dry leaves of the ash-tree overhead whispered softly with their touch. Sagging fences cast short shadows on the street and the moonlight quivered in the gaps between the palings like shoals of silver fish in the river at sunrise.

"The earth smells best of all in autumn," said Timofi musingly, more to himself than to his companion.

In this he was like old Goritsvit, and Svirid only wished Timofi were as good a talker as his father. A pity that he could say more to himself in one evening than to other people in a year.

"In autumn, you say?" Miroshnichenko sniffed the air appraisingly, trying to remember how it smelled at other times of the year.

It was quite true. In early spring the air held only moisture and the smell of birch sap from the woods, but now it was an infusion of rotting leaves mingled with the sharp aroma of fennel, the tartness of apples and the honey-breath of tobacco flower, the malty smell of damp maize and the pleasantly pungent smell of the marigolds. However, what did it matter now when instead of enjoying the smell of the earth your one thought was how not to get killed because of that good earth.

"Oh, you go to hell, Timofi," said Miroshnichenko angrily. "You're as bad as a wizard, fill one's head with all sorts of fancy stuff so the main thing's forgotten. Well—tomorrow we'll meet in the fields—right?"

"At sunrise."

"Our great day's come at last."

"A great day all right."

"Where'll you get a measuring chain?"

"I'm not going to use a chain." Stubborn lines appeared on Timofi's long, hook-nosed face.

"Why not?"

"It was the squires' idea to put chains on the land and the people too. But we'll measure with a lighter hand, one that'll not lie heavy on the land. We live with it, and it's a living thing, too."

"Everything's alive with you," said Svirid with a warm glance at his friend. "Well, good night."

He shook hands with Timofi and made his cautious way home, keeping to the shade of the Goritsvit ash-trees.

Timofi stood a few minutes watching him, then closed the crooked gate, dark with moisture, and stopped in the middle of his weed-grown yard that sparkled with dew-diamonds. His cottage was silent and dark in the shadow of the cherry-trees, only on Dmitro's window lay a dreamy gleam of moonlight. The barn loomed on the left of the storehouse, mourned over by a lonely wild pear-tree, the last survivor of the forest which had once rustled here. Its angular branches hung over the vegetable patches on one side, and over the barn on the other. Now and then came a sharp tap as the small, hard fruit fell from the roof to the ground or bounced off the woodpile.

"Now what shall we do next, Timofi?" he asked aloud in the Goritsvit manner. "Long past bedtime, but how can I sleep on a night like this?" He glanced at the cottage door—had Dokia heard him? Then he tiptoed cautiously to the shed. Shavings rustled beneath his feet and there was a

smell of fresh wood. "Dmitro must have been making something," thought Timofi, smiling fondly at the thought of his son, a lad as silent as himself.

He found the axe, the wooden measuring-rule, the chisel and auger in their places and went to the woodpile. The brushwood on top looked like the wings of some fabulous bird. Timofi dragged out a block of elmwood from underneath, wood with a heart red as a man's, the only tree in the region like that. The solid timber, just dry enough and not too dry, split easily in four under the axe, and Timofi began skilfully carving legs and a crosspiece for the measure he intended to use the next day.

Chips fell like white feathers under the axe as the legs became thinner. Timofi was thinking of finishing them off with the chisel now, when suddenly he felt that he was being watched. He looked round the yard and along the street. He could see nobody, hear nothing but the gentle sighing of the ash-tree scattering silver moonlight-coins beneath its leaves, and the wild pears with their inescapable sharp, tangy smell, rolling down the thatched roof of the barn.

Timofi took the chisel and struck lightly with the axe to make a notch. But he could not rid himself of the unpleasant feeling of being watched.

Except in early childhood, alien eyes had watched him mistrustfully all his life. From the day old Varchuk had probed him with that sharp, appraising look, putting a price on the new herdsboy, eyes had been always upon him, unsleeping as dogs. His masters had changed, but there had been no change in the watchful mistrust, the contemptuous vigilance, the cold disdain, the spite and malice in those eyes which always said the same thing: "You're not worth the money you're getting."

How often he had swung round, the back of his head scorched by the look in those eyes, and how often his masters' eyes had made him think of cold flat coins. For others they held laughter, kindness and tenderness, but for him there was only the smarting jibe: "You're not worth the money you're getting." He supposed there were many more eyes turned on him now, meaner eyes loaded with hatred.

He counted his enemies in his mind and only then did he realise how many they had become this night, even though he had never done them an injury. That hatred which had surrounded Svirid Miroshnichenko and Vasil Pidoprigora now came crawling from all the kulak houses and farms into his yard.

"Looks as if that's to be your lot now, Timofi," he decided as he worked on the measure that had already ploughed such a deep furrow in his life. Then he took the auger and with a sure hand bored into the wood.

Hostile eyes were still fixed on his shoulders. He shrugged as though to throw off the evil gaze, turned and saw a dark figure looming behind the gate. For the fraction of a second the auger hesitated in his hands, then rotated again, sprinkling fine sawdust on the ground.

It was stumpy Ivan Sichkar who hung darkly, watchfully over the gate. A few days ago Vasil Pidoprigora had been watched in this same way. Timofi remembered Olga telling him how Ivan Sichkar came just before the murder and how Vasil threw him out. Could it be that now, too, Sichkar was a harbinger of death? Perhaps like a screech owl he could dive suddenly into the barn, fling himself down on the threshing floor behind the shelter of unwinnowed grain, or get up into the hayloft? But with a proud disdain he shook off his superstitious fears. Never in his life had he given people cause to laught at him, neither in the village nor at the front.

Timofi made the pegs and hammered them into his measure while his memory followed threads forming a spider-web in the middle of which sat Sichkar.

This man had not clung to the ploughland like the other kulaks, he had retreated into the dark forests and laid axe to trees, selling the timber in the towns. At the time of the Revolution he did not have to pay for felling, and Sichkar felled ruthlessly, with savage greed, skilfully concealing huge stores of wheelwright timber in the forest to avoid requisition. When the new government began to turn its attention to forests, he quite legally bought a section and with the help of bribery felled more timber all round it than five sections could have held. But this was not enough for his rapacity. In the famine years black market speculation in foodstuffs could bring the gold pouring in, and of all the local profiteers Sichkar was the greatest.

In those days it was considered the height of heroic achievement among profiteers to slip through all the cordons and traps of the people's militia with a couple of poods of flour or a bag of salted pork fat, to bring it safely into the town and to the market. On dark, moonless nights those callous dealers, whose very souls were greasy from the lard they smuggled in, slipped into the hungry towns like evil spirits, and sneaked out again with clothing, footwear,

gold and sackfuls of notes issued by the various self-styled governments, Austrian crowns and other worthless notes which were later used to paper the walls in village houses.

Unlike these dealers, Sichkar got himself authentic certificates from the village committee or food agencies testifying that he was taking in food deliveries. Packing some well-salted fat into sacks of grain, he would drive whistling down the highway, exchange a cheery word with the men in charge of the cordons, smoke with them and assure them that since the government needed help, he, an honest Soviet kulak, was only too glad to offer it. Then he would quietly get rid of his grain and fat, taking in exchange only lengths of cloth or gold.

Sichkar never once got caught at these games, but then Svirid Miroshnichenko pulled him in for tax evasion on land he cultivated secretly in the forest. He flatly refused to pay, and got a sentence in the district prison. There, however, he managed to buy himself more than a few privileges—this was the second time he had come on a week's leave.

Now he opened the gate, edged into the yard and unhurriedly brought his cumbrous body to the woodpile. A large cap crowned his head, the stylishly flattened peak coming almost down to his nose. Timofi rose and the axe in his hand gleamed in the moonlight.

"How do, Timofi!" Sichkar halted by the woodpile, a smile stirring the black brush of a prison-grown beard on his round face.

"How do." Timofi took in his visitor's hard smile which held little that was pleasant. Sichkar's thick lips shone with an oily sheen and his heavy head drooped like the head of a sunflower.

"Making a land measure, are you?" Sichkar played with his beard and stretched his thick lips wider.

"Can't you see that for yourself?"

"Yes, I can see all right." Sichkar's not very tanned face, blotched with white herpes marks, darkened for a moment. Sighing, he kicked a chip aside with the stubby toe of his top-boot, turned innocent eyes on Timofi and went on speaking, as though following a thought already begun. "Strange things happen in this world, you know, Timofi. Today a man makes a measure for other folks, tomorrow other folks make a coffin for him."

"It can happen," Timofi agreed. "And other things can happen too. Some bastard digs away at a grave for another

man, digs and digs, sweats his heart out, and then he's the one that fills it."

"Yes, that happens," Sichkar laughed. "The thing is to dig cleverly, use your brains about it." Innocently, as though he knew nothing at all, he asked: "Are you going to re-measure your old fields with that thing?"

"Not re-measure old ones, measure out new ones."

Sichkar jerked involuntarily, and the last remnants of the smile vanished from his face. His eyes narrowed like a cat's and glared angrily at Timofi through slitted lids.

"A futile job you've taken on, friend, futile—and dangerous."

"Is that what you came to tell me?"

Sichkar sighed.

"Yes. Because I'm sorry for you, Timofi."

"Starting with tonight, you're sorry for me?"

"Yes, starting with tonight." Sichkar brightened. "I never thought a quiet man like you would try to climb on top with a shaky government."

"So you don't like our government?" Inwardly Timofi was seething, but his face preserved perfect calm.

"What's there to like about it? Other times, I could buy a herd of cows for a couple of hundred rubles, now a miserable egg costs as much in town. Those Bolsheviks of yours have drained the golden soul out of money, there's only paper left. And what's a government without money or food? A dandelion clock—one good puff and it's gone!"

"Then you can't be puffing hard enough," said Timofi with a short laugh of contempt and tossed the axe down on the woodpile. If it came to it, he could choke Sichkar with his bare hands, the man was just a bag of lard. But it was not likely Sichkar would start a fight. Despite that, something inside Timofi kept nagging at him.

Sichkar saw the lines of contempt in Timofi's mouth, donned his smile again and assumed a jesting tone.

"Now that's a really fine measure you've made, Timofi! Sell it to me, I'll give you a good price." And he patted his wadded pocket lovingly.

"Are you trying to buy me?" Timofi Goritsvit's brows met stormily and his eyes widened, flashing in the moonlight.

"No, I'm making my first purchase from you. Other times, you and your father used to get hoops and wheels from me. Why shouldn't I buy a measure from you now? For the best ash wheel with axle and spokes you paid ten rubles

and looked sour at the price; now for that little measure I'll give you ten thousand. Though of course, it'll be Soviet money."

Smiling, he pulled a bundle of paper money tied with a string from his pocket, tossed it up and caught it again with a wink—here you are, take it.

Timofi shook his head.

That was the first time kulak money was actually being offered him. He often enough had to go begging cap in hand for the money he had honestly earned, and here was unearned money offered on a platter!

"Don't you want it?" Sichkar said, surprised. "I can make it more, I'm no skinflint." And he weighed the bundle in his hand.

"A clever trick, Ivan."

"What's clever about it?" the "buyer" shrugged in innocent dismay. "I simply want to buy the measure from you."

"Sure, you'll take it home and tell your gang that you've bought it and me?" said Timofi, looking with distaste at the whitish patches on the fat cheek.

"I swear by all the Apostles I'll not say a word about you to anyone. Everything said and done between us will go down with me to the grave." The cunning had left Sichkar's face, he was ready to promise anything, do anything.

"Nobody, nowhere?" Timofi insisted.

"Not even at the Day of Judgement." Sichkar solemnly raised the hand holding the money.

"Well, thank you kindly for that."

"Good man, Timofi," said Sichkar heartily. "I knew I'd be able to talk sense with you. You've only got one head on your shoulders, why risk it?" And he gave the virgin-white measure a kick. It leaped into the air and Timofi caught it.

"Well, Ivan, now that we've had our little talk, we can both go home to bed. When do you have to be back at the prison?"

"The day after tomorrow."

"Bad there?"

"It's not living in clover, but if you've money you can get anything."

"See here, then, I'll make you a present of the ten thousand, and you can take the measure."

"What do I want that thing for?" Sichkar laughed. "It was just something to start the conversation going. I'm always one for a joke, you know."

"Please yourself, Ivan. I thought you really wanted the measure, I was going to make another for myself."

"Another?" Sichkar repeated with alert suspicion. "Are you joking or laughing at me, my friend?"

"Why, I can easily make another one."

Now it was Timofi who looked at Ivan with bland, innocent eyes, while the latter was still wondering who had got the best of the encounter. Surprise, suspicion and anger stirred the lines on his fleshy cheeks and forehead.

"You mean you're set on measuring the land tomorrow?"

"Why, of course," Timofi answered in mocking surprise. "We never talked about that."

"Laughing, are you?" In sudden fury Sichkar stuffed the money into his pocket. "Mind you don't find yourself laughing on the other side of your face, my fine fellow. Don't forget whom you're trying to fool!" The white patches turned crimson. "Or maybe you haven't guessed?"

"I've guessed all right." Timofi straightened up and Sichkar seemed to shrink in stature beside him.

"You think it's only me you have to reckon with?" he asked, crushing the money in his pocket.

"Are you trying to frighten me with whoever is backing your black market deals? You think you can make a new government out of those? If so, you're a bigger fool than I took you for. And now, get out of my yard."

With the same inscrutable calm, Timofi pointed to the gate. But Sichkar hissed in his face: "Look how honest you are! Won't take my money. But you want to take our land! The best thing you can do is to be ill tomorrow, Timofi. You hear me? Really ill!"

"No, you'll be the one feeling ill tomorrow!" And taking Sichkar by the shoulders Timofi pushed him, hissing with rage, to the gate.

"You get ill, Timofi, it'll be safer for you," Sichkar threatened again from outside, but Timofi only waved a hand at him.

In the middle of the street Sichkar, swaying drunkenly to be on the safe side, started bawling a song:

Kombed, swelled head,
Aren't we fine and grand,
Wearing riding breeches,
Spouting on a stand!

Then silence settled over the yard again, broken only by the occasional plop of falling pears. One rolled right to Timofi's feet. He picked it up, wiped it and let the golden fruit lie in his palm. He bit into it and the cold, tangy juice filled his mouth with freshness, leaving a few tiny seeds clinging to his palate.

Silence and pensive moonlight. Timofi carefully stood the measure by the gate and on a sudden impulse climbed over the fence separating the vegetable plot from the orchard. The dew sprinkling down from the trees and shrubs chilled his hands, and branches laid their shadows upon him. Stopping beside a tall sunflower he let his eyes rove over his home, and then over the fields sunk in moonlit dreams but seeming to be listening to something even in their sleep.

An owl flew silently over the gardens. For an instant its blunt wings were etched against the bright disc of the moon, then it drew away, shrinking against a background of ragged clouds. The round, thick shape of this bird of prey was somehow reminiscent of Sichkar, and repulsion surged up in Timofi mingled with the thought of a half-forgotten superstition about owls bringing misfortune. With a shake of his shoulders he drove away all that nonsense.

He stroked the sunflower stem, then went to his flower garden and the gloom slipped from him. He returned to the yard, stopping close to the ash-trees he had planted the day his son was born. His heart filled again with that throbbing tenderness he had felt at the time. The young father had planted not just one ash-tree but three, hoping that three sons would come to him. But the years, poverty and war had dashed his hopes and only the three trees stood there as a reminder. Later, when the trees rose on tiptoe to look over the yard he grew to love them like living beings. In the trenches, too, he had often seen them before him, as he had seen his wife, son and father.

Now the thought came to him that he had been right to plant three trees. There would still be other children. He might feel a bit awkward before Dmitro, but when you think of it, it was not his fault he had been in the army nearly seven years. And before that—but after all, what need for words? Dmitro would understand when he got older.

Smiling at his thoughts, he gently opened the cottage door. A ray of moonlight lay on Dokia's black braids and her cheek resting on her hand. Through her sleep she heard the door opening, the straw on her bed rustled as she jumped down to

the floor, she stretched, and sank back on the bed, too sleepy to open her eyes.

"Is it you, Timofi?"

"Yes, it's me, Dokia. Go back to sleep."

"What was it all about?" she asked, trying to fight off sleep.

"Where?" her husband asked teasingly, touching her bare knee.

"There—at the meeting." She pulled her nightgown over her knees.

"Nothing special. Go to sleep."

"The land—?"

"Yes, the land," said Timofi with a sigh. "Go to sleep."

Obediently, like a child, she turned over and in a moment was asleep again, dreaming of those fields she saw almost every night.

IV

At the crossroads the brothers parted silently, without even a handshake, each taking the path to his own home. The meeting had left them with so much to say to one another that it was better not to begin. Olexandr in his thoughts called his brother every name under the sun, and Miron, although he felt guilty, still wished to warn the younger man to be careful in times like these. A storm might smash an oak-tree, but grass it would only flatten to the ground, and then it would rise again. Mind that, Olexandr, don't stick your neck out, there's no sense in rushing into the next world before your time. God willing you'll raise your head when there are no bullets whistling over it.

Olexandr's footsteps died away on the road and Miron turned homeward, to the woods, to the little lake with its double ring of reeds and bushes where his neat new cottage stood. The thought of it brought both gladness and alarm to the hard-working forester. He had attained his goal: he had built his own nest as he liked it, beside blue water, with the wooden hats of beehives lined up before the master, and the woods close by to feast his eyes on. But it was these woods that now frightened him with all the scum of the earth hiding there, all waiting to eat and drink you out of house and home, and rob you into the bargain. You gave them your last bit of bread, yet you weren't sure that they wouldn't do you in just for the hell of it. He would never forget those two bandits who came one night. How they ate—cleaned up everything

on the table as though they'd swept it with a broom. They collected all the bread, millet and salt, picked up a tub of honey, and then, when they were right at the door, one of them turned round and said: "You're a good farmer, so you ought to be killed." And calmly slipped his gun off his shoulder.

He would have done it, too, but Miron's wife threw herself at his feet, calling him son and gracious sir. So instead he sent a bullet through one of the hives. There was an angry humming behind the fence as the bees poured out, leaving their ruined home.

At the thought of all his possessions that had fallen into brutal, dirty hands, Miron's spirits fell and he began humming a melancholy song, but broke off with an alarming thought—what if they took him for some active member of the committee and just shot him down? His next thought was that they'd be out of wheat flour before Lent; the wife must be told to mix ground maize stalks with it to bake the bread.

Miron heard voices coming from a side street. His first thought was to turn aside, but then he recognised Polikarp Sergienko's lisp and the sedate speech of the old fisherman, Semyon Poberezhny, who lived on the very bank of the river Bug. The two men were leaning against a fence, continuing the endless talk about the land and politics.

"There's no order, no order anywhere, Polikarp," sighed Poberezhny, striking a light with flint and steel.

"None whatever," Polikarp agreed eagerly, grateful to Poberezhny for talking to him as an equal—people did not often treat him as one, although they were ready enough to listen to the tales and legends he told.

"Here we think we've got the land in our hands at last, and yet you never know if it won't slip out again like an eel." The old fisherman frowned as he blew on the spark.

"It may do just that," Polikarp, thin as a lath, leaned over the fence to get a light and evidently inhaled too deeply, for a terrible cough racked his flat smoker's chest.

"They're all bandits, the whole lot of them. If it isn't Galchevsky it's Shepel, if it isn't Shepel then it's one of Makhno's gang—and all because we have no real head. There's no order, no strictness, like there was with the tsar."

"It sure is a far cry from that," Polikarp hastened to agree, and suddenly blurted out: "If the tsar could only make peace with the Bolsheviks, there'd be order in everything. The tsar

could rule there in his crystal palace and the Bolsheviks would portion out the land to the people. There'd be no country to beat ours then."

"What a hope!" Poberezhny gave a hopeless gesture and pulled on his cigarette.

Maybe there was something in that, thought Miron as he passed cautiously, but remembered what a windbag Polikarp was and dropped the idea. But about there being no order, God in his Heaven was witness to that. They've started this surplus appropriation business, well then, let them protect the peasant, so he wouldn't be robbed by anyone and everyone who had a mind to it. But the way it worked out, you paid three times over, not one. And on top of that, you couldn't get even a lousy piece of metal anywhere, and look at the price of kerosene and salt. If you needed a new ploughshare you just had to make do with an Austrian bayonet, fit it on somehow. But was it worth while disturbing the bones of God's Anointed for things like that? Let him lie in peace beneath the sod, he wasn't worrying anyone, let them not worry him either.

Something moved in the shadow of a barn. Frightened, Miron crouched low under the fence. Then came a girl's voice, quite close.

"Stop that, you hear me?"

"Why, what am I doing?"

"Nothing. Just take your hands away."

"That's all I ever hear from you."

Even the Revolution doesn't bother them, the young devils, thought Miron, and taking courage he straightened up and even reached into his pocket for a light, but thought better of it. He'd have a smoke when he got home—safer.

At the end of the village a narrow path ran down into a gully and on to a row of willows where it was caught up by a gate. A little further on Miron's garden plot began. From where he was he could see the patches of moonlight on his pond that was always so fresh and cool. The reeds bent their heads under the hand of the breeze and the merry little stream running from the pond babbled with its usual gaiety. Miron always fell asleep and awakened to the sound of that merry babble, and he missed it when he was away from home for a day or two.

He stepped on to the small dam planted with willows that separated the pond from the stream, and started: there was Varchuk's britchka behind the nut-grove, and he could see the satiny backs of his black horses gleaming in the

moonlight. Behind the horses stood Varchuk himself, lean and dark as a Gipsy, with broad-shouldered, shaggy-headed Larion Denisenko beside him. They waited in silence as Miron approached. And he went to them as to his executioners. What did they want with him, a man who only longed to live in peace? But where could you find peace these days?

"Speech-making all this time?" said Varchuk with a shake of his wedge-shaped head as he gave his hand to Miron.

"No drinking, no eating, just gabbling at meetings, eh?" Denisenko seized Miron's hand from Varchuk's. "Well, what's going on over there?" And he jerked his shaggy head towards the village.

A duck on the pond quacked sleepily, startling all three. Denisenko slipped his hand into his pocket while Miron raised his to a sweat-beaded forehead to cross himself.

"You'll be scared of your own shadows soon." Varchuk's thin lips twisted in contempt.

Denisenko's flat face showed displeasure.

"Not so much of your brag, Safron, you never know these days where you'll meet your end." He turned to Miron. "What have they decided at that meeting?"

"It couldn't have been worse," Miron said with a gesture of defeat, and his head sank beneath the weight of the looks bent on him.

"So the peasants don't mean to keep their hands off our land, is that it?" asked Safron Varchuk, coming close to the forester.

"I was the only one who refused it."

For the first time Miron noticed that Varchuk's large beak of a nose jutted out from his very eyebrows at one end and joined his pitch-black whiskers at the other.

"Only you?" he repeated in surprise and frowned, looking suspiciously at Miron.

Miron hastened to explain.

"When I said I didn't want Larion's land, that I'd take only estate land, somebody else at the back started to speak too, but Miroshnichenko stopped him."

"How did he stop him? Maybe it was against the law?" asked Safron, catching at this thread. And fear clawed at Miron again—had he betrayed Miroshnichenko?

"No, what happened was this: it shut them up quick enough when he said to me: 'If you don't want Larion's land you needn't take it, but you'll get no other.' They didn't say

anything more. That's enough to kill a man, let alone stop him talking," burst out Miron.

"Kill him—the black plague wouldn't kill him," snarled Safron and his eyes flashed hatred. "So they'll divide the land tomorrow?"

"Yes, tomorrow."

"Well, let them amuse themselves with our land for a few days. But you Miron, stick to your line and you'll be all right. Carry on." Safron clapped a bony hand on the forester's shoulder as though granting him permission to live.

Denisenko strode heavily to the britchka, dragged out a pillow-case full of grain, and handed it to Miron with a sigh.

"Here, Miron, something to help you along. I know you're short of food, so I scraped up a little of the blessed grain for you."

"It's all right, Larion, I can manage," Miron protested, squirming.

"You can't manage, I know," and Denisenko obstinately thrust the pillow-case into the forester's arms. Lost and confused, Miron clutched it round the bottom so that it seemed to grow to his body like a second belly.

Varchuk and Denisenko returned to the britchka, talking quietly. The two blacks picked their way across the dam, their horseshoes ringing beautifully on the wood and moonbeams flashing on their backs, and at a touch of the reins broke into a brisk canter. Miron was dazzled by the wet gleam of the tyres. Soon the britchka and the two dark silhouettes disappeared along the forest path, leaving the lonely figure by the dam with his oppressive thoughts and the unwanted grain. He felt more guilty than a thief, even though nobody would ever know of it, not even his own brother.

A fish jumped in the pond, and circles spread over the water till they reached the banks and lost themselves among the roots of trees. But there was no such refuge for a man's thoughts, they haunted and tormented him.

Miron set the pillow-case on the ground, unfastened it and thrust his hand inside. The first touch told him that the grain was not winnowed. Then he raised a handful to his eyes. A wind playfully caught up the husks and carried them away, leaving the grain with its coral-pink lustre.

This was the wheat he had always wanted to buy from Larion for sowing, but the man could not have named a higher price for his own father. And now he had brought it himself. Miron looked round sadly, and without regret threw

a handful into the pond. It hissed in the water, and like a sacrifice to some unknown god it lightened his spirit. He picked up the pillow-case, unlocked the store-room, hoisted the wheat on to his shoulder and poured it into the dark, hollowly ringing bin. As he did so he saw Miroshnichenko's contemptuous eyes. In his thoughts he justified himself to them—he had said nothing to Varchuk and Denisenko, nothing that mattered.

At other times when Miron poured grain into the bin he always stood before it a while, letting it run through his fingers, but this time he turned away at once and quickly locked the store-room.

His daughter lay asleep indoors, but his wife still thought the closet a safer place. A strong smell of fried fish rose from the table; his Vasilinka must have caught it. But he could not be bothered with food just then. He took off his hat, top-boots and coat, then knelt before the icon and crossed himself with fervour.

"With the cross I sleep, with the cross I wake, may the cross be with me till the day shall break. The Holy Virgin at my head, angels by my side, guard my soul till midnight and from midnight till dawn and from dawn on for ever and ever."

But neither the Holy Virgin nor the guardian angels could give him peaceful sleep that night.

V

Lieutenant-Colonel Kindrat Pogiba of the political department and the Sotnik* Danilo Pidoprigora were making their cautious way across the front from Kamenets-Podolsk, Simon Petlyura's last residence. Disguised in shabby peasant coats, with scythes over their shoulders, they gave themselves out to be seasonal workers on their way back from Moldavia. Even the tobacco in their pouches was Moldavian, for safety's sake.

Certain people, it is true, had suggested that Pogiba take a few poisoned cigarettes as well—they might meet someone they wanted to dispatch quietly to the next world; but the experienced lieutenant-colonel's little reddish-brown eyes had narrowed in ironic folds and his usually sombre, round face had brightened.

"I'll take those if—God help me!—I have to work some

* Sotnik—Cossack junior officer.—*Ed.*

time in that land of Soviets. But this time I've a simpler job."

Pogiba was known in the Ministry of War as a bold fighter with a good brain for staff work. A gloomy, watchful man, he never lost his head in battle, never got mixed up in petty, shady enterprises, and had been shrewd enough to see through the far-reaching schemes of Wilhelm Hapsburg of Austria sooner than Petlyura himself.

When the narrow-shouldered heir of Archduke Karl Stefan left his Rumanian prison and for the second time appeared in the Ukraine, the Head Ataman Petlyura received him with open arms and by a decree transformed Cavalry Captain Wilhelm Hapsburg into Colonel Vasil Vyshivany of the Ukrainian Army. After Brest, of course, when the Germans and the Austrians almost came to blows tearing pieces of the Ukraine from Petlyura's delegation, the captain could have been made not only a colonel, but even a general; however, Wilhelm Hapsburg's professions of love for the Ukraine, his playing up to the Cossacks by donning an embroidered Ukrainian shirt, the effort he expended on the study of Ukrainian and the bad Ukrainian poetry he published in Vienna would bear pondering over.

It was not the laurels of a poet but the crown of a Ukrainian king that the archduke's heir wished to assume. In a good humour, he would say as he played with his smudge of a moustache: "If coal is king and wheat is queen, then the Ukraine is a royal throne."

Yes, for him the Ukraine was only a throne on which he hoped to deposit his lean buttocks. How could the Head Ataman fail to see it, he who could not imagine the Ukraine without himself alone ruling it!

Although Pogiba disliked the fussy Petlyura with his passion for parades and shady ventures, and set all his hopes on Yurko Tyutyunik, nevertheless in the autumn of 1919 he did once drop a hint to him about the secret designs of the newly-fledged chief of the political department. The lines running down from the ataman's full lips twitched. He took a deep, gurgling breath, and with a histrionic gesture he had cultivated into a habit touched the trident and flowers adorning his collar, as though seeking an answer in those tokens of authority. And even though one man alone was watching him, Petlyura could not refrain from posing, unable to see the line separating grandeur from absurdity.

To Pogiba he had seemed absurd ever since the autumn of 1918. After his men had driven Skoropadsky out of Kiev, the Head Ataman himself did not enter the Ukrainian capital

until five days later for he was engaged in supervising a highly important operation: his supply men had been set to work ripping red and green cloth from first-class railway coaches to make smart Cossack shlyks * for Petlyura and his staff; without those he would not make his entrance.

"Thank you, Lieutenant-Colonel, I shall look into the matter." The Head Ataman turned his tired eyes with their drooping blue-veined lids towards the door, and letting go of his tokens of authority pressed a concealed bell button.

However, events of such moment took place next that they naturally crowded the thought of Vyshivany and his dream of a crown out of the Head Ataman's mind. The Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Galician Army, Mikola Tarnavsky, on secret orders from the dictator Petrushevich, had signed a treaty between the Galician Command and Denikin's Volunteer Army. The Ukrainian Galician Army, which had for several months prolonged the death-throes of the Head Ataman, defeated in the spring of 1919, now flung itself into the arms of an enemy who, for some unknown reason, regarded Petlyura as a Bolshevik. It was easier for Petrushevich to accept a governorship of Galicia within the "one and indivisible Russia" from Denikin than to join the treaty with Pilsudski prepared without Petrushevich's knowledge by Petlyura's diplomats.

Now, in these autumn days, the silent hatred between the two kinglets in Kamenets-Podolsk where two "Ukrainian" governments had been quartered since June had developed into furious quarrels between the Directory and the leaders of the West Ukrainian People's Republic. While typhus mowed down Petlyura's men and the Cossacks alike, while the front collapsed and Ministers withdrew men from it to assist in dispatching stolen goods abroad, a fierce struggle for power continued in Kamenets-Podolsk, and so did the endless bargaining—who would rule the Ukraine, what hangman would pay more for their services? The last joint assembly of Ministers called by the dictator Petrushevich was attended by only one Minister from the Ukrainian People's Republic, and it was not without grounds that Dr. Makukh remarked acidly that eighteen business managers addressed the council because the Ministers themselves had scampered out of the Ukraine with "inviolable property".

But at a time when two governments had less than two gubernias to rule, there was no agreement between the

* Shlyks—Cossack hats have a "stocking" dangling from the crown—the "shlyk". Its colour can be a distinguishing mark.—*Ed.*

Directory and the West Ukrainian People's Republic. Petrushevich, the old lawyer who had so unexpectedly become a dictator, cleverly cast the blame for the treaty on Tarnavsky and even arrested him for appearances' sake, hoping by this gesture to reconcile the disputants.

He honestly believed that history could no longer be made without him, just as sincerely as he believed that Petlyura, or the Napoleon from Kobelyaki as he was called behind his back, would be ousted from its pages.

"For the sake of history, we must die together," he would say, raising a tragic hand to his coal-black, obviously dyed moustache.

But even in the face of death, the dictator presented the Directory with four demands—one Galician to be included in the Directory; Petlyura to retain the title of Head Ataman but to be removed from operative work; the cabinet to be reformed; the Galician to have post of Finance Minister.

What remained of the government of the Ukrainian People's Republic rejected Petrushevich's importunity, for who could ever conceive of Petlyura giving up an inch of his authority! So on the fifteenth of November Petrushevich and his government quietly slipped out of Kamenets-Podolsk, while the Head Ataman left the remnants of his army to their fate and, accompanied by a few of his Ministers and his safe, hurried to Proskurov. On the way, however, he had to abandon even the safe, get himself to Lyubar on a cart and from there escape from his own atamans to the Poles.

In those same November days the claimant to the Ukrainian crown fled to Austria. He did not come back to the Head Ataman when the latter returned to the Ukraine with those same allies whom he had only recently threatened in the words of the poet, "Death to the dirty Poles, death!"

In two years of service under Petlyura, Pogiba had lost the ability to judge who really deserved death. Yesterday's enemies became allies, yesterday's allies became mortal enemies. Petlyura's policy was as variable as spring breezes, and all this had to be paid for with blood, grain and carloads of money printed in Berlin and Kamenets-Podolsk.

He was prey to harassing thoughts sometimes, but the thing that really frightened him was that each day took him farther and farther away from his beloved Ukraine. He, too, could have gone abroad long ago and kept out of it all, but after Petlyura's flight to Pilsudski he went with Omelyanovich-Pavlenko and Tyutyunik on that hard winter campaign, just to remain in the Ukraine. He fought Denikin's

men and he fought the Reds, he had lain sick with typhus in some peasant's hut, and in the spring of 1920, with a wrench to his pride, had gone to receive a hand-out of cast-off uniforms from the former Austrian army for his Cossacks. That was all his hungry, ragged and lice-ridden men had earned. It was true, they saw with some surprise the general's insignia given by these new allies to Ataman Omelyanovich-Pavlenko, and cursing everything on earth, took their places in Austrian cast-offs on the right flank of the Sixth Polish Army.

Although Petlyura had sold Galicia, Kholmshchina, Volyn and Polesye to Pilsudski for the vestiges of his authority, Pogiba had to stand by him. In those two years of bloodshed, he and Petlyura had become bound with the same rope. And if Wrangel did not draw more Red units from the Polish front, that rope was likely to become a noose.

Pogiba lay on the straw in a barn, looking through a crack at an ash-grey, indifferent sky which, as night approached, puckered up into dull clouds. There, beyond those autumn clouds gathered on the horizon, lay another land, to which today he must make his way.

Two elderly peasants came through the vegetable plots, bridles and bits jingling in their hands. The lip of one was cut, and there were traces of dried blood on his smoke-grey beard.

"Watched them and looked after them, and now here we are," said the other, a short, thickset man like an uprooted tree-stump, speaking as though to himself. "Ugh, the devil take them all."

"We can put these on ourselves now," and the grey-bearded man shook the bridle in the air. And then, as though plunging headlong into a void, he cried out in anguish: "Oh Lord, let the Reds come! Have mercy on us!"

"Listen to him!" the thickset man made a gesture of disdain with a gnarled hand. "All governments are out to ruin the peasant. And the Reds want grain deliveries besides."

"At least they're giving us land."

"They give to some, and they take it away from others."

"They won't take it from us."

"The dirty bastards," Pogiba cursed wearily to himself. "You shed your blood for them, and they grudge you a miserable nag."

But as Pogiba well knew, those miserable nags stood for all the hardships the peasants had suffered in those years. Crushed, plundered by a rapid succession of governments,

atamans and various batkos,* without kerosene, without salt, without matches, without boots, in rough homespun clothes, the peasant stood at the crossroads of history, his eyes on the land. And beside him stood his faithful nag, all skin and bones and galled flanks, suffering no less than its owner, keeping him and his children provided with black bread, bitter with colza, damp with sweat.

Incidentally, there were times now when Pogiba envied the poor peasant his lot. Whatever government might come, that poor peasant in his patched clothing would go on living in the Ukraine in a wretched hut maybe but still his own, and before you knew it he'd get land and turn Bolshevik himself, the bastard. But where would the whirlwinds of war carry him, Pogiba? What was he going to turn next?

Since the Poles had started talking about a truce with the Bolsheviks, Pogiba had often thought of the future with horror, finding no asylum for himself anywhere. Where could he go? Pilsudski he hated, the Bolsheviks he feared, and Petlyura was a broken reed. The only hope lay in Wrangel and a miracle, and to bring that miracle nearer he had agreed without hesitation to cross the front line and raise all those batkos in an organised offensive.

The wooden latch clicked dryly, the door opened and Sotnik Pidoprigora appeared in a shaft of evening light. Even his poor coat, mangy sheepskin hat and patched reddish top-boots could not make his strong, well-built figure less attractive. He had the sunburned face and the high cheekbones of an ordinary country lad whose only really handsome features were his full, fresh, youthful mouth and restive dark-grey eyes that held a hint of melancholy even when they were laughing. And who could say what was behind those eyes—a longing for the land, or for the chatter of children this former schoolteacher heard sometimes in his dreams?

"Anything new?" The lieutenant-colonel raised his head which seemed too heavy for the neck that supported it.

"A ford's been found, a boat's ready, and from the look of things there hasn't been anyone on the other bank since yesterday. We can get to Veremi's farm before the moon rises," said Pidoprigora, in a brief summary of things Pogiba for the most part already knew.

"And Veremi, is he reliable? Not gone over?" asked the lieutenant-colonel, with slow emphasis on the final words.

* Batkos—leaders of smaller groups than those headed by atamans.—*Ed.*

Pidoprigora frowned for a second, angry at himself for trembling inside.

"Not likely. He doesn't see eye to eye with the Reds."

"Is it a big farm he's got?"

"About fifty dessiatines."

"Vinnichenko's quota, what?" Pogiba said with a sneer, remembering the explanations of the former chairman of the General Secretariat. "I wonder how your idol is getting on now?"

He knew that Pidoprigora always carried Vinnichenko's works about with him and thought him one of the best European playwrights. In Kamenets-Podolsk, another sotnik, Golovan by name, often teased him about it. He'd say:

"Don't you imagine that Vinnichenko is a tree from which kings are carved. No, that tree sways in all directions and no one has yet learnt what its heart is really like."

"I don't know how my idol is getting on," Pidoprigora gave Pogiba a keen look, "but I do know that he's put out a new appeal to us."

"He's good at that, and how!" Pogiba chortled rather nastily. "So he's not setting the target at fifty dessiatines any longer?"

His laughing got Pidoprigora's back up. Only a minute ago he was not sure whether to show Pogiba what he had come upon in one of the peasants' cottages, but he was no longer in doubt.

"No, he's setting the target for us at ... communism!"

Pogiba gave a whistle of amazement, leapt up and then slided down the slippery stack.

"Is there something in print? Where?" he cried, hastily shaking off the hay.

From his inside pocket Pidoprigora produced a copy of the Podolsk *Visti* printed on thick blue wrapping paper.

Impatiently, Pogiba grabbed at the Bolshevik paper, unfolded it, found the article and started reading it.

He pursed his rather hard lips with their drooping corners and moved them soundlessly as he read. Then he gave another whistle and glanced at Pidoprigora.

"He's a crafty devil, that idol of yours.... Listen to his attack on capitalism! How do you know when he means what he says and when he's just lying?"

Pidoprigora smiled ironically and a light came into his grey eyes.

"You should be the one to know," he said.

"What makes you think so?" Pogiba looked at him askance.

"Why, you've spoken to him at the Central Government and the Directory. I haven't."

"True enough, but it appears that even the Head Ataman himself could not crack this hard little nut."

"And got cracked instead...." The words were out, but Pidoprigora stopped in time before he said more.

Pogiba frowned in thought, and then said reflectively:

"D'you know what that Vinnichenko of yours makes me think of?"

"No, what?"

"A great sinner like Tvardovsky, who can't make either heaven or hell. How does the simile strike you?"

"Not badly put," Pidoprigora said, and after a pause added: "All right, let us develop the simile: he may be a crafty devil in politics, but then there's a truly divine spark in some of his works."

"I'd forbid writers to meddle in politics," Pogiba declared, glancing scornfully at the paper. "What other drivel is there?"

"Read on," Pidoprigora said with an enigmatic smile.

"I suppose you've already learnt it by heart?" Pogiba asked suspiciously, and again pursed and moved his lips which swelled like the new moon before rain, and again they parted in a whistle to show the jagged edges of his broad teeth. "That's a vicious stab! Right in Petlyura's belly!"

He lowered the paper, uncertain whether to tear it up or return it to Pidoprigora. Finally, he turned round and spat three times over his left shoulder.

"So help us! What bad luck finding such drivel just when we're starting out. Has your idol perhaps gone over to the Bolshevik commissars from the French?"

"Let the political section do the sniffing, Colonel, it's over our heads, we go where others send us."

"Since when have you been thinking so?" asked Pogiba, rousing himself, with something between curiosity and menace in his voice.

"Even the gods don't always go by straight roads, so why not us?"

"There are no straight roads. It's only the mists of youth that make them look smooth and straight," said Pogiba with conviction. "Are you getting homesick?"

"I'm always homesick," Pidoprigora answered simply.

"You're dodging the point!" Pogiba's tobacco-brown eyes flashed.

Pidoprigora shrugged his shoulders but said nothing. Even if Pogiba had seen through his pretence, there was no need to give himself away entirely. He could not say: "In these two years it's all been piling up, grain by grain, till I'm bursting with it."

To Pogiba the army was his mother. It had fostered and reared him, regaled him with the glory of the tsar's epaulettes and made him first a fighter, then a killer. Except for drill, headquarters' maps and killing he knew nothing and wanted to know nothing, and if he ever felt any yearnings they were only for a real military leader who would uphold and revive the glory of the Ukraine. Pidoprigora, unlike him, had been driven to the army by the cruel events of 1918 and a romantic nationalism. At that time he had believed with his whole heart that he would ring the bell of liberation, and only later did he realise with horror that the bell was tolling for the funeral of his Ukraine.

VI

The melancholy grey of an autumn dusk. The motionless shadow of a poplar is etched against the motionless clouds. Thoughts are drifting like shadows about you, flinching in fright from your fear, floating across the river, beyond the poplar, to that patch of earth where human kindness and happiness await you. Someone else maybe, but not you. You have flung it to the winds, scattered it on strange roads, shot it to fragments in battles which brought not glory but shame to your mutilated youth.

None of this, however, taints that patch of earth. If thunderstorms rage over it the lashing branches of its trees cry: "Come!" In springtime its flowery meadows and blue stretches of water whisper: "Come!" And you would have come long ago, would have kissed the paths people tread, would have bowed before your doorway—if fear had not held you back.... Are you really such a coward, are you so white-livered? If you want to have done with it, do it today, and make it a clean break.

The grey sky descended lower, swallowed the shadow of the poplar, came down to the very bank and stirred the dark clouds above it.

As in a dream Danilo Pidoprigora walked down to the river. The battered old scythe over his shoulder caught on

twigs, and shook down cold dew from the bruised and murmuring alder leaves. In front of him limped a barefoot boy carrying an oar, whistling as he went; Pogiba stumped heavily behind him. How Danilo longed to climb into his flat-bottomed boat and pull on the oars until they brought him to his own dear home, to his brothers, his wife.... Where was she now?

He had been twenty-five, a teacher, when he first met her on the stony bank of the Teterev. After the lush, cheerful verdure of his native Podolye everything in these wild and ancient Polesye forests amazed him—the weathered, rotting boulders among which pines grew, the marble rock by Deacon's Oak-Wood, and the forest quarries where handsome swarthy men, descendants of Italians who had long ago merged with the Ukrainians, toiled all day breaking up the stone. On this right bank one day he saw a party of students. A young man with black hair and the eyes of a rebel held a piece of stone in his hand and, brandishing it before his companions, talked with anger and fervour.

"Just think," he was saying, "so far this is the only place in the Ukraine where you can find real pink and grey marble, with its lovely veins, tender as those on a maiden's temples." He displayed the fragment he held. "It's beautiful with its crystals of pyrite, fluorite and red ironstone. It should be used for carving goddesses and heroes, but all this beauty is barbarously destroyed in the furnaces of the landlord Korostyshev. He uses it to make lime!"

"What barbarism!" cried a sweet-faced, slender girl indignantly, and her musical voice at once captivated Danilo.

Her name was Galya, and the student with the eyes and manner of a rebel was called Nechuiviter. How long ago all that seemed, and yet it was not really. The sweet-faced girl became his wife, the black-haired young man, Grigori Nechuiviter, became a political convict, a Communist. And he, Danilo, a poet at heart, became one of Petlyura's men. And who cared if it was from romantic heights that he fell into that stinking pit? He had regarded Nechuiviter's ideas as primitive, too rigid for a peasant's soul, held in thrall by majestic memorials of the past and dreams of a private paradise on his own seven dessiatines.

"Why so sad?" Pogiba's hand descending on his back squashed all Danilo's memories.

"Too many thoughts and worries."

"Afraid?"

"That too, a bit," Danilo admitted, and the barefoot boy glanced round in surprise.

"What's there to be afraid of? The Reds won't touch an ordinary peasant," the boy said with a look at the blunt scythes. It was difficult to tell whether he was laughing at them or speaking in earnest.

Pogiba sensed cunning in the ferry-boy's tone and gave him a suspicious look.

A reek of salty-sour slime and fish scales rose from the river bank. Through a gap in the branches of a molested osier they could see the surface of the Bug, striped at the bank with the dark shadows of trees which were like drowned giants striving to rise again from the depths. Here the bank was of black soil, grass-covered, and the water did not hiss as it does against sand but was muttering dully. Who was it grumbling at as it wore away the soil with its bushes and coarse grass? On the left bank, humped shadows took the place of bushes and willows. How would that darkness receive them? In dead silence, or with a fatal shot?

How he longed to be a child again, to hear his mother's voice, to forget the burden of the past and the terror of the future! When people have done something wrong they always seem to turn back in thought to childhood. In this there is comfort, but no protection. The innocence of childhood cannot wash away the dirt which has collected in adult years.

The boy dragged a boat out of the bushes, motioned the men to get in, and crossed himself. Danilo sat down in the bows, the most dangerous spot, Pogiba followed him, and the ferry-boy bore down with hands and chest on the stern, jumping in as the boat left the bank with a soft rippling of water.

The darkness weighed down on the flimsy craft, pressing it to the water. And in it, two men with firearms and one with the oar watched the bank alertly. The water, like the unknowable, gripped the little boat as in a vise, babbling in its own language. Fingers tightly clenching revolvers became numb, and the boat swayed and rocked, and the disturbed waves came back with a splash, a sigh or an angry gurgle.

The bank came closer, it advanced rapidly, then the boat buried its nose in the soft soil like a puppy and swung round, broadside on. Danilo jumped out on to the springy sod and looked alertly round him, the revolver following his eyes.

Autumn silence brooded on the bank, stirred only by the soft breathing of the water. The three listened without a word, then the boy gave a sigh of relief.

"God be praised, we've come at a good time!"

At that moment they heard a voice beyond the bushes shrilling a song drunkenly: "Marusya's taken poison, they've carried her away...." There was the rattle of cart-wheels, a confusion of men's and women's voices, then silence descended again. After a moment, however, it was broken by one lonely, lovely voice pouring out a plaintive Kobzar song over the beaten earth road, pleading that blood should not be shed.

Let the blood of man not flow,
'Tis more than water, well we know....

So great was the sorrow, so strong the love of man in that song, that the two killers involuntarily dropped their hands and bowed their heads. Only the ferry-boy, his oar raised, turned his head towards the song about his blood-drenched land as a sunflower turns its face to the sun.

"That's blind Andriyko. What a voice!" he said in wistful admiration.

"Who is he?" asked Pidoprigora, turning.

"A man..." the boy answered evasively.

"Was he born blind?"

"I should say not! They blinded him."

"Who?"

"How would I know?" The boy stopped, frowning, but then blurted out: "Some say it was the Hetman's gang, others say it was some of yours."

"You know who we are?" rasped Pogiba, turning sharply to the ferry-boy.

"Seasonal workers," he answered calmly.

Pogiba, however, sensed the sly hint.

"Hold your tongue, you dirty brat, or I'll shorten your other leg for you," he hissed, levelling his revolver at the cripple.

"Thank you kindly." The boy's voice was hard. "I see I didn't bring you over for nothing."

He jumped into the boat and pushed silently off from the bank. The water rippled and carried him back to the side where he was awaited with truly kind words.

"What did you say that for, sir?" Danilo asked reproachfully.

"Let his tongue run like an unleashed dog. Doesn't know a thing, yet he slings dirt at us."

"He knows all right, it's written all over us," snapped Pidoprigora, angry with himself for not cutting the other short with more dignity.

"Oh well, to hell with him," said Pogiba more calmly, dismissing the matter with a wave of his hand. "That Andriyko's voice though, it literally tugs at your heart-strings. He ought to be singing in the royal theatre. But with our barbarism...."

Rustling through the bushes, they crossed a track soft with beaten dust and made their way through the fields to Veremi's farmstead. For some reason Veremi had picked out a hollow for his house, he took pleasure in ponds and fish and sowed his fields to fragrant hemp for the market rather than wheat.

"You won't lose your way?" asked Pogiba, confused by the maze of field roads, paths and tracks.

"My bare feet tramped all these paths when I was a lad, they grew big on them, got their bruises and scars on them."

"The idyllic poesy of bruises," laughed Pogiba.

"Yes, the real poesy with us was always one of bruises. And it is not very funny either."

Black poplars, as tall as hills, darkled in the valley. By the dam Pogiba and Pidoprigora were met by one of the Head Ataman's intelligence agents, Denis Barabolya. To make sure, he struck a match and took a good look at Pogiba and Pidoprigora, who immediately memorised the agent's short, round figure and round, bristly face for all the world like a ball of wool. The man greeted Pogiba fulsomely and kept clutching at his sleeve like a sexy girl.

"Nobody here, is there?" The lieutenant-colonel, who had no love for spies, gently released his sleeve from Barabolya's fingers.

"There's not a living soul just now. But sometimes those Red Cossacks do come, they have a meal and take a couple of sheaves of oats for their horses. I'll put you in the old carpenter's shop, just to be on the safe side. Nobody ever goes there."

"Is the front far off?"

"It's gone away from these parts. The Reds aren't too many. They try to patch up their lines this way and that. From the Bug to the Dniester they have only the Fourteenth Army, Kotovsky's brigade and the First Division of Red Cossacks. The Head Ataman has much bigger forces. A blow at the right moment and we'll wipe the Bolsheviks out," giggled Barabolya.

"We'll deal that blow before long, but we've got to prepare the rear well first. Are there any reliable batkos and atamans here?"

"Galchevsky's near Lityn, Batko Palilyulka is six versts off, and Ataman Chornoguz is near Zhmerinka with big forces. And there s another district not far from here that's neither ours nor theirs."

"What does that mean, exactly?"

"The peasants there have proclaimed a peasant republic and won't recognise any authority but their own. They've even elected ministers and it doesn't worry them that these ministers wear homespun trousers to conferences. Everyone chipped in to buy one of them a pair of top-boots, for even the peasants don't want a minister without boots." He giggled again as though to order, with a succession of neat little "hee-hee-hee's".

"How does this strike you, Sotnik?" Two sharp lines ran from the corner of Pogiba's mouth to his chin.

"It doesn't. For centuries the peasants sought justice and a good tsar. If even Ivan the Fool could become tsar of a far-away fairyland, why shouldn't a peasant become a minister in his own district?"

"And what do they use for money? Have they their own money too?" asked the lieutenant-colonel with a smile.

"So far they're using all kinds, but they're looking hard for a printing press. They learned somewhere that the Head Ataman left presses and engraved plates behind him a number of times when he retreated, and they've sent men out to search for them. They want to alter the plates a bit, add something, maybe, and have their own paper money, district-state currency." And he emitted another series of giggles.

The farmstead gate had been left open and the dogs locked up. They now greeted the strangers with furious barking from inside the house.

Denis Barabolya walked quickly across a yard littered with freshly sawn wood, stopped by a stile and climbed over heavily into the orchard. There, among the Podolye pear-trees, tall as oaks, they saw an old carpenter's shed, the whitewash running from many a rain. The ataman's agent turned the key in a huge, rasping padlock. He followed his guests in, shut and bolted the door, and then struck a match. It hissed, spitting out sulphur and stench, and at last flared up.

The small four-paned windows were carefully covered. Food, home-distilled liquor and dark berry wine stood ready on the rough, pitted carpenter's bench. Wild pinks and marigolds crunched on the earthen floor under their feet.

"M'yes, not bad here at all," said the lieutenant-colonel with satisfaction, glancing at the two pallets with their fresh bedding.

"Barbarically simple." Barabolya's fuzzy face seemed to take on dignity. "To my mind, Lieutenant-Colonel, only barbarism and heathenism can now save civilisation. It has become too much for Christianity."

"It's a pretty long time since Nietzsche's theories have been aired under the Ukrainian willows last," Danilo Pidoprigora said, frowning. His eyes met Barabolya's, and both were conscious of an immediate and acute mutual dislike.

"Won't you have something to eat?"

Barabolya danced attention on the lieutenant-colonel, and Pidoprigora felt nausea rising as he looked at that petty gambler who by the caprice of fate had more than once been judge and executioner, depriving men of their one and only life. Apparently Pogiba felt something like that, too.

"I suppose you have had your supper?" he asked noting with surprise that an invisible line seemed to divide the agent's face into halves, one smiling with a fawning eye, the other sombre, with a look both wary and evil.

"Oh, yes, to be sure." Barabolya turned his unmatching eyes on Pogiba and again broke the silence with his "hee-hee-hee". Was it his natural laugh or had he cultivated it on this spy job as a blind, one could not tell.

"In that case, I'll ask you to go over to Polilyulka at once, and tell him to come here."

"Today?" One eye looked surprised, the other angry.

"As quickly as possible."

"All right, I'll fly there."

Reluctantly, Barabolya went to a corner of the workshop and got out a whip and a homespun bag from behind one of the pallets. He slung the bag over his shoulder, with a single movement changed the shape of his hat, changed the expression of his face in the same instant and lazily cracked his whip. Before the astonished eyes of the visitors there now stood not the fawning agent but a despondent shepherd who had lost his flock.

"Why, you're a born actor!" The down-turned corners of Pogiba's mouth lifted.

"I'd but one old nag on my farm, and now that's strayed to Petlyura, or maybe Trotsky.... What a life!" Barabolya's womanish shoulders sagged a little further and not so much as a spark of cunning could be detected in his dissimilar eyes. "Well, I'll go and look for my nag."

He hitched up the bag on his shoulders and left the workshop, a perfectly authentic shepherd.

"You saw that?" Pogiba glanced at the sotnik. "I sent him off to Palilyulka to spare us that greasy giggle of his, but it seems he's a real actor."

"An actor from a freak show," snapped Pidoprigora with disgust in his eyes.

"There's something about you today I don't like, don't like at all," said Pogiba, looking at him rather hard, and fell into thought. He felt his old mistrust for this softy of a village teacher.

"I don't like it myself," answered Pidoprigora despondently, not lowering his eyes.

"Nerves, all nerves! You should brace them with vodka and women. But you live like a monk. D'you expect your wife to remain true to you?"

"My wife is a saint," said Pidoprigora with proud contempt. He could not stand smut.

"War turns even saints into sinners. Life is like that," Pogiba continued, ignoring his companion's tone.

"That may be so, but it doesn't justify every baseness."

Pogiba had his mouth open to dispute this when a tramping and jingling came from the garden, approaching the workshop. Both seized their revolvers and moved out of line with the window, their eyes exchanging the wordless question—could the ataman's agent have led them into a trap? There was an instant of silence, then again came a crackling and the ring of iron.

"Why, it's only horses!" Pidoprigora smiled in relief. "Listen—that's the metal hobbles."

"You're sure?" Pogiba cautiously moved aside the blanket covering the window and looked out. Two tall horses stood beside the raspberry bushes, crushing them with their hooves as they grazed. "Damn them, they certainly gave us a fright!"

He left the window with a short laugh and reached out to the covered bowls.

The first held rich, crisply brown, fragrant carp, cooked in sour cream.

"That smells good," said Pogiba, sniffing appreciatively.

"Worth starting on at once, but we'll wait a little longer. Or maybe you're too hungry?"

"I'm not hungry."

Grimacing, Pogiba pulled the rather tight boot off his right leg, carefully slit the sweat-darkened lining with his knife and drew from it a bundle of crumpled papers. He smoothed them out and Pidoprigora read mandates signed by Petlyura himself, empowering those to whom they were addressed to form and lead counter-revolutionary detachments. With the aid of these documents, manufactured by the field campaign office, the Head Ataman hoped to spawn new atamans and atamanlets and affirm the authority of newly-baked batkos whose forte was not ideas but pogroms, assassinations and home-distilled liquor. Pogiba wrote the name of Palilyulka on one, pushed the others back into his boot shaft and winked.

"Damn those batkos! Some day, perhaps, our grandchildren will thank us for our work.... Well, let's have supper."

Pidoprigora reached out for the berry wine but Pogiba pushed his hand away from the bottle.

"That's stuff for women, not for a Cossack!" With a touch of swagger he poured liquor into the glasses. "Your very good health, Sotnik!"

He tipped his head back and downed the glassful in one breath, rumbled with satisfaction and shook his heavy head. The Adam's apple on his thin neck moved up and down like a ball in a socket held in place by two thick veins.

As for Pidoprigora the fiery liquor seemed to spread in an instant through his sturdy body, and his eyes burned with a stubborn sparkle.

They drank another glass each and Pogiba, forgetful of caution, became quite gay and even tried to sing one of the favourite songs of the Head Ataman and his army: "Oh, what a tumult far and nigh, our brave mosquito's married the fly." When he got as far as the fly, however, he glanced at the window, broke off short and turned to philosophical musings.

"There's no place like the Ukraine, live here for ever and never stir. But life—that's all meetings and partings, it's bread and water, vodka and blood. 'Oh, what a tumult far and nigh....'"

Pogiba's singing and smiling revealed the jagged edges of his broad teeth more and more often. Those teeth, and the tiresome mosquito that married the fly, and the Pogiba brand of philosophy began to irritate Pidoprigora beyond endurance. He drank, but never drained his froth-rimmed glass of the

strong home-brew. No alcohol was strong enough to drown his thoughts anyway.

"So you think your wife is a saint, eh?" Pogiba needled Danilo, smiling smugly and playing with his own wedding ring.

"I prefer to leave the discussion of women to sober people," Danilo replied, stiffening.

"But why are you angry?" said Pogiba, pouring out more liquor. "Drink up! Excellent stuff! Who knows when we'll drink together again!"

"Probably never," said Pidoprigora. He gave Pogiba a hard look and felt his nerves go taut, as before a battle. He was in the grip of that native obstinacy which had more than once led him to sudden actions. Gentle and dreamy by nature, he gave way easily to those who were more insistent, more glib of speech, and was quite unable to storm or threaten; but if he felt deeply about something, then there was no holding him.

"Never?!" Pogiba repeated.

His hand shook with surprise and the liquor slopped over the rim of the glass, wetted the rough, chipped work-bench and dripped despondently on to the floor where fragrant marigolds and wild pinks lay dying.

"And how am I to take that, Sotnik?" Pogiba sobered up and then his hard, heavy face softened in a smile. "Ah, you're talking of the dangers, of our death?"

"No, of my life." Pidoprigora laid his piece of bread neatly beside his bowl. "I've done my job, brought you honestly to the farm, now I'm going home. I've had enough of war." He moved a step back from Pogiba, just in case.

"So the rats are beginning to leave the sinking ship?" Pogiba's tobacco-coloured eyes gleamed with malice.

"No, the rats are biting, defending themselves to the end."

Those words literally lifted the lieutenant-colonel from his seat. Now the men stood facing each other, angry, irreconcilable, ready to go to any lengths.

"So, Sotnik, it's a case of hands up and throw yourself at the feet of the commissars?"

"The commissars give people land."

"And you'll get your three arshins.*"

"That's as may be," answered the sotnik. The other had hit him where it really hurt.

* Your three arshins — your grave.— *Ed.*

"Love of the Ukraine's reason enough for them to put men against the wall.... Internationalists, they are."

"That's as may be," the sotnik repeated quietly.

The lieutenant-colonel had caught a shade of indecision on the sotnik's white face: "Could you, the hero of a sacred cause, really turn traitor?"

"No, Lieutenant-Colonel, we are not heroes of a sacred cause," said Pidoprigora, the revolting impulse towards weakness gone. "That was what we thought, until we became the playthings of alien policies and started selling our land right and left."

"My, that's a lot all in one breath," said Pogiba, shaking his head reprovingly and seething with fury, barely controlled. "Let's take one thing at a time. Yes, I don't deny that other states are giving us aid, but we have our own government—it may not be very good, but still it's the first Ukrainian government."

"Yes—and what's it worth?"

"It comes a bit dear, like all governments," answered Pogiba, trying to turn things off with a joke.

"No, it's cheap, Lieutenant-Colonel, that government of ours, cheap as any street-walker. What sort of government of a people's republic is it if in its very capital, Kamenets-Podolsk, on our own soil, a Polish official can pick up three of our ministers at one go, like petty thieves, and clap them into jail? Did anything so disgraceful ever occur in history?"

"That really was a disgraceful affair," Pogiba agreed. "We do need a better government. Even if only for prestige in Europe."

Pidoprigora seized on that last sentence to angrily pour out all the accumulated pain and bitterness of nearly two years.

"For Europe, it's the best possible government. It defends the national Ukrainian costume like a sacred relic, but sells the Ukraine to her murderers. The men in the ranks are saying it's not the mosquito that married the fly, but Pilsudski that married Petlyura, and the bride's brought the Ukraine as her dowry."

"So we're selling the Ukraine?" Pogiba's face turned stony and purple.

"I'm not talking about us personally. We weren't let in on the deal even as counter-jumpers. We're just cheap hired men, dumb porters who carry the Ukraine on our backs to the market place."

"Bravo, Sotnik, gone Red all in a minute."

"No, I'm black with anger and grief, for won't the sin and shame of that sale drive us to the grave?"

"Get into your grave, then, carrion!" Pogiba quickly drew his Browning from his pocket.

As quickly, Pidoprigora pounced, seizing Pogiba's wrist with one hand, gripping his throat with the other, and catching his foot to bring him down. Pogiba fell heavily on the earthen floor, with the other lying across him, feeling the hard lump of the Adam's apple under his fingers.

Pogiba fought free, but the next moment Pidoprigora was on top of him once more, his stranglehold unslackened. He snatched away Pogiba's Browning when the man began to choke.

"Oh, no, you don't, Lieutenant-Colonel," he said, digging the weapon into the other's chest.

"Shoot, you bastard. Shoot, traitor. It's your chance!" rasped Pogiba hoarsely, writhing on the floor. Under his weight, the fragile pinks broke away from their stalks with a crunch.

"I don't shoot a man when he's down."

Levelling the gun at Pogiba's head, Pidoprigora backed to the door.

"Maybe I should get up to make it easier for you?" The Adam's apple stirred convulsively on Pogiba's neck as if a hunchbacked little dwarf were helping him to heave the words up from his chest.

"Better stop where you are, on the floor, and don't raise your head either. That's how we'll say good-bye." With a jerk of his shoulder Pidoprigora pushed the door open.

"We'll meet again, Sotnik!" the lieutenant-colonel called after him. "Our paths will cross again!" There was hatred in his eyes and not gratitude for his spared life.

"All the worse for you," Pidoprigora laughed scornfully through his anger. "Good-bye to you!" He disappeared through the door.

"No, *au revoir*, traitor! We'll meet again, beware...." The words in a hoarse, hate-filled voice followed him out.

Maybe I should go back and put an end to that snarl of evil, thought Danilo Pidoprigora. He hesitated a moment, then spat and with firm steps left the orchard. Suddenly he remembered that he had left his scythe in the workshop, but he did not return. He had to make a clean break sometime; and he had made it sooner than he expected.

What next? Life, or three arshins of land? Again hatred and fear gripped his heart. He had always flown home with

tremulous excitement, to his own soil, to the pond beside his brother Miron's cottage, to the forests where the clouds rested on the tree-tops, to his wife's golden braids. If only he could have melted into the forests, into the soil, if there he could have found the end of the road, if only he did not have to present himself to those dreaded military headquarters and the Cheka!

To Pogiba he had talked boldly about land and everything, but alone, faced with the unknown, his boldness drained away from him with every step he took.

VII

Past the crooked well with its sagging cross, the path from Veremi's farm divided into two dark arms embracing a big swamp with pools that never dried up.

As a child, Danilo had often driven cattle here during times of drought to let them graze at the edge of the bog, and as a boy he had come at night to shoot game. He would lie beside a pool facing the moon, listening to the water breathing sleepily, watching the shimmering, moonlit ripples. The birds would stir among the reeds and a flock would come swimming down the track of light. He would let loose at them, hardly troubling to aim. The birds would rise, shaking the drops from their wings, and settle down behind the osier and alder thickets.

Then he would go on to another pool and again lie down facing the moon on the dew-wet hummocks, and reflect on the secrets of this treacherous spot with its dreadful quags and warm patches which never froze even at the height of winter, where the grass was always green and the water still and clear. Old folks said that in times long past, when the Tatars came ravaging the Podolye region, the inhabitants of neighbouring villages and farms escaped death by hiding in these marshes.

Danilo Pidoprigora left the road and cut straight across. It was a shorter way home, and even if Pogiba and Barabolya came after him they would never venture on this unsafe ground.

A partridge, probably hidden in the millet, called and two others answered it; water squelched under his feet and the earth sank a little beneath his weight. It was good of the moon to rise just at this time. It brushed the vague outlines of the clouds with silver and the same silver gleamed smoothly on a small pond. There was a smell of poisonous hellebore

and hemlock, and of bitter roots. The track across the bog narrowed, shrank to a slit overgrown with grass, then that too vanished, leaving a smooth, green cushion that sank under his feet and sometimes broke. The thing to do then was to pull the foot out calmly and go on without pausing a second.

On his right lay the enchanted pond, round and smooth. Now the moon drew a greenish furrow over half of it, and the rest was a dense black, as though black stones had been infused in the water. Here even the birds were black, they pecked at the moonlit furrow and washed their feathers in it.

Danilo thoughtfully skirted the pond on which the moon was ploughing a broader furrow. The ducks took no notice of his footsteps: evidently it was a long time since anybody had frightened them. After the second pond he stepped from hummock to hummock round the treacherous spot covered with swamp moss and wild flowers, plunged through a thicket of mezereon already adorned with ear-rings and again found the faint, barely visible track.

At long last, dirty and wet with dew, he came out on firm ground—on the land of his childhood, for he now had none of his own. Trembling, he snatched off the cap that was alien to this land and, with lips salty with sweat, he kissed the stubble. Dew and tears mingled on his face.

"My land, forgive me for all I have done!" He pressed himself closer to it. The land listened and was silent.

He did not remain waiting for an answer, it was to people that his thoughts went out. He rose and with hands that felt strangely heavy he wiped his face.

That was his meeting with his native soil, with his hopes and apprehensions. Much human blood had been shed for it, but would it be the fairer for that, would its people be better, or would they be even more angered and savage in their ignorance and need? He had mutilated his life for the sake of the soil, let others at least not mutilate theirs.

Before him a windmill twirled its arms merrily in the night; the moon hung over it, encircled by clouds white as swans. He had never seen clouds so pale at night-time. And he never thought he could be so moved by the sight of an ordinary windmill, that kindly bird which reaches out its wings to the earth and the moon.

Without stopping for overmuch thought, he went straight to the mill. Which of his fellow-villagers would he see first? Would people recognise him? Not a single cart or horse stood

before it. He guessed with relief that this was not a delivery day. Behind the singing sails he climbed the stairs that creaked with every step and opened a small door.

A red-cheeked young woman was scooping up flour with a board and pouring it into a sack. A flickering light in an old clay bowl set on a block of wood close by lighted the handsome thoughtful face of a boy, with proudly curved nose and heavy eyebrows. He was sitting on a filled sack watching the flickering flame, and even that youthful face looked grave with age-long peasant worry.

"Good evening," said Danilo softly.

"May good health be with you," the young woman pattered quickly, with a brief glance at the visitor, while the boy rose, bowed, and sat down on his sack again.

Now, which of the people he knew did this boy resemble? Ah—that was it, it must be the son of Timofi Goritsvit. The same nose, the same wavy fair hair, the same pensiveness.

"Got grain to grind, lad?" asked Danilo, sitting down.

"No, mine's done. I'm waiting for my aunt, she's afraid to go home to Maidan alone," he explained with a jerk of his head towards the young woman, while the faintest possible smile moved his lower, slightly retreating lip.

"Are you going to carry the flour on your shoulders?"

"Our shoulders and our backs."

"Not too heavy for you?"

"Lucky there's something to carry." The boy turned sad, intelligent eyes on Danilo.

"What's your name?"

"Dmitro."

"Is the land being divided here yet?"

The boy's face lighted up. "They're starting tomorrow."

"Will you get a share too?"

"The same as other folks." A quiet spark lighted his sad eyes.

"You love the soil?"

"Of course, who doesn't?" With a sharp movement he swung round to face this stranger sitting there, his clothes stained with swamp weeds. "Even the cows love it, they kiss each blade of grass, how could a man not love it?"

And suddenly Danilo had the mind and heart of this youth revealed to him: he lived for one dream alone—land! Strangely, he felt that before him sat not a simple country lad, but the master of the land, the embodiment of its future, and perhaps of Danilo's own future as well.

VIII

"Daddy, someone's banging on the window! Daddy!" The frightened little girl of ten shook her father vigorously. She had been the first to hear the tapping, and jumping out of bed in her shift had seen the head of a stranger silhouetted against the pale window.

"Is that you, Vasilinka? Why aren't you asleep?"

Drowsily, the father stroked the child's head, then awakening fully he leapt out of bed, snatched her up and shrank into a dark corner behind the chest. Peering out from there, he saw the shadow of a cap and a hand against the glass. Vasilinka huddled beneath her father's arm and whispered into his shirt, "Don't be afraid, it isn't bandits, bandits would have broken the window in."

"That's what you think."

He pressed the shivering body of his only daughter closer. Thoughts raced through his head, breaking off like the strands of spider-webs. Get into the hollow under the stove? Or slip up to the attic?... But what about Marta? He remembered his wife, but immediately forgot her again as his thoughts returned insistently to the attic, where he could pull the straw from the thatch and slip out into the woods.

"Do you hear? Someone's calling you." The child's keen ear had caught her father's name outside the window.

Miron strained his ears and—yes, it seemed a familiar voice, too.

"Miron, open the door, it's me, Miron...."

"I told you it wasn't bandits," the little girl whispered.

"Miron, Miron," came the voice outside the window again, filling him with agitation.

"Holy saints, can it be Danilo?" Miron was both relieved and apprehensive. It was not death that had come to him in the night, but it certainly was no joy.

He got to his feet, striking his shoulder painfully against the corner of the chest, came out into the middle of the room, looked round him, listened intently, then with a sudden movement went up close to the window.

"Danilo—is that you?"

"It's me, brother," came an excited whisper. A face was pressed to the other side of the glass—but it looked very unlike that of Danilo, once the pride of the family.

Almost knocking Vasilinka down, Miron ran out and with trembling hands slipped back the wooden bolt, pulled open the door and fell like a heavy cross into the embrace of his

younger brother. Danilo pressed Miron to him, kissed his bristly face, then with a groan, still clutching him helplessly, sank to his knees.

"What are you doing, Danilo, get up. I'm not your father nor your judge."

Miron raised his brother's sagging body. He saw quite clearly what had happened to Danilo, and also what awaited him; the only thing he did not know was what he and Olexandr must do now.

Danilo put his hand on his brother's shoulder and for a long time they stood motionless, looking at one another, not even noticing the plump little girl in the doorway, holding her shift together and staring at them wide-eyed. She had already guessed that this was the learned Uncle Danilo, but why he knelt before her father, and why he had tears in his eyes as though he were a child—that was too much for her to understand. But then, grown-ups did such a lot of things you couldn't understand. Perhaps that was the proper thing to do when you went visiting, she thought, and decided to do the same when she went to see Aunt Galya on Sunday.

"Come on inside, brother." Only then did Danilo see the little white-clad figure leaning against the doorpost.

"Is that Vasilinka?" He stretched out an arm from which a few grains of sand trickled down.

"Yes, Uncle Danilo." She glanced up at him shyly and then dropped her eyes.

For an instant he saw before him again a small, dark, handsome woman—his dead mother. It seemed she was to live again in this large-eyed little girl who like her would gladden the eye with her face rather than her figure. He smiled to himself—why leap into the future? Probably that was the way of men, to look at beauty in this manner.

Danilo kissed Vasilinka's head and quickly searched his pockets for something to give her. They yielded nothing, however, except rubbish of all kinds, a gun and cartridges. Had she been a boy he would have given her a cartridge or two, but he had nothing for a girl. In two years of war he had not gained a single thing for himself, that was the only good thing to be said for him during his service in Petlyura's army—he had never laid a finger on what was not his.

Danilo picked up the little girl and hugged her. She liked it but it embarrassed her a bit to be fondled like a baby, with her father looking on, too. And she begged softly, "Don't, Uncle Danilo. I'm not little now, I go to school."

"What class are you in?" Danilo carefully set her down and sighed, remembering his pupils in the distant pine-scented Zhitomir district.

"I'm in the second."

"What are you learning just now?"

"About the October Revolution. All about Lenin. Uncle, did you ever see Lenin?"

"No, child, never," said Danilo.

"Everyone here talks about Lenin, but whoever you ask, no one's ever seen him. Even our teacher hasn't seen him," sighed Vasilinka. "Uncle, have you any books?"

"No, no books, Vasilinka," answered Danilo, his fingers mechanically feeling the handle of his revolver. "Are you fond of reading?"

"I still make my mark instead of a signature," said Miron, "but she can rattle off the pages as easy as anything." He looked affectionately at his daughter. "And our Olexandr's Yurko, you should see him! He's read all the books the masters had and now he's starting a lot of new ways in the fields and vegetable plot. That's how it seems to run in our family, it's in our blood, either the land or learning. And blood, you know, is a big thing, ours can't be diluted with liquor as some people's was in this war."

"Don't be disappointed, Vasilinka, I'll get you some books."

"Oh, lovely!" cried the little girl, delighted.

Miron looked at his daughter with clear, glad eyes—he loved her dearly. It fact, he loved all children. Then he turned back to Danilo.

"Have you been home yet?"

"How could I?" Danilo shrugged despondently. "I don't even know where my wife is now, whether she's still in the old place or whether she's left ages ago."

"You don't know? Honestly?" Miron sounded surprised and for some reason even pleased.

"Honestly. I haven't heard anything about her since last year's retreat." Danilo looked at his brother in eager hope—perhaps Miron could tell him something about his wife?

Miron's face split into a broad grin, he held out a hand and announced with smiling solemnity: "Then allow me to congratulate you on a lawful son! He was christened in our church, we named him after his grandfather—Pyotr. So now you're a father. We'll have to drink to that."

"What's that you're saying, Miron—is it true?" Danilo took a step back in amazement.

"You didn't know? That Cossack of yours is ten months old now, he can say 'mamma', if you'd been there he'd be saying 'dada' too. Children are much cleverer now than they used to be."

"Where are they, Miron? Are they all right? Are they well? Heavens, a son, you say?" Danilo seized his brother by the shoulders and shook him.

"Quite close—hi, there, gently. They're in Beryozovka. Your wife's teaching, just as she did before.... Look at you, you're going crazy about it! She gets rations of this and that, and she's planted a vegetable patch in the school yard so she won't go hungry. She's small but she's tough. She does the weeding just as well as our women."

"Has she got very thin?"

"She never was a plump piece," Miron answered with rustic humour. "But she's no worse than other young women. She's got the longest braids in the village, all her bones are there, and enough skin over them, and as for the back view—well, you'd hardly expect her to grow any fat there now if she couldn't manage to do it before. She's worrying herself sick about you. She keeps having dreams that you're in prison."

"What a thing to dream about.... It might come true at that." The thought brought an instant frown to Danilo's face.

Miron knitted his brows too. The brothers silently entered the cottage. The elder fumbled mechanically round the edge of the hearth. Seeing his brother had brought back old times, when there were matches in the house. He opened the stove door and sought with roughened fingers among the ashes for a spark. Embers glowed golden; he laid a resinous chip against them, blew up a flame, then lighted the little lamp. Vasilinka, without waiting to be told, took off the table-cloth, and put out bowls and spoons, and again Danilo saw fried carp. It reminded him of the happenings of that evening, and the pond where he had stood a little while ago, trying to master his thoughts and feelings.

What would he not have given just then for Miron's quiet, uneventful life! To live unnoticed beside his pond, to follow the plough, bring up children and forget everything, everything in the world—that accursed war, and Petlyura's dazzling promises that had mesmerised him, and the fear that poisoned his thoughts of the future. To whom would he have

to tell all this? Who, among those now in authority, would understand that he, like that carp, had seen the bait but not the hook? It was true, he had in his pocket a number of documents, including the appeal of the Podolye Revolutionary Committee which promised soldiers and officers their lives if they voluntarily came over to the Reds. But he remembered the old saying: promises are like pie-crusts, made to be broken.

Carefully—for he was careful in all things—Miron poured out a glass of home-distilled liquor and looked at his brother with cheerless sympathy.

"Your good health and long life! And may neither God nor man serve you ill!"

"Here's hoping," sighed Danilo and drained his glass to the last drop, just as though that drop really would decide his future.

"Help yourself, brother. You're eating with me tonight, but your wife'll give you your supper tomorrow.... A month past I took four cockerels over to your Pyotr, let him get used to the birds while he's small. I like a bird to wake me up, be it a nightingale, a quail or just an ordinary cock."

Miron smoothed his reddish, uneven moustache, and looked reprovingly at Vasilinka who had taken her place beside Danilo and never moved her great, thoughtful eyes from his face.

Her childish heart sensed that there was something not quite right about the way her father had greeted this learned uncle; then too, there must be some reason why they turned gloomy when they mentioned the word prison. She tried to guess this secret the grown-ups had; for grown-ups always had secrets, even the older girls, and they worried and fretted about them, just as though there was no way of living without them. She had firmly made up her mind that she would never have any secrets from other people, she would never whisper with her friends as the older girls did.

They drank another glass. Miron rested his cheek on his hand and asked Danilo: "What do you mean to do now, brother?"

"I don't know," Danilo answered—just like the children at school when they hadn't done their homework.

"You've chosen a bad time to come, brother. A very bad time indeed," her father sighed heavily.

How could he say a thing like that to a visitor, right to his face, and his own brother, too? Vasilinka blushed for her father.

"You don't want me? Might as well say so at once!"

"What's there to say? You know I'm no enemy of yours, Danilo. Wasn't it Olexandr and I who worked our hardest so you'd be a teacher, so your hands wouldn't stink of manure?"

"What do you want?" Danilo rose and reached for his cap. "D'you want me to slink out of your house like a mangy puppy?"

"You're talking nonsense," Miron frowned.

"Let's have some sense then." Danilo swung his cap on a finger where it swayed like a scarecrow on a windy day.

"I say again, you've come at a bad time. They're going to divide the land tomorrow. When they hear you've come, they may mete out such an 'allotment' to Olexandr and me that we won't know what'd hit us. Folks have got bitter and hard in the war. Why, even the bees are quicker to sting!"

"Yes, land's dearer than blood," muttered Danilo. "We've got to manage so that nobody knows, then."

"That's what I think. You'll spend the night here, and then go straight to Beryozovka, to your family. But don't let anyone see you there right now either."

"But won't that make it worse?"

"Better have it worse for one than for everybody," Miron pronounced judicially. The words were out before he realised how they must hurt his brother, and to make some sort of amends he poured him out another drink.

"No, I've had enough, Miron." Danilo rose from the table. "This home-brew, too, you'll probably reproach me with one day."

"Oh well, what's there to say?" Miron rose too. "You know yourself how little we make on Grandad's wretched plot—you toil and moil from dawn to dark, and sometimes you're near biting on a stone for bread. But now there's a chance to get land and I'm thinking more of that than of my own life. So forgive me if I tell you plain truths too plainly."

"Olexandr wouldn't have said it."

"That's because he's bolder, and I'm easy to scare," Miron confessed, then snapped at his daughter. "It'll be dawn soon, and you're still making a nuisance of yourself!"

Vasilinka gave her father an offended look but was otherwise untroubled, as she clung to her uncle's hand.

"Don't be cross with him, Uncle Danilo," she begged.

"He's really good and kind, but he's been frightened a lot. Whoever comes from the woods always frightens us. Some take grain and some take honey from the hives. It's enough to frighten anyone."

The brothers' eyes met over the child's head; both felt awkward and at the same time relieved. Miron seized the moment to fill their glasses again, and they drank, standing, to the health of the children.

"Will you sleep in the cattle-shed or in the hayloft?"

"In the hayloft."

Cocks crowed outside. The brothers started. Miron felt quite disgusted with himself—how could he be so startled by a bird? He pulled the sacking off the bed, picked up a pillow and took his brother out to the barn.

"Is there anything I can do to help you?" he asked as they crossed the yard.

"Find out if you can who's in the military headquarters and the Cheka—Ukrainians or not, and how they treat people like me."

"I'll talk to Olexandr about it, he knows more about things."

"Do that, then."

Miron felt his way to the ladder in the barn and tested it to see if it stood firmly.

"There you are," he said, "climb up into the hayloft. Good night. And don't be angry with me. It wasn't me speaking, it was the land."

"Good night," Danilo said, and repeated Miron's last words to himself. Perhaps later, if he lived, he would write about the power of land over man.

Moonlight seeped in through the cracks in the barn and a tree rustled its leaves by the door, filling Danilo with melancholy. If that was how his own brother met him, what could he expect from other people? For them, the greatest thing was the land, and who cared whether one more insignificant person remained to live on it or whether he was stood up against a cold wall and shot? How long could one go on tormenting oneself and turning the same thing over and over in one's mind? Other people's lives we turn inside out as easily as a pocket, condemn them, sometimes wreck them, if not with weapons then with words, but our own—we play safe with it, and carefully weigh up all the pros and cons. He made up his mind that he would face the judgement of man without subterfuge, he would tell of all his torments and sufferings, for he must cleanse himself before the people. It

would have been easier to do it before one person, at confession. Never mind, he had enough courage for a more fearful confession. Only what would happen to him afterwards? Pain left him for a moment as he let his thoughts turn to his wife and son. But now, when they were only a few versts away, he was more apprehensive than he had been in all the past months. How would he meet his wife, what would she say to him, and what remained of her love after this dreadful year and a half? Suppose war had trampled on the sanctity of that feeling too? Then — then he would have only one thing left to him — his son.

Thoughts and doubts smothered him like autumn mists, and he began to sink into oblivion. Somewhere on the borderland of sleep and waking he heard a quiet rustling in the barn. There were footsteps on the threshing floor, the ladder creaked, and then a timid, gentle voice spoke to him.

"Uncle Danilo, are you asleep?"

"Vasilinka, child, why aren't you in bed?" asked Danilo, surprised and also alert—had someone learned of his arrival?

The child laughed softly and pattered up the ladder, taking a bold leap into the hay from the last step. She sat down beside her uncle, her legs tucked under her.

"Why aren't you in bed?"

"I wanted to come and talk to you.... So you've never seen your Pyotr at all?"

"No, never," he said, and felt his eyes blinking rather fast.

"What a shame!" Vasilinka looked at him pityingly, her chin propped up on a forefinger. "He's so sweet. He's got light, light hair, all fluffy, and his eyes are sometimes grey and sometimes blue, and he's as quiet as quiet can be, he just never cries. And do you know what he likes?" She laughed suddenly at some thought.

"How can I know, Vasilinka?"

Danilo raised himself on his elbow, trying to see the little girl's face in the faint rays of the new moon, but the bars of light lay on her braids and her shift, leaving her face in darkness.

"When you pick him up, he bends forward and nuzzles his head into your neck, right against your cheek.... And he likes apples, too. He can't pluck them himself yet, so he takes my hand or mummy's and pushes it towards the branch. You see how clever he is!"

"He really does that?" asked Danilo, livening up.

"Yes, really!"

Only now did he realise completely that he had a son, a son he had not known was coming. He saw him as Vasilinka described him, and thinking of the baby, hugged the little girl.

"Uncle Danilo, have you got a big secret?" Vasilinka asked, snuggling close to her uncle. Danilo started—the question was so unexpected.

"Why do you ask?"

"I can see it. You'd have gone to Auntie, not to us, if everything had been all right. And Dad told me not to let anyone know you'd come here. That's queer too."

"Yes, child, it is." He sighed and stroked her silky-soft braids.

"But you're good and kind, aren't you, Uncle?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know about yourself?" repeated the child in surprise. "I've never heard anyone say that before."

She wondered whether her uncle had said it in fun, or whether he really didn't know he was good or bad. But if so, how could he have been a teacher? No, he was just joking, like grown-ups always did. And her uncle went on stroking her head, deep in his own thoughts, till he suddenly noticed that she smelt of honey.

"Do you look after the bees, Vasilinka?"

"Why, of course I do!" She roused herself, and added proudly: "The bees love me, too. This year I even got water for them at Epiphany."

"Why did you do that?"

"You're just pretending you don't know!"

"I've sort of forgotten. Tell me."

She settled herself more comfortably, and softly, as though afraid someone might hear, she explained.

"At Epiphany you have to take a clean jug and go for water. You say to the well: 'Good day to you, water of Jordan, your name is Olyana. You have three springs, one with drinking water, one with honey-water, and one with milk-water. I do not want the drinking water, I do not want the milk-water, I want the honey-water.' You must take water and keep it in the jug until springtime. And when it gets warm and the bees really start flying, you must put honey and mint and tormentil in it, boil it and give it to the bees. That's what old Goritsvit does."

He could hear the superstitious ignorance of centuries in the words of this child, who believed with all her heart in the water of Jordan and the wonder-working brew. They touched something deep within him, he felt himself sinking into the

world of his fathers, so distant and yet so close. Well, perhaps this too might come in useful—if he remained alive.

"And how else do you get a good yield of honey?" he asked with awakened interest.

"Uncle, you're teasing me! You know everything, you don't need me to teach you." She leaned forward, peering into his face.

"No, Vasilinka. I've never had anything to do with bees."

"Except eating the honey." The little girl laughed.

"Oh, I've done that all right. That's quite easy," and Danilo smiled back at her. "Well, what do you do about the honey?"

"When a fine-weather dew falls on the flowers, I always waken the bees before it's light."

"Do you get up as early as that?"

"I get up with Mum. She lights the stove and I go out to the bees. I hit the hives three times with a stick and I say, 'Elijah the Prophet rides over seas and oceans and tides, driving the wind before him, driving the rain before him. And so I drive you out, my bees, to seek the spring wax and the sweet honey.'"

"And do you get plenty?"

"I would if it wasn't for the war. A lot of our hives have been smashed by bandits," answered Vasilinka, bringing Danilo back with a start from the misty superstition of centuries to the chilly present.

He hugged the child, as though seeking protection in her.

IX

Hooves thudded past the farm and wheels creaked melodiously. Pogiba, listening alertly, guessed that this must be a britchka coming along the road and not a cart. Could Pidoprigora have made trouble for him already? He dressed quickly, put his documents into his pocket and slipped out of the workshop. Quietly he stole away to a far corner of the orchard and waited by the stile.

On this rich soil beet cuttings grew feet high. If you hid between them and the fence, nobody would see you.... So now it had come to this: even at night he must go into hiding in his own native Ukraine. If only they could keep their hold on these two gubernias at least, they would be spared the need to go begging to foreigners....

The gate creaked, and a shadow slipped across the yard. It climbed over the stile and Pogiba recognised the round form

of Barabolya. The Head Ataman's agent went to the workshop and Pogiba came out from his hiding-place. Barabolya, alert, revolver in hand, swung about and they met at the door.

"Lieutenant-Colonel!" cried Barabolya surprised and relieved. "Lord, you gave me a start! It might have been anything. I'm still quaking in my boots." He slipped the revolver back into his pocket and now he had a whip in his hand. "Where's the sotnik?"

Pogiba went into the workshop. Barabolya shut the door firmly behind them and stood in front of it with his whip, for all the world like a driver.

"Sit down." Pogiba liked both the face and the figure of the man much better now. "Our sotnik's made off, gone over to the Reds."

"The dirty traitor! I'd a feeling he was no good from the first," Barabolya's face, fleecy like a ball of wool, turned crimson with rage, but in the same moment it changed. He raised his hand dramatically and declared: " 'Thus spake Zarathustra. In truth, my friends, I go about among men as among the fragments and separate pieces of a man.' "

Nietzsche made no impression on Pogiba.

"You'd better give thought to what Pidoprigora's going to say about you and me. He's from this district, you know." The reflected light of the tiny lamp flickered through Pogiba's scanty eyelashes.

"We've got to forestall him. We'll dig a soft little grave for him," Barabolya answered quietly, but veins swelled under his ears. "What's his name, did you say? Pidoprigora?"

"Yes, Pidoprigora."

"From Novobugovka?"

"That's the place. What are you going to do?" asked Pogiba. "Shoot him?"

"Good heavens, no! Why use such antiquated methods? We must act in the spirit of the twentieth century and those of our Devonshire teachers who prefer to remain in the shade." Barabolya giggled. "We'll write a verisimilar letter to the Cheka, put down everything you know about the sotnik, the whole truth, and add just one small lie — that Danilo Pidoprigora has gone over to the Reds to be of better use to the Head Ataman."

"And you think it'll work?" Pogiba listened with horror and disgust to the giggle.

"It has worked before, Lieutenant-Colonel, and more than once." He prodded the air with his finger three times for

emphasis. "The most important thing in letters like that is to have as much of the truth as possible. If the part that's true checks up, then the small lie acts like a drop of deadly poison. It's lethal."

"You know best. I don't suppose I could do that," said Pogiba thoughtfully.

"You'll do the same if it comes to the point. In our days, romantic chivalry's only good for fools. I don't deny it helped the Head Ataman to catch a good part of the youth with Cossack glory, red Cossack trousers and shlyks for bait. But besides the romance, there's the dirt of war, and it gradually gathers on us. What you can't do today, you'll do tomorrow. War doesn't make saints, it makes killers. Even in the villages the foundations of Christian morals and compassion are shaken—there are too many people, and they all want to live." Barabolya's voice rose to a crescendo, then he broke off dramatically and quoted Nietzsche again: "'Compassion! Compassion for the supreme being!'" His face turned copper red. "Ah well, there was a time for that!"

For the first time Pogiba saw, not without surprise, that the secret agent's eyes could be both clever and hard. Before he could utter a word, Barabolya floored him by adding: "When the time comes, you'll be as good an actor as I am, although today you were too squeamish to sit at table with me."

This sudden attack disarmed Pogiba and raised the clumsy figure of the agent in his eyes.

"You must forgive me, I didn't get you properly at first."

"And I didn't mean you to." A glint of arrogance showed in the hard eyes, then they dulled into their usual stupidly sleepy look. "Well, what shall we do about Palilyulka now?"

"Wouldn't he come?"

"Since Shepel's defeat near Khmelnik, he's got cautious. He sent his britchka for you."

"Are things bad with Shepel?"

"Only the headquarters staff has escaped, there's no government left, they all ran away."

"Did Shepel have his own government?" asked Pogiba in surprise, remembering the squat ataman.

"Very much so. After our disaster last year he proclaimed a new government of the Ukrainian People's Republic in Lityn. He even shoved a Galician into it so he could say it represented both the Dnieper Ukraine and the Dniester Ukraine."

"There's a rascal for you," laughed Pogiba. "He seizes one

single district and sets up a government for the whole Ukraine!"

"A sparrow trying to be an eagle. It's all a great gamble—supposing you draw the fourth ace, there's always a chance."

"Well—so we'll go to Batko Palilyulka, shall we?"

"Frankly, I'm not quite sure what we ought to do. I've a feeling that the batko's sitting on the fence, lording it in a few villages and waiting to see who comes out on top."

"But at bottom he is for Petlyura, isn't he?"

"At bottom he is only for himself and his few villages. He hopes he'll be able to knock together a peasant kingdom without landlords, generals, or government."

"Well, we can only die once, so come on. At least we'll see how the wind's blowing from the Soviet side!"

Barabolya let Pogiba go out first, furtively crossed himself three times before the icon of St. Nicholas and blew out the light.

A painted britchka stood under the sycamores by the gate; fine horses pawed the ground, their eyes sparkling in the moonlight. Barabolya jumped on to the front seat, glanced back at Pogiba, grinned and cracked his whip. The horses took off at a sharp pace and the wheels rolled over the soft, springy peat.

Well-armed sentries stopped them by a roadside cross with an icon hung with embroidered towels, but the batko's britchka was recognised at once and they were allowed to pass.

Barabolya drove up to the brick school-house. A crowd of the batko's henchmen stood under its high windows, a woman was weeping and wringing her hands in the yard, and three prisoners dressed only in their underwear sat despondently on some logs, under guard.

"They're Soviet grain collectors. The batko will stuff their bellies with grain all right," Barabolya told Pogiba.

They climbed the time-worn stone steps of the school porch. Two tall young fellows with whips made way for them. The classroom was full of men sitting at the school desks in the most casual manner. Farther back Pogiba saw a squat figure in a voluminous coat and fur hat behind a big table. He had wavy moustaches and in his teeth held a long Cossack pipe, the spark in it looking like an inflamed eye. On the table lay a hunting-crop and a revolver. Behind him stood his bodyguard, hung with hand-grenades.

Barabolya wound his way through the crowd with eel-like smoothness, led Pogiba to the table and presented him to the squat man sitting there.

"I'm Batko Palilyulka," the man announced, taking his pipe from his mouth and emitting a cloud of smoke. "So you're from the Head Ataman?" He examined the lieutenant-colonel openly with sly little eyes.

"Yes, I am."

"We'll have a talk later on. For the present, go and sit down over there, on the window-sill." The stubbornly serene face of the batko was quite inscrutable.

This rather cool welcome worried Barabolya more than it did Pogiba. The nostrils of his stubby nose dilated as though sniffing for what was going on, his eyes raced over the bandits' faces and came to rest on the pale face of the chief of staff who sat on Polilyulka's right, jumping up nervously from his chair every now and then. The man wore a tight-fitting dolman à la Makhno. He had a long flat face and slits of eyes in which there was ill-concealed despair. A fat clerk with cap pulled down to his brows wriggled uncomfortably on his seat. The sixth sense of a secret agent told Barabolya that something ominous had happened just before their arrival.

Three decently dressed peasants sat at the front desks.

"Who are they?" Pogiba whispered.

"Ministers from that district I told you about. They've come to complain. They don't want Palilyulka's braves coming to their parts for food."

The batko picked up his hunting-crop, pointed with the handle to the door and said: "Bring him in."

Two of his henchmen, armed with whips, dashed out into the corridor and came back in a moment with a broad-shouldered, dishevelled but very calm Cossack in a black hat with a red shlyk.

Pogiba started. The red shlyk was worn only by Ataman Volokh's men.

"Who are you?" Palilyulka asked him in an even voice. "Now, speak the holy truth. One lie and I'll stop your mouth with a bullet."

"I'm a Red Cossack now," the young fellow answered boldly, and with a defiant gesture straightened his shlyk.

"Put that on record," Palilyulka told the clerk curtly. The man snatched his pen from behind his ear, dipped it in the ink-bottle, and began scratching away.

"And what were you before that?"

"I was a Free Cossack under Ataman Volokh."

"Write it all down." Palilyulka gave the clerk a glance and turned back to the Cossack. "Well, and why did you go over to the Reds?"

"It wasn't my own idea. Ataman Volokh himself thought of that. Last year when Petlyura didn't know what to do next, our ataman decided to teach him a lesson and attacked his headquarters at Lyubar."

A babble of talk rose among the bandits, but Palilyulka struck the table with his hunting-crop and silence fell.

"Go on!"

"Well, so we attacked his headquarters. We wanted to get him in a bag and hand him over to the Reds, but his adjutants managed to stuff him into a britchka, and took him, more dead than alive, to Pilsudski."

There was a roar of laughter, and that laughter echoed painfully in Barabolya's heart. He wanted to jump down from the window-sill and run to the table but Palilyulka spoke again.

"So you didn't catch Petlyura?"

"No, we didn't catch him, he ran too fast," answered the Cossack regretfully.

"And you're sorry, you devil?"

"Yes, Batko, I am."

"Doesn't that make you a bastard?"

"It does, Batko," the young fellow agreed, and there was laughter again.

The chief of staff clapped his hands to his head in despair and jumped up from his seat, crying, "Batko, this scum is flinging mud at a hero! Petlyura means as much to us as Garibaldi does to the Italians!"

"Ha-ha-ha!" The Cossack burst out laughing at something he remembered. "Someone once wrote that Petlyura's as much like Garibaldi as a pig's like a horse!"

The Cossack left the chief of staff speechless. For a moment dead silence reigned, then the very walls rocked with wild laughter. Palilyulka laughed with the rest. The chief of staff sat down on his chair again, clutching his throat.

"Well, you smartie, what happened next?" Palilyulka turned to the Cossack again.

"What next? Well, our ataman called us together and said, 'We've scratched muck for foreigners long enough, men. We've had our fun, we've seen our sweeties, now it's time to go back to the right sort of people.' Well, so we raced off to the Reds—you couldn't see us for dust."

"Did they take you to the Cheka?" Palilyulka sounded wrathful, and a hush fell on the room.

"No, Batko, they didn't."

"What did they do to you, then?"

"They gave us newspapers and books, then they fed us, then they sent us a commissar. We didn't want him much at first, but when we'd listened to him a bit, we kept him. He was a good sort."

"You kept him, or they kept him with you?"

"We kept him ourselves," the Cossack answered firmly.

"Did they kill many of you?"

"They didn't touch one. They didn't even cut off our shlyks, let alone our heads. We're still wearing them."

"He's a stool pigeon!" The chief of staff burst out, jumping up again.

But the young fellow only laughed.

"If I'm a stool pigeon you're Kaiser Wilhelm's son-in-law."

Palilyulka rose to his feet. There was a scowl on his face.

"Well, men, you've heard what this bastard's told us?"

"We've heard him, Batko," the bandits shouted.

"I'm thinking now, what shall we do? Go to Petlyura's rescue so he can go in cahoots with Pilsudski and bring him back here, or go over to the Reds, or just disperse and go home?"

The crowd was quiet at first, then they all began to speak at once and soon they were shouting.

"What's best, Batko?"

"Time to go home!"

"Sure, and feed the lice in jail!"

"Let's all go over to the Reds together, before they get any harder on us."

"If we're all together they won't touch us, but one by one they'll throttle us!"

When the noise died down a little, Barabolya slipped down from his window-sill and ran to the table, past the desparingly silent chief of staff. His thickset figure at once attracted attention.

"Think what you're doing, Batko!" Barabolya's voice trembled. "You're leading your flock to destruction."

"Hold your tongue, damn you, when people are thinking," Palilyulka snapped.

But Barabolya was not to be silenced.

"It's a crime, Batko! The Reds will mow you down. You'll be sorry then, but it'll be too late."

"How very rude!" Palilyulka marvelled, and his voice sank insinuatingly. "Come on, men, give him a dozen, to teach him a lesson."

"Batko!" squealed Barabolya and shrank back, but the next moment he was struggling in the sturdy hands of the bandits. They skilfully trussed him up and pulled down his trousers, then two held him bent over the bench, willingly vacated for the purpose by Palilyulka's bodyguard. The whips cracked, there was a scream, they cracked again and came whizzing down on the prostrate body.

Cold sweat broke out on Pogiba's forehead. To him that whizzing seemed a precursor of his own death. He realised that Palilyulka intended to lead his band to the Reds that very day, and would not think twice about seizing him and taking him along.

At that moment the woman who had been weeping in the yard burst in. She cast a glance from her grief-crazed eyes at the bench where Barabolya was being flogged, shut them for a moment, then looked round the room, desperately seeking somebody.

"I'm here, Mother!" called the Cossack with the red shlyk.

"My son, my little one!" The woman fell trembling on his breast. "It's not you they're torturing, then?"

"You can see it's not, I'm all right," her son calmed her awkwardly, glancing in embarrassment at the bandits.

"Clear out, you two! What a sickening sight! Do your slobbering when you get home," Palilyulka roared at mother and son, and they slowly left the school.

Gasping, with barely strength to move, Barabolya rose from the bench, collapsed, then staggered to his feet again, and with hands that had become infirm pulled up the trousers dragging on the floor. He fastened them and, groaning, half doubled up, left the school. Nobody stopped him, and Pogiba envied him.

Palilyulka waited until Barabolya had disappeared, then took his pipe from his mouth and leaned forward so that his great head seemed to hover over the table.

"Listen, men, to what may be my last words to you. You've known me for a long time, and for some time now I've been wondering what we ought to do next. We've nothing to hope for from Petlyura. The Poles are making peace with the Reds. And Wrangel belongs to the gentry, he has to be strung up. And so the way matters are shaping, it's better to fight the gentry than the Bolsheviks. That's why I'm going over to the Reds. I'll help them to fight Wrangel, so

there's no trouble later from any bastards. Who wants to, can come with me, and those who don't can go wherever they like. I won't stop you. Freedom for the free. Am I right, men?"

"Cheers for the batko!" shouted most of the bandits, throwing up their hats, while some began quickly making their way to the door.

The chief of staff followed them at a run. Nobody hindered them.

"Now, brothers," said Palilyulka, turning to his bodyguard, "bring in all the food and drink we've got. We'll have one more good feast. Not a bloody chance of that with the Bolsheviks: they live on rations."

"What shall we do with the grain collectors?" somebody shouted in through the window.

"Let them go to the devil."

"Hi, you, get going!" the same voice shouted. A moment later the guard entered the room.

"Here's a nice thing, Batko, they don't want to go without their trousers. They're shy or something."

"And what have you done with their trousers, you bastards?"

"Bartered them for drink. We didn't know they'd be that lucky," laughed the bandit.

"Damn it all, I didn't either. We'll have to do something about it."

Palilyulka came out from behind the table and went towards the door. The bandits followed him, and after them, trembling in every limb, went Pogiba. No one took any notice of him. Hugging the school wall, he made his way to the orchard, jumped over a stile and found himself in a narrow, weed-grown lane. There he quickened his steps, wondering how best he could get back to Veremi's farm.

Leaving the village, he saw a short, thickset figure moving with uncertain steps in the shade of the trees bordering the road before him. That must be the Head Ataman's agent. Barabolya gave a frightened glance behind him, and gasped with relief when he saw the lieutenant-colonel.

"Thank God, thank God, it's you. I was walking and thinking terrible thoughts."

There was anguish in Barabolya's eyes. He stopped and shook his fist at the village. "Laughed at us, did you? Just wait, I'll have your blood for that joke of yours! We'll string you up on the same rope with that sotnik."

Barabolya's face was distorted with pain and hatred; his dissimilar eyes looked as though they would burst from their sockets, and Pogiba turned his own eyes away.

Straw rustled in the breeze somewhere near the road, and Barabolya turned quickly in that direction, on the alert. The moon shimmered over a field ribbed with rows of tall stubble, showing the plain line of the path winding away into the cold distance. He turned off on to the path, took a few painful steps, and stopped.

"I'll have to undress, I can't go any further like this."

"Please yourself."

Standing, Barabolya took off his boots, then with a groan removed his bloodstained trousers, drew his boots on again and, cursing, hobbled towards the farm.

They came to Veremi's house as dawn was breaking. At the door they were met by Veremi himself, a broad-shouldered man with a short neck and long, powerful arms.

"God Almighty, what's happened?" he asked with concern when he saw how painfully Barabolya's feet dragged on the ground.

"Trouble, bad trouble."

Veremi hurried forward, looked about him, walked round Barabolya and in a calmer voice said, "Not as bad as it might be, thank Heaven. I'll send you my witch, she'll heal all your cuts in three days."

"Whispering spells?" Barabolya's bloodless lips twisted in an ironic smile.

"No, she's got herbs."

"She won't make it worse?"

"She's only a slip of a girl, but she's cured people with one foot in the grave, take my word for it."

"Well, looks as if I'll have to," sighed Barabolya and went to the workshop with Pogiba.

Veremi went into the house for a minute, then led a horse from the stable and rode away towards a grove gleaming grey with morning dew.

An hour later, when Pogiba was just about to begin breakfast and Barabolya lay groaning on the pallet, the door opened and a thin girl came in. She wore bast shoes and a tattered old skirt.

"May I come in?" she asked softly.

Pogiba knew that nobody but the owners of the place should know they were in the workshop, and looked at the girl with wary alertness.

"Come in, come in," he said, rising.

The girl awkwardly closed the door behind her and bowed to the lieutenant-colonel.

"Good morning, sir."

"Good morning. And who might you be?"

"I'm one of Veremi's labourers. Mariana's my name."

She raised her head and Pogiba saw eyebrows more beautiful than he had ever seen anywhere: two broad, uptilted, glossy black wings starting at the bridge of the nose and sweeping away to the temples. But the eyes beneath did not glow and sparkle as one would expect. They pleaded. They held an old, old fear, and its shadow seemed to rest on her whole form.

"Did you want to speak to me?" Pogiba looked admiringly at the girl, reading in her eyes that her life was not an easy one.

"No." She hung her head shyly. "The master told me to come here to treat somebody's wounds."

"Then it's you who—cures people?" asked the amazed lieutenant-colonel. He almost blurted out, "So it's you who's the witch?"

"Sometimes I have to," the girl answered with a pitiful smile that trembled in the corners of her mouth.

"Who taught you?"

"My mother. She knew all the herbs." The girl straightened proudly as she spoke, and there was respect in her voice for the mother who had been so wise.

"And what could she cure?"

"Wounds and sores, and she could set broken bones, and she cured the itch and eczema."

"Eczema, too?" The lieulenant-colonel was surprised that the girl should even know the word. "What did she use?"

"She distilled nut-wood.... Who is ill here, please?"

Pogiba jerked his head towards the pallet and Mariana went over to Barabolya, who never took his eyes off her. He had little faith in simples, but there was something in Mariana's face that attracted him.

The girl put her jar of ointment on a stool, bent shamefacedly over Barabolya, and her fingers touched his burning flesh as gently as a zephyr.

When Mariana went out, Pogiba smiled.

"Well, what do you think of that ... witch? Like her?"

"I like her all right. And do you know, the pain really is less, and so is the fever. She seems to know her business."

"Possibly. And do you know what she looks like?"

"No, what?"

"A water sprite of the woods. Mavka, they call them. Quite a good-looking girl, isn't she?"

"Not bad, except that a puff of wind would blow her away."

"Yes, she doesn't get the food we do," and Pogiba glanced meaningly at the table

X

God sent down the quiet night over the earth so that plants might grow and people rest. And on this night too, it may be that the winter grain rose a little higher under the autumn stars, but rest for men was scant. Sleep was slow to visit those who were to receive land, it fled the eyes of others who were to lose part of their rightly or wrongly gained fields and farms.

Some had barely left the meeting when others were slinking furtively about the village, and hands tapped on windows—the hands most pious with the sign of the cross in church, most avid to reach for rubles at the market.

Most of the money in the village passed through the hands of the shopkeeper Mitrofan Sozonenko. Red-headed, freckled like a cuckoo's egg, he would sit like an idol behind his counter, his arms folded, but at weddings and christenings he would let himself go and carouse like a red goblin. He spent no money on drink, nor did he bring gifts; instead, he would take an I.O.U. note out of his smart note-case and with a regal gesture throw it down on the table. And in the village, where the whims of the rich man who held the stick were watched with all kinds of feelings, those I.O.U.'s were called Sozonenko money. That did not trouble Mitrofan Sozonenko. In fact, it elevated him in his own eyes, he even got paper of different colours for these notes-of-hand, and made them a uniform size so they really should look like money.

On this particular evening, after supper which he little enjoyed, Sozonenko locked his shop inside and out and settled down to waiting for whoever would bring him bad news about the land from the Kombed meeting.

The door opened a slit and Nadezhda, a timid sickly woman, slid a stooping shoulder inside. Her husband looked up and she disappeared again into the darkness of the adjoining room, the door swinging with a sigh.

The bitch, thought Sozonenko with his usual bored distaste as though it were her fault that he had married her for her dowry without love. He had taken her at the age of fifteen,

before she even had her monthlies, and the poor girl had shrank away from his touch, hiding in dark corners as though she knew that married life would bring her nothing but pain, mental and physical. That was how it had indeed been. Even with the good food she ate, she was thin, pale and sickly. "Wise women" with their spells and simples were never out of the house. Mitrofan cursed her for a whimpering bundle of ailments and went to other women.

His wife's dowry had been land, not money — damn it and her too, for now it was being taken from him. He wished they would take the woman with it, his memories of his married bliss would be less bitter, anyway. Why, she couldn't even give birth properly, a simple enough thing, surely. Nothing but miscarriages. She'd only carried one son to the end, and what good was he? — pale and thin, like a potato sprouting in a cellar.

Dogs barked furiously in the yard. Without bothering to put on a coat, Mitrofan went out to the close-set fence, and laid his ear against it.

"Who's there?" he asked after a moment.

"It's only me," the humble tones of Kuzma Vasilenko came back to him through the keyhole.

With a rattle of keys, chains and padlocks, Sozonenko opened the gate, and Kuzma the eternal debtor edged in, careful not to brush against his host. His baggy cotton trousers were dark with damp, as though he had been creeping along the ditch.

"Good evening, sir." Kuzma took off his hat, bowed and sighed.

"Come indoors." Sozonenko stealthily thrust his head outside and looked up and down the street.

"There's nobody about, I didn't — hee-hee! — bring any witnesses," Vasilenko snickered fawningly. "I went through the vegetable plots so nobody should see me. I'm all wet with dew."

"I'm not afraid of witnesses. I don't give a damn for them. I was just looking to see if the moon was up." It made Sozonenko angry to think that his nervousness was apparent even to a worm like Vasilenko.

"It's up, it's up. You can't see it here because of that high fence. It's a real fortress you've got," Kuzma said to flatter him, still holding his hat in his hand.

Inside, Sozonenko sat down while Kuzma stood in front of him, shuffling his bare feet on the freshly scrubbed floor. His watery, sadly humble eyes would have done better for a

monk. When drunk, it is true, Kuzma became more like a human being with quips and witty words for his drinking partners, although he kept his sense of humour under lock and key when sober.

"Meeting over?" Mitrofan's eyes probed Kuzma. He could appraise a man at a glance, estimating exactly what he was worth, inside and out.

"It must be, by now. I didn't stay to the end, I wanted to come to you without being seen."

"So it's come to that! Well, what happened at that meeting?"

"Bad, irre-triev-ably bad," said Kuzma, selecting this bookish word for some reason. He sighed once more and turned eyes of dog-like devotion on Mitrofan.

"Pidoprigora's death hasn't helped, then?" A hot wave poured through Sozonenko.

"No, it hasn't, not a scrap," Kuzma touched his head where the hair was thinning early.

"It will," the shopkeeper said morosely. "So Olexandr Pidoprigora and Karpets are taking my land?"

"They're the ones."

"And they didn't refuse the farmers' land?"

"No. Only Miron Pidoprigora got out of taking Denisenko's."

"Well then, get off quick to Karpets and Pidoprigora, tell them to come here to me at once. And you'll get something for yourself out of it."

"I'll fly like the wind." At the thought of something for himself Kuzma's eyes lighted up. He clapped his hat over his thin hair and turned to the door, displaying the patches on his back.

"Don't be in such a hurry, you'll bump into the dog."

With a grimace of distaste, Sozonenko passed Kuzma who always stank of sweat and the pot-house, and saw him out into the street.

Kuzma slunk into the shadows and became one of them, only the barking of dogs indicated whose house he was passing. True, dogs barked at the far end of the street, too, where Kuzma had no need to go, but that did not surprise Sozonenko. Probably some other envoy was sent to admonish those who cast covetous eyes on their neighbours' land. But would those messengers be any help?

One single ray of moonlight penetrated the yard through the keyhole and lay like a dew-drop on his hand. He shook it off with distaste and went inside. With a habitual gesture he

reached behind the icon, took out a bundle of I.O.U.'s and unfastened the string, forgetful for a moment of the land, admiring his small, neat handwriting. This handwriting had many a time sent cold chills through burly gloomy peasants, it had been moistened with the flowing tears of women, and more than one young widow, writhing and wringing her hands, had surrendered to its power. It was only with them, not with his cold, withered wife, that he knew passion. Of course, it was a sin to spend his money on other women, but after all, he was not exactly giving it away free, was he.

He leafed through the notes-of-hand and each one of them spoke to him with its own voice, looked at him with a sadly humble or a pleading smile. There was Olexandr Pidoprigora's cross under the words: "Signed by— " There were the awkward, broken lines of Karpets' name, made by a man leaning heavily over the table to sign his debt. What else could he do when he had to get a horse? And he had bought it, bought it with Sozonenko's money.

It had been a real joke with that swollen-hocked, sly-eyed nag. It had surely never known a gallop, all it knew was the plodding gait of the worker; but give it a touch with the whip and it would shy wildly, its eyes almost humanly wicked. And one day when Polishchuk's fine horses got stuck in the mud, that nag showed its mettle, pulling out the cart loaded for a pair. After that nobody laughed at Karpets or his horse again.

Only for a short time could the coloured papers distract Sozonenko's attention from the really important question. After all, thought Sozonenko, why feel so badly about it? It was only a small part that was being sliced off, a mere seven dessiatines, but it meant more to him than all the rest of his land now.

Sozonenko tied up the debtors' notes again and put them back in their place behind the icon. Two notes he kept. Dammit, he would cancel Karpets' and Pidoprigora's debts if they left his land alone.

Paying for his own land! Fine freedom, indeed, with that panhandler Miroshnichenko running the village! Angry thoughts fanned his fury, he wanted to spit on the cautious tactics Safron Varchuk had sought and take more drastic measures.

The metal latch of the gate rattled and rattled again. Sozonenko quickly slipped the papers into his pocket and went out into the yard. He opened the gate and in the square

of light saw Kuzma's despondent form. His attitude boded no good.

"Well, Kuzma?" For some reason Mitrofan stepped aside, making way for Kuzma just as though he were an equal.

"Irre-triev-ably bad," he answered, and dragged his crooked shadow into the yard.

"Speak up, don't mumble," snapped Mitrofan, and his freckled face crimsoned to a dark shade visible even in the moonlight.

"I don't know how to tell you. They've lost their wits, the peasants. There's Karpets, he harnessed his horse and went off to your fields right in the middle of the night."

Amazed and outraged, Sozonenko clutched at his chest as though it pained him.

"With my horse—to my field? Couldn't even wait for the division, the son-of-a-bitch?" Sozonenko's pale lips trembled.

"He'll wait there. He's a hard character," Kuzma raised a clenched fist, inwardly amazed at Karpets' boldness.

"And what about Pidoprigora?"

"Don't ask."

"Tell me—quick."

Kuzma came further into the yard and Mitrofan with a slam of the gate extinguished the moonlit square.

"Olexandr was at home. They'd had supper and he was talking to his wife and lad about tomorrow. And you should see the number of books that Yurko's got, like a seminary student. They're all over the place: by the icons and on the benches and in the chest.... I wonder if he's thinking of getting an education too?"

"To hell with his books. Come to the point," Mitrofan seethed.

"I told Olexandr to come to you, and at once." Kuzma sighed, took an obstinate, sidelong look at Sozonenko, and mumbled into his chin, "And he ... he looks at me as if I'd given him a bad ruble and says to me, 'How much longer are you going to grovel before Mitrofan Sozonenko?'"

"He said that?" Mitrofan could not believe his ears.

"That's what he said, damn him. 'How much longer,' he said, 'are you going to grovel before Sozo—'"

"I heard it the first time. Go on, go on." Mitrofan groaned as though he had a bad toothache.

"It doesn't get any better. 'Tell your Sozonenko,' he said, 'if he wants to see me he can come to me. He's no big noise now.'"

These words almost paralysed Sozonenko. In all his life he had never heard such insolence.

"All right, you wait," he said, shaking his fist. "I'll go out on night pilgrimages myself now!"

Forgetful of Kuzma, he ran into the house, put on his coat and dashed out, mentally checking over all his friends and those of like mind with himself.

The chill of autumn did not cool his fury, the late hour did not slacken his rapid steps. God had not sent this night for a rich man to take his rest.

XI

When Svirid Miroshnichenko got home he found two people awaiting him—Ulyana Zavirukha, a distant relative of his foster-mother, and the teacher, Grigori Marchenko. They were sitting in the shadow of the house, on the earthen bank surrounding it, talking quietly. At the sight of the teacher, Miroshnichenko remembered his promise to the school.

Novobugovka had never had much of a school, and the peasants for their part saw little use in it. "You'll never learn enough to be a priest, and we don't want any drunken clerks in our family," was their attitude. So learning began more often than not on the common or the estate. In former days the school had barely kept going, and with the Revolution it closed down for good, because the deacon who taught there had no taste for living on rations and went off to farm in his own village. The school books were torn up for cigarette paper and the window frames taken out by whoever wanted them.

This year, however, the education office had sent a stubborn, determined teacher who meant to earn his thirty pounds of rye, one pound of sugar and two packets of matches, and earn them well. The first time Svirid visited him he was busy turning a hand-mill. He stopped and wiped his face with a sleeve, in no way embarrassed.

"Well, so we meet at last," said Miroshnichenko, with an uncomfortable glance at the millstones.

"Glad to welcome the first Communist here," the teacher answered, extending a floury hand.

"Are you going to curse me?" asked Miroshnichenko with a cautious glance.

"No, I'm not." The teacher straightened up, tall and thin. His teeth gleamed bluish-white between his lips.

"You're not?" asked Miroshnichenko in no small surprise. "In your place I would've let myself go."

"Trying to egg me on?" the teacher laughed with boyish candour. "But come inside."

His small room contained a narrow iron bedstead covered with a faded Austrian army coat, a table heaped high with books, two chairs and a bucket for food topped by a loaf of black bread baked by the teacher himself.

"You're not exactly living in luxury here," grunted Svirid, sitting down on the home-made chair. "Tell me, how do you expect to live on your ration? Teachers are running away from the schools everywhere."

"I shan't go, unless you put me out yourselves when you find I'm a bit tough to deal with," the teacher answered cheerfully.

"Oho!" Miroshnichenko brightened up. "So you're going to get after us, are you?"

"I'll get after you all right, if necessary," the teacher promised. "If you don't send wood to heat the school I'll go and pull down your houses for it." He shook his fist. "Well, you won't let me pull them down, of course, but you'll be disgraced before the whole village. I'm a Ukrainian myself, stubborn as any of you. I've had an education and I'm going to see the children here get one too."

"I'll send you wood." Rejoicing in his heart, Miroshnichenko met the teacher's eyes, angry one moment and laughing the next. "But how'll you manage to get your salary out of the district executive committee? They haven't paid anything for three months."

"Others have to wait six."

"But what'll we do?" Svirid was already worried about this teacher whom he liked at first glance.

"Go round the Twelve Apostles, maybe you'll get something that way."

"What Twelve Apostles?"

"All twelve heads of departments," the teacher explained.

"In that case better go straight to God Almighty himself—to the chairman," Miroshnichenko laughed.

"And he'll say, 'First let me get the grain in and settle with the bandits and deserters.'"

"You're probably right," Miroshnichenko agreed, wondering why Marchenko did not whine and curse his luck.

The teacher guessed what the Kombed chairman was thinking. He cut off a slice of bread and then got a piece of pork fat, damp with salt, out of the bucket.

"Take a bite with me," he said. "You're pretty nearly as much of a bachelor as I am, aren't you?"

"Oho, where did you get that fat? Sent from home?"

The teacher frowned.

"This room's my home, I've no other. My parents are dead. My mother badly wanted to see me a salaried teacher but she didn't live long enough. And as for where I got the fat, I'll tell you. But on one condition, not a single soul must know of it," Marchenko stooped down, folding in two like a pocket knife, and pulled out from under the bed a girl's boot on a last, a piece of wax and some cobbler's tools. "This is my second trade, I make boots and take them to another district twenty-five versts away to exchange them for food, so that nobody here should know."

"Amazing!" Miroshnichenko wrung the teacher's hand. "Now I do believe we're going to have a school, hard as it'll be for you."

"Never mind, that'll all pass, our job is to build something that won't pass away. Each generation has its heroism and its tragedy. When I'm old I shall probably enjoy telling smart, well-dressed young teachers how their colleague, at the time of the Revolution, at the time when the greatest decrees in human history were being passed, made boots and sold them secretly on the market rather than drop the school, rather than join those who croaked disaster for the Revolution. Yes, the time will come when I shall speak of it, but for the present neither the children nor their parents must guess my second trade."

"I want to say: good for you, but that's too little," said Miroshnichenko, moved. "So each generation has its own heroism and its own tragedy, eh? That's worth remembering."

"Remember it, Svirid Yakovlevich. I know you're greedy for new thoughts. But now tell me, how can you help me get the children into school? I upset the dogs all through the village, trying to make a list of the children of school age, but the parents hide them from me as they hide grain from you. They hide future professors and scientists whom the whole world may perhaps honour some day! Well, have some of my bread, even if it does smell of cobbler's wax."

They parted as friends. Marchenko lent Svirid some books to read, and after seeing him to the gate, crossed the school-yard to his room, carefully covered the only window with the Austrian army coat and set to work cobbling. And to make sure that the sharp eyes of children or neighbours

should not discover traces of cobbler's wax on his hands, he put on a pair of old gloves.

But despite all the efforts of the teacher and the Kombed chairman, very few children appeared at school when autumn came. The usual excuse the parents gave was that the children had no clothes or boots to wear to school. Then Miroshnichenko resorted to guile; he set a rumour going that every child attending school would get boots and stuff for clothing. It worked like a charm—children crowded into the school, including some who had not even been on the list. But soon the parents began asking the teacher with growing persistence—what about the promised boots and cloth?

So now Svirid knew very well why Marchenko had come and he made his greeting particularly warm, never guessing that this extra warmth told the teacher how little he had to hope for.

"Well, I suppose I can just pack up and go." That was like a blow on the head.

"Is it really so bad?" A frown gathered the Kombed chairman's stubborn forehead in folds.

"Some of the parents are keeping their children at home already. If only there was leather, I'd make boots for them myself."

"I went to see the chairman of the district executive committee about it, you know."

"Well, what did he say?"

"Gave me hell for the very idea, said I'd no class consciousness and was just wanting to make a show."

"Why, Svirid Yakovlevich, does anyone really give you hell too?" marvelled fair-haired, smiling Ulyana. "I'd never have believed it, that I wouldn't!"

"They certainly do, even though I pin my decorations on my tunic if things look black and leave my jacket open to let them show." Miroshnichenko laughed at his own ingenuity.

"So he just gave you hell and didn't promise anything?" Marchenko looked very despondent.

"He did promise something. He was angry all right, but still he worries about the school like we do. So he said the next time profiteers' goods are requisitioned, something will go to the school—gingham, maybe, or whatever there is."

"Well, that's better than nothing. I hope we get the gingham at least, and never mind about the boots."

"We'll get it all right."

"I'll be waiting for it. Oh, by the way, do you know Olexandr Pidoprigora's son?"

"Yurko?"

"Yes, that's the one. He's got a real head for books, he's gone through all I've got. So now I want you to help me."

"What can I do?"

"I've got an idea." Marchenko lowered his voice so that Ulyana should not hear. "You must go to the priest."

"Me—to the priest?!" gasped Miroshnichenko, both surprised and angry. "Do you realise what you're saying?"

"I do, Svirid. For the sake of science I'd go to the devil himself like a certain German scholar did, though I wouldn't sell him my soul. But the priest—he's got three bookcases full of books."

"I don't care if it's twenty-three. I'm not setting foot in there."

"Well, I went."

"Wouldn't he give them to you?"

"Worse, he just jeered. 'I can offer you only holy books to cleanse your sinful soul.' Well, I don't think he'd talk to a Communist about cleansing his soul."

Without giving Miroshnichenko a chance to reply, the teacher took leave and hurried back to the school.

"Talks your head off and rushes away, leaving you to work it out," muttered Miroshnichenko, scratching his ear.

"He's a good, kind man," Ulyana said.

"He may be all that, but once he starts he won't leave you alone.... Tell me, how's my mother? It's a long time since I've been to see her."

He smiled at the thought of his foster-mother who up to that very day still wondered how she, so small, could have raised such a huge fellow. "To think that my little pillow was large enough for the whole of him to lie on!" she often said.

"Mother's cross with you."

"Why's that?"

"She expected you every holiday, but never a sign of you."

"I'd no time."

"She kept saying, 'Svirid only comes to me when he's in trouble!'"

Miroshnichenko called himself a good many names and made up his mind to go and see his foster-mother the first time he had an hour or two free.

'Well now, Ulyana, what's troubling you?"

"The same as everyone else, Svirid. Will my land be where I thought?" she turned trusting eyes on him.

"Why didn't you come to the meeting yourself?"

"It's not a thing for women. They'd laugh at me."

"Rubbish, Ulyana, who should take the front seat if not you? Your husband has voluntarily signed up to fight Wrangel, and your brother's fighting Petlyura."

"It's no good you talking, Svirid Yakovlevich, I'm not going to any meetings."

"Why not?"

"I'm afraid of talk."

"What sort of talk?"

"You know yourself...."

"No, I don't. Tell me."

"Soon as a woman goes to a meeting, almost before she's time to sit down, tongues start wagging, saying she's no better than she should be." The very thought upset Ulyana and her lips, more accustomed to smiling, trembled.

"That's the kulak gang."

"Maybe, but if enough dirt's thrown some of it is bound to stick. And I don't want dirty words bandied behind my back. You tell me what land I'll get?"

"Three dessiatines of the best, as the wife and sister of volunteers. Come out to the fields tomorrow."

"And along the hillside?"

"A whole dessiatine."

"Thank you, Svirid Yakovlevich." She bowed. "Excuse me for coming so late, but I've only babies and old folks at home."

The young woman turned to the wicket gate, but stood with her hand on it, hesitating.

"Is there something else, Ulyana?"

"There is." She sighed heavily and hung her head. The shadow of her kerchief falling on her face changed its expression. "But I don't rightly know how to say it."

"Just say it in plain words, we're plain folk." Miroshnichenko went up to her. Ulyana raised troubled, tear-filled eyes.

"Maybe it's sinful to say such things to a man," she whispered, swallowing words and tears together. "But who can I talk to? My father-in-law's deaf as a post, just lies up there on the stove-shelf all the time, and my sister keeps nagging at me day in day out to go to a wise woman. I'm in the family way, Svirid Yakovlevich."

"Why do you take it like that? You ought to be proud of it and walk the earth like a queen."

Ulyana stopped him with a gesture and a bitter smile.

"Yes, and if my man's killed out there—then I can just beg my bread."

"Who's going to kill him?" Miroshnichenko shook his fist. "Why, your Denis, he'll drown Wrangel himself in the Black Sea. Don't you know Denis?"

"Yes I know him." She became a little calmer.

"Before the first snow-fall, Denis'll be home again. Wrangel's about finished."

"To listen to you they're all finished—Petlyura and Pilsudski and Wrangel too."

"But that's a sure thing. Certain! D'you know what the international proletariat is?"

Ulyana not only did not know, she could not even pronounce the words, so she asked simply, "Is it on our side or against us?"

"On ours, Ulyana, on ours. So your man'll be here before winter, for sure."

"Really and truly?"

"Of course," Miroshnichenko assured her, and indeed, he believed with his whole heart that it would be so. "And you're blubbering." He dried her eyes with the corner of her kerchief.

"I'm not a baby," she smiled through her tears. "No wonder my sister calls you the smartest liar there is."

"She's a lying bitch herself. She's got Prokop Denisenko hanging round her, mind he doesn't seduce the widow and make her a kulak underling. She ought to drive him off with a stick, the mangy rascal. And if she starts talking about wise women to you again I'll have her in the lock-up. You go on and produce a fine Cossack like Denis or a snub-nosed daughter like yourself. I like girls with turned-up noses best, they always seem gayer, more cheerful, as though the nose invites a smile."

"Just listen to you!" Ulyana cheered up and wiped away the last of her tears.

"It's the honest truth. Some like the ones with big straight noses, but I don't know what they see in them. Give me the snub-nosed ones every time."

"And if someone with a big nose came, you'd say you like that kind best. Wouldn't you?" laughed Ulyana, tying her kerchief.

"Now that's what I don't like, when women start measuring everyone by their own short stick. If I said I like snub noses, then I like them. And you, Ulyana, hurry up with that baby and invite me to the christening. If you don't, I'll come anyway."

He gave her a light slap on the behind, and she, taking it in the right spirit, looked at him over her shoulder, with a gay lift of the eyebrows in parting.

Svirid let out a deep sigh. Lord, he has been bombastic as Kerensky himself. No, it was better to storm and curse with men than to deal with these weeping women. He raised his head and saw the moon peeping down at him through the leaves, laying its silver spell over the village.

On a night like this the only place to be was up at the windmill—so said memories of his distant youth.

He went to the cottage and saw a bowl covered with a leaf standing on the earthen bank. Raising the leaf, he smelt fresh cottage cheese. Ulyana must have brought it for the children. Many a cow from the estate had passed through his hands to find a home with the peasants, but he had felt awkward about taking one for himself, so ever and again poor folks brought him a bowl of sour milk or cottage cheese, or maybe a lump of butter. And then somebody had written in to the district Party committee, saying that the Kombed chairman was collecting a milk tax for himself. Although Svirid knew this came not from the ignorance of the poor but from the malice of the rich, for some days the very thought made him feel sick. He scolded the kind people and asked them not to bring him anything, but it did no good. They even reproached him, said he was too proud.

Svirid softly turned the wooden key and opened the door, but quiet as he was, Nastechka heard him, jumped out of bed and ran to hug her father.

"Gently, gently, or you'll knock the bowl out of my hand." He lifted the child with one arm.

"Ouch, how prickly you are!" Nastechka drew her face away from his stubbly cheek and touched it with one thin finger.

And with that light touch all his cares seemed to drop from his shoulders. His eyes sparkled, but a guilty feeling troubled his heart—how little time he gave to his children. They were growing up like wild grass on the river bank. Sometimes he wondered how Nastechka managed to do everything, how she had learned to be such a capable little housewife. He promised himself that just as soon as the division of the land was completed, he would spend all his time with the children.... Of course, he could marry some widow but up to now he had not felt the faintest stirrings of love, or even of that compassion which he had given his wife.

Nastechka lighted the floating wick in the saucer and carried it to the table, shading it with her hand. The weak flame shone through her rosy fingers, and shadows played on her long, dark-skinned face with her mother's large eyes. It was a wonderful thing, thought her father, how Nature fashioned people: there were few men in the village bigger and stronger than he was, yet his children showed no sign either of his strength or of his blunt features: they both took after their mother. Levko was only six, yet he seldom smiled and often sighed, just as she had done.

Svirid took the light from his daughter and went over to the bed where his little boy lay asleep under his father's coat, legs drawn up. One eyelid was swollen with heat and dust. The black eyelashes, long as a girl's, stood out darkly. There were one or two chicken-pox scars on the dark face. The full rosy lips were open like the petals of a flower.

"Has our Levko had his supper?" asked the father, and felt a lump in his throat.

"Oh, yes," Nastechka answered in her clear little voice; she was busy at the stove. "I made galushki. He tried them and then all of a sudden—there he was, in the bed. 'Why don't you have your supper?' I asked him. 'I'm cold,' he said, so I put your coat round him. 'Now you've got to be father,' I told him. He liked that, he laughed and sat down and had his supper, and then he went to bed with your coat, played a bit and fell asleep."

Svirid kissed the little boy on the temple and then smiling pitifully like a woman, tiptoed away so as not to waken him. Meanwhile, Nastechka was getting things out of the dish-cupboard, laying the table for their simple meal.

"Come and have supper."

She had already mixed the tiny dumplings called galushki with some of the curds and now sat down in the place where her mother always used to sit.

"You're a real housewife," her father praised her as he tasted the dumplings. The child chuckled slyly.

"Whatever I make and however I make it, you always say it's good. Mother must have had a wonderful life with you."

Those simple words stabbed him. For his wife had not had such a very wonderful life with him; she had to take the rough with the smooth, but there was no need for the children to know that, they had enough troubles ahead as it was.

"Aren't my galushki as good as Aunt Dokia's?"

"They're better!"

"Better, indeed—you're just saying it!" Nastechka protested, although in her heart she believed it.

If only Aunt Dokia's Dmitro could try the food she made—! Nastechka smiled at the thought, and then felt ashamed. That spring Dmitro had pulled her out of the river and carried her home, and ever since then she had loved him with all her heart. And what if she did? Older girls could fall in love, so why shouldn't she love the boy who had saved her? And love him she would, and for ever, and she had even embroidered a handkerchief for him, but could not pluck up the courage to give it to him.

"Dad, Levko and I are going to the woods for sloes tomorrow. I know how much you like them pickled."

"For sloes?" He laid down his spoon. "Don't go to the woods, daughter, it's not very safe there yet. We'll manage without sloes this year."

"We won't go far in, only just round the edge." Nastechka swung her legs under the table—the only thing to distinguish her from a real grown-up housewife.

"No, no, Nastechka, don't even think of going there. Too dangerous."

"Then we'll go to the meadows, sloes grow there too, but in the woods there are more berries on them."

"The meadows, yes, that's all right. Well, thank you for the supper. Be a good girl," he added looking affectionately at his little housewife.

"And thank you, too," said Nastechka with the customary polite phrase that closes a meal. She rose first from the table and with sober dignity took the spoons and bowl to the hearth and set to work sluicing them with warm water over the bucket.

"Where are you going to sleep tonight—on the meadow or in the barn?" she asked, pausing for a second in her work.

"Tonight I'm sleeping at home."

"Oh no, better not," she protested, alarmed. "We'll manage alone somehow, but you go to the barn. You never know. Why, Danko's boy was talking yesterday, he said we'd be orphans yet. He must have heard something at home."

Miroshnichenko smiled, although he did not feel so very gay.

"Don't worry, little one, all our fears'll soon vanish like mist. And then I'll send you to town to study, and get you a fur coat."

"And I'll learn to be a teacher?" she asked her father for the hundredth time. She could dream of nothing better than

to be a teacher, and read all the books she wanted, and teach children the things they ought to know.

"Of course. Why, you're a bit of a teacher already."

"You're just poking fun at me." The child wiped her hands on a homespun towel and went up to her father.

"Who taught Levko to read, then?"

"But that's Levko. He's so quick and clever, he can count to a thousand already."

Svirid drew his daughter close to him and stroked her hair with his huge hand. And Nastechka hung her head like a child who has been naughty. His wife used to hang her head like that. Even this she had got from her mother.

XII

Heavy fringed shawls draped the windows like huge black birds with outspread wings, letting no light penetrate.

The table bore a metal lamp, a narrow bottle filled with grey home-distilled liquor, and thickly cut chunks of pork fat—it was obviously no woman's hand that had served the meal. And one might have thought it was poison the guests were drinking rather than liquor, for not a smile could it bring to their morose faces.

The only smile in Sozonenko's room was on the portrait of the last Russian tsar. With sly, knowing eyes, he looked somewhere beyond Denisenko's back, paying no attention to the cold gaze of the white-bosomed, bejewelled tsarina. That was how he had looked at you from paper money. Now the tsar was under the sod but his money still lived, although most of the peasants were reluctant to take it; they preferred gold and silver, or tsarist bank-notes of large denominations.

Safron Varchuk looked thoughtfully at the tsar and wondered whether to be angry or sorry he had gone. As for the tsarina, he had long been calling her the filthiest names because of Rasputin, but he couldn't bring himself to curse the tsar, and then he hadn't enough anger for that. After all, it was in the tsar's time he had got a farm, got land, put money by for a rainy day and become Safron Andreyevich to the village instead of plain Safron. If the tsar had remained, he would some day have become one of the landed gentry, but all they called him now was a "Stolypin nobleman". No, he never imagined such troubles could descend on his clever head. Once upon a time it had been easy to say "if people are poor it's because they have no sense". Now even the richest

man might find himself a fool. And despondency mingled in his heart with rage.

Larion Denisenko, warmed by the spirit, was storming as he sat at the table. He turned his shaggy head from side to side and shouted: "The world is coming to an end, because as soon as they take the land away from us, everyone will starve!"

His coarse voice was strained until it cracked into a bleat like a goat's, but this amused Sichkar alone, for he seemed to take the news of the world's end much more cheerfully than the others.

Even at this moment lustful thoughts of Larion's wife Nastya came most unsuitably into his mind. She may look at everyone with incurably spiteful eyes, but for all that she had a taste not only for the shaggy-headed. And he laughed inwardly at Larion, who had no idea about his wife's goings on with other men. She was not even true to her lovers. Before Sichkar's eyes rose a picture of the slender, supple Nastya, with breasts firm and round as apples, her passionate, depleting kisses, her shameless language in quarrels and in love-making. He liked that too—a woman with fire, pep and greedy eagerness is much more fun than one of those meek and mild ninnies.

He turned a stealthy look on the others—had anybody noticed the lecherous gleam in his eye, not very fitting for the present occasion? He sighed and gave his attention to what was happening around him. His gaze came to rest on the despondent face of Suprun Fesyuk, hollow-eyed, topped by hair hanging like over-ripe corn. The folds round his mouth had lost their haughtiness and spoke only of trouble. He held his long, pointed chin in his hand, thinking his tormenting thoughts.

Sichkar had no love for Fesyuk. Although the man had climbed up and accumulated much land, he always wanted to deal fairly and honestly. Well, live that way yourself if you want, it's your own business after all, but don't stick your nose into other folks' affairs. Fesyuk, however, had more than once set them on to Sichkar for his timbre-stealing. He thought he'd catch him napping; that fool never guessed what a kick you got out of a really clever theft. It wasn't only the money, it was the thrill of pitting your wits against others and getting away with it. A pity, of course, that he himself had landed in jail, but it wasn't his wits had let him down, it was his vanity, rather. Oh well, it wouldn't be long now. Again his eyes came to rest on Denisenko and he thought of

Nastya. How they could draw a man, those fiendishly spiteful eyes of hers!

Denisenko's roar and bleat was followed by the buzzing of Danilo Zayatchuk. Only the lower part of his coarsely modelled head grew hair, from the temples upward he was bald as an egg.

"Soviet power, call it that, lives on the grain *we* produce. What will it live on if our land goes to those rabble who can't even feed themselves on it because they're starving? What does a government like that mean? It means—take everything, give nothing back. Commune indeed—give to some, take from others. Now what I say is this, we've seen governments come and governments go, we'll see this one go too, because there's those abroad who'll never give the Ukraine to the Miroshnichenkos. The Ukraine is a coveted prize for those abroad, and they are as wealthy relations to us. That's my mind."

"They're taking our land tomorrow, and he'll go on till morning about his precious friends abroad," Sozonenko frowned. "You'd better tell us, good man, what are we to do now."

"Do? Take axes and defend our land, or they'll keep cutting here and cutting there till there's not a clod left us. Only one thing to do—fight, slash down anyone who comes near."

"Folly from a fool," Yakov Danko burst out. "Beard like high harvest, but head not even ploughed, let alone sown." He tapped his forehead with his finger. "Slash one down and we'll have the whole village to reckon with."

"All the same we have to fight. What else can we do?" Zayatchuk brought his hairy hand down on the table and turned to Danko. "You can do as you like but I've got an axe ready. And the first head it'll go into will be Miroshnichenko's right up to the haft."

"Now, that sounds more like sense." Danko nodded his own head with its thick wavy hair, but Fesyuk frowned. "If you want to strike, then strike at the heart. What good is it to slash down someone like Polikarp Sergienko?"

"We'll only make him a Soviet martyr, they'll carry him to the graveyard with music and flags, and give him a funeral he'd never have dreamed of," Safron Varchuk remarked and said no more, for he always preferred to keep out of argument.

Sozonenko picked up the bottle and shook it. Sichkar watched the healing sediment, "tears of Christ", rising

mistily from the bottom. Made you clear your throat, the way it touched the spot.

They drank in silence and reached out fat hands for the fat pork. All but Fesyuk. What effort he had put into getting his few dessiatines of land! Others had inherited theirs, or lied and cheated for it, sold themselves to the devil for it, but he had relied only on the strength of his two hands and his pride; he had not sold his soul to anybody, but nearly all his strength to the Peasants' Bank. And those with whom he was now drinking jeered at him to his face and behind his back. Driving away dark visions he shook his sheaf of hair and gripped his chin in his fist.

Zayatchuk once more began his talk about "those abroad" and about the rich relatives who ought to help "poor Petlyura".

"There's nothing poor about him, he's just a swindler!" shouted Denisenko to the amusement of Ivan Sichkar.

When Petlyura's Minister of Finance Martos issued the decree that all gold, silver and notes be exchanged for copper coinage, Denisenko was one of the first to take his gold and notes to the bank at Kamenets-Podolsk. A government was a government to him, something to be obeyed. But he brought no copper money back, only a receipt. Later on some of the other rich men who had been plundered in this way shot themselves, and he himself went to his barn and made a noose of reins. His wife and family had a hard job getting him down and reviving him.

A dog barked in the yard and all listened alertly, their eyes on the draped window. But it was probably only barking at the moon, for it quietened again.

"It's getting late," remarked Safron Varchuk to nobody in particular, hoping they'd get a move on with their deciding. He glanced over the others' heads at the corner where the painted faces on the icons looked down and listened in silence to what was said.

"What are we to do, good people?" Sozonenko burst out. "Unless we take a sin on our souls we'll be crushed like mice. And perhaps the sin won't have to be a very big one. The village is frightened, and no one knows what may happen in a few days. But one thing we must do—get rid of Miroshnichenko."

"And Stepan Kushnir," added Danko. "He's worse than Miroshnichenko, more malignant!"

"And leave Timofi Goritsvit to breed more of the same kind?" asked Sichkar. "We'll deal with that holy trinity; and

then nobody'll dare set foot on our land." An unhealthy flush spread over the spots on his plump cheeks, and his jaw hung open in a spiteful grimace.

The others listened to Sichkar in silence, hardly breathing. He flaunted his boldness, a thing the cautious Safron Varchuk never would have done, delighted though he was with the resolute determination of Sichkar.

"No sense in sharpening the hoe too long. We've got to chop out the trouble by the roots at once. The question is how. Well, I'll take on Miroshnichenko myself. That's the simplest way. And you take Goritsvit and Kushnir. Settle it among yourselves who'll do the job. And before morning comes our good friends will recoil from touching our land, they'll find it a bit too hot for their feet."

"You're right!" Yakov Danko brought his fist down on the table. "Denisenko and I'll take Goritsvit. I'd take Kushnir, but people saw us fighting in the street. God be with us and assist us." He glanced at the picture of Christ, bowed to it and crossed himself with a sinking heart.

Hardly had Danko finished his prayer when Suprun Fesyuk rose heavily from the bench, the folds round his mouth trembling.

"Do as you please, but don't drag me into it. This thing is beyond my ken. I've handled plough-handles, but I won't touch a gun. The world is not run by wickedness. Good-bye."

Safron Varchuk, the first to recover himself, rushed to him.

"Now this is just rank foolishness, Suprun," he cried, snatching Fesyuk's hat out of his hands. "People will say all sorts of things when they've had a bit to drink and they're cut to the heart. It's words, nothing more. Now, which of us would kill a poor man? D'you think we've no God in our hearts and children in our homes?" Safron's dark, wedge-like face was pale with excitement and repressed rage. A fine person to bring into honest company! Now he could ruin them all.

Sozonenko winked significantly at the others and all but the furious Sichkar raised a fuss around Fesyuk. But to no avail.

"You can say and do what you like, but I'm going home." His eyes held pain and alarm, he could not look at the men about him.

"All right, let him go to the devil if he wants," shouted Sichkar, unable to restrain himself any longer. "He's not worth bothering about."

"You needn't worry, I shan't say anything, but I can't stop here any more." Protesting, justifying himself, Fesyuk made his way with unsteady steps to the door. Sozonenko and Sichkar followed him, agitated and alarmed. A heavy, ominous silence fell in the room.

The first to speak after the wicket gate slammed was Safron Varchuk.

"All our talking and planning has been a waste of breath," he said bitterly. "We've got to think of something else. What the devil brought him here? And what are we going to do now?"

But no one answered the question.

At the gate Sozonenko said good night to Fesyuk, but Sichkar offered to go part of the way with him. This offer gave Fesyuk no particular joy, but he said nothing. They walked in silence, with trailing shadows that beat their heads against the fences.

"Well, Fesyuk, so you're going to let the land you've earned with your sweat go without lifting a hand?" Sichkar asked raising his head and glaring at Fesyuk.

"Nothing else to do. All rule comes from God," Fesyuk answered without looking at his companion.

"You're just a silly oaf! How can this government come from God when it says there isn't any God?" Sichkar's big jaw jutted suddenly. "It's no sin to overthrow that kind."

"Why did you go to jail, then? You could have taken to the woods with the bandits!" Fesyuk snapped angrily, but lowered his voice at once. "Get away from me, don't stir up the bitterness in my soul, for it's near leaving my body as it is."

"All right, hold your soul tight with both hands while the soil slips through your fingers. But mind, not a word," Sichkar added warningly and turned down a lane without any further leave-taking. Should he return to the council at Sozonenko's, or pay a quick visit to Nastya?

By Denisenko's house Sichkar whistled—a familiar whistle that brought a dog whining from the barn. He still hesitated—was this the night to think of women? But after all, why not? We live only once! He climbed over into the yard, crept to the side window and tapped gently on the frame.

There was a sigh and a rustle inside, then the latch rattled and Nastya appeared in a skirt thrown over her shift, stretching and yawning. Sichkar caught her to him and bored

into her mouth with his, while his left hand with spread fingers clutched her small breast.

"You're crazy," sighed Nastya, twisting her slender form. "Somebody'll see!"

"There's no one about at this time of night."

Her lips made his head swim more than the liquor he had drunk, and through her shift he could feel the trembling of her hot, slim hips.

Nastya examined the street and vegetable plots with a long, slow look, then with a gasp she gripped him in a close embrace.

XIII

Suprun Fesyuk, always busy, had little time for the beauties of nature, but even he knew the village looked its best under the moon. The sun was kind to water, trees, flowers and pretty girls, but it was ruthless to the blind sagging huts and the manure-littered yards, making an ostentatious display of them. The moon took pity on the dwellers in these huts, it made such a play with light and shadow, laid such enchantment on some shanty where storks had made their nest on the roof, that the belief it gave in human happiness was greater than the whole sum of that happiness throughout the world.

On this night, however, the village seemed a fearsome place—silent as a forsaken graveyard, with the moon shedding a cold, sickly light upon it. In this light Suprun moved like a sleep-walker, staring at the ground, thinking of the soil. He had given all his youth to the land, drop by drop, gathering it to him, furrow by furrow, to gladden him and raise him in his own eyes.

How hard it had been at the beginning, this effort for land! He had gone anywhere and everywhere to earn money, he had gone to Taurida and the Crimea and Odessa and Moldavia. And then fortune came to him through Olessya, a quiet girl, robust and rounded like an acorn.

He met her at a church festival in a neighbouring village. All day long people drank and made merry by the church, and all day long he hung about the girl, trying to attract her attention. When evening came and a slender young moon appeared above the poplars, Suprun walked home with her to her cottage by the common where the geese fed. But from the cottage there came such a stench that he stared at the girl in amazement and she hung her head, blushing.

"My father's a tanner," she explained, almost weeping.

"That's excellent," cried Suprun gaily. "Looks as if I'm in luck. I need a pair of boot soles. Maybe your father could help me out?" He looked down lovingly now at her embarrassed face.

"I expect he can." The girl's blush brightened; she had a good idea what was in the mind of this deep-eyed lad with the shock of hair like ripe corn.

Suprun almost choked inside the cottage while old Omelyan displayed the various kinds of leather to him. The tanning vats and lime-pit were right there, on the floor. How on earth could people live in a place like that, and sleep on the floor, too? One night there, he felt, would turn his own head into a vat. But Olessya's family took no notice of the stench of raw and tanned hides and tanning liquid.

Suprun bought half a good hide without bargaining, but said he would come another time to fetch it, since it was not seemly to return from a church festival with purchases. He became a frequent guest at the tanner's. In time he got used to the smell and even learned to treat the hides of oxen, horses and goats.

In tanning everything depends on eye and nose, and Suprun seemed to have a real gift for it. His black and white Russian leather was smooth and even, with no patches, and his Morocco had a tender bloom—cobblers and merchants snapped it up at once when they saw it at the fair.

As soon as he had mastered the fine points of the old man's trade, Suprun asked for his daughter, had a quiet wedding, and became the best tanner in the district. He used up almost all he had saved to build a tannery big enough to handle thirty or forty hides at a time; with his own hands he made a tight wooden lining for the soaking pit at the end of the vegetable plot, made a lime-pit, vats and beater, and for tools he used what Olessya brought from her home. Suprun called it her dowry in fun, and set to work with all the confidence of youth.

Those were the days of high hopes. He did not sell either his soul or his hide to the devil; he himself stripped the hides from carcases or bought them on credit, and gradually established himself, in the stench of cows' blood and tanning liquid, in the dirt of scrapings, wool and lime.

He was an excellent tanner but he loathed the work with the whole of his land tiller's heart. It was not the dirt of the tannery but the gold and green of the fields that he saw before him as he prepared coloured leather for the market.

And this leather brought him first bread, then something to put on it, and finally land as well. Now he was in the fields day and night, eating his meals there too in the summertime. He gave his wife no more rest than he gave himself. She bore his son under a hay-cock, out on the meadow; she bit through the navel cord as she lay bleeding, while he stood lost and helpless by the cart. Then he loaded the cart—after all, there was no sense in making a journey with it empty, fastened down the load and carefully laid his wife on top. This was the first time he had ever picked her up in his arms.

It was only now that Suprun began to see how hard he had been on himself, and how hard he had been on his wife, working her far beyond her strength. He did it even when he had men and women labourers, because by that time they were caught up in the work of a big farm like spokes in a turning wheel. Now somebody had smashed that wheel with a single blow, and hub, spokes and rim flew in all directions. And the land which year by year he had put together out of Russian leather and Morocco was to pass into other hands. He wept for it, great tears that fell like stones on his heart.

Only God knew what losing his wealth meant to him. But he would not take up an axe. His hands were made for work, not for murder. Only—why had they listed him with Varchuk and Sozonenko, Denisenko and Sichkar? In past years, when he was just getting on his feet, these men had jeered at him, called him the skinner. But he had skinned animals, while they skinned men; he had fed his labourers with bread, they gave theirs only sweat and tears; he had always kept his word, to the big merchant and the poor labourer. Why, then, couldn't the new authorities talk to him like to a decent man? Wrote your name down on a piece of paper—and that was the end of you.

He came to his spacious house and it looked strange to him. He opened the gate and Olessya and Ignat rose to meet him from the dark logs where they had been sitting. The lad was already as tall as his mother. The three met silently in the middle of the yard. Ignat broke the silence without raising his head.

"What did they decide over there?"

"They didn't decide anything," Suprun answered, wondering how the boy knew he had been at Sozonenko's.

"Scared?" Ignat raised a head that looked too heavy for a lad. A wicked smile flickered on his mouth and he covered it with his hand.

"Quiet!" Suprun looked about him. "I left them still at it."

"You ought to have stayed. The house wouldn't run away if you came an hour later."

Ignat once more raised his head with a challenging look. His eyes, deep-set like his father's, were sharp and dark with spiteful obstinacy. But Suprun saw only the darkness, he could not read his son's eyes.

"Where did you learn to talk to your father like that?" he said frowning.

This, however, did not stop the youth, whose mouth was set in spite that seemed beyond his years.

"Never mind where I learned it, at least I know enough not to run away from people at a time like this."

"Do you know those people are plotting murder?" asked Suprun, restraining his anger with difficulty.

"One may even kill for the land," said the youth, evidently repeating words heard somewhere. "The land is sacred."

Suprun was taken aback for a moment, and then he slapped Ignat's face hard.

"Hold your tongue, you young whelp! How do you know what the land's worth and whether it's dearer than human blood? First learn how to earn it, break your back over it. Is it Karp Varchuk who's been teaching you that filth? I'll have it out of you if I have to burn it out!"

He brandished his other fist, but his silent Olessya hung on to his arm.

"Don't, Suprun. Don't take any notice, dear. He's only a silly child that repeats everything he hears...."

The "child", however, spat blood on to his hand, looked at it and turned a venomous glance at his father. Then he swung round, went to the barn, muttering under his breath, and slammed the door.

How could he have fathered such a son? Who had planted such evil in him? It was not his own stubborn, hard-working nature the boy had, nor yet Olessya's gentle, affectionate ways. Yes, the children who lived in wealth from the cradle were always the hardest to bring up! They did not know the taste of bread moistened with sweat.

"A fine son we've raised." Suprun covered his eyes with a hand. "The kind that's a burden to the earth."

"That rascal of Varchuk's was with him all day, he'd turn a saint into as big a scamp as himself." And Olessya led her husband to the cottage—gently, persuasively, as though he himself were a child.

At the door Suprun turned and went into the old tannery. During the war years he had sometimes taken up his former

trade again, tanning leather to make boots and shoes for his family and his neighbours, or harness for the horses. The moon peeped into the tannery, picking out the lime-pit, the vats, the sack of ash and a raw hide hanging up.

Suprun and his wife sat down on the home-made bench, and she nestled close to him as she had on that day when they first started out, full of hope, with their tannery. It had been the dawn of their lives—not yet bright, but promising. And now night looked into their eyes, eyes dulled with sorrow and fear of the unknown. Suprun laid his hand firmly on Olessya's shoulder. The wife God had sent him was really like a ray of sunshine.

"What shall we do now, Olessya?" he asked. It was the first time he had ever come to her for advice. And for the first time she, his quiet shadow, his shy smile, his melancholy musings, offered him consolation.

"We once lived on two dessiatines, Suprun, and we lived on five, then we got ten, and then more than twenty. But we're just like other people, after all. Why shouldn't we be able to live on the portion allotted us?"

"Who wants an allotted portion? I wanted you to live like a princess in your old age."

"Perhaps we can do without that," she said with a sad smile, wondering if she should best leave her short-tempered husband alone. For he had taught his wife silence and she had been an apt pupil. "I've been a princess once, that'll have to do for me."

"When was that?" he asked, at a loss.

"When you were a prince—at our wedding. Do you remember? The sky frowned and then smiled, and a shower of rain came down like the juice squeezed out of sunshine."

"Yes, the sun was shining that day."

Suprun looked up at the moon. How long ago that had been. He remembered the yard decorated for the wedding, the ceremony, and the friends of the bridegroom and of the bride. And a mist clouded his eyes.

"I can't, Olessya. I can't live without land of my own, I've got it in my blood. Remember how we struggled for it!"

"Yes, we did, Suprun. And who knows, maybe we were wrong. Maybe our children or grandchildren will some day laugh at the hard, and perhaps foolish life we lived—always seeking wealth."

He stared in astonishment at his quiet wife. Was it really Olessya speaking? When had she learned to think like this?

"The only ones who'll laugh will be those who don't understand what the land means, who don't care whether ears of grain wave over it or weeds trip up your feet. And this new government—does it understand the land?"

"It must, since it wants every peasant to have his share." Again his wife had come out with something unexpected.

"To divide up the land—that's only half the job. But to understand the land—that's something else." Suprun thought a moment and rose suddenly. "I'll go to Miroshnichenko, I'll ask him whether this new government understands the land or not."

"Maybe tomorrow would do?" Olessya rose too, and touched his shoulder. "Why waken people in the middle of the night?"

"No, I'll go at once. I can't wait, I can't. It's like a fever inside me."

Olessya knew it was useless to argue. Silent as a shadow, she walked with him as far as the street and then stood for a long time watching sadly as he strode away into the night. It was not an easy life she had had with him: she had been more like a labourer than the mistress of a farm. Striving for that accursed wealth had made him less handsome in face and spirit, had made him quarrel with men and with God—with God because there were too many holy days. Still, he had never once struck her, never gone to other women and never abused her in front of others, only praised her. For a woman, this could be counted as happiness.

Suprun had no hesitation in awakening Svirid Miroshnichenko. When he came out, Suprun asked him to sit down a while on the earthen bank with its tracery of shadows from the cherry-tree.

"It's a long time since you've been here, Suprun." Miroshnichenko glanced at the tormented face of his visitor.

"Not very fitting for a kulak to visit a member of the Party," Suprun answered, quite forgetting to ask whether the new government understood the land, for his own pain was closer. "Although when you come to think of it, I wasn't a kulak always."

"No, not always," Miroshnichenko agreed. "I remember very well how you and Olessya worked on your first lot of leather. In those days I often used to visit you too, and even learned a bit of your trade."

"And do you remember how our fingers burned and the skin came off when we'd washed the wool after it had been in lime?"

"I remember that too, Suprun. Damnable work."

"Not every tanner would do a job like that. Well, and now you lump me in together with Varchuk and Sichkar. What am I supposed to do after that—take a gun and kill you?"

"That's as your own conscience tells you, Suprun," Miroshnichenko answered calmly. "If the years of wealth have turned it into a piece of muck, then take your gun and go out killing. Great wealth always either begins or ends with that."

In a flash Suprun's mind ran over a dozen wealthy men he knew in the district and he realised how right Miroshnichenko was.

"But my wealth, Svirid, I gained honestly, with bloody blisters on my hands, it did not start with villainy, and it won't end with it either. Didn't I earn my land honestly?"

"Not all of it, Suprun."

"What d'you mean?"

"The part you worked for yourself is honestly yours, clean as the sunshine. But the part that labourers earned for you—I can't call it that, I'm sorry. Those fields glisten with the sweat of others."

"But I gave the labourers work, I gave them bread."

"And does Varchuk say anything different? No, just the same. In that, you're together."

"And our fate's in one and the same list too?"

"You may be on the same list," said Miroshnichenko, beginning to understand what was worrying Suprun. "But people don't think the same of you as of Varchuk."

"Thank you for that much, at least, Svirid. You're a member of the Party, if you say so I can believe it, for you don't mince matters with our sort. Well, what am I to do next? Are you taking my land?"

"Yes."

"You're a terrible man, Svirid, you say everything straight out. You could lie when you're talking to a man—for comfort."

"Lies are certainly a comfort, Suprun," said Miroshnichenko after a moment's pause, thinking of falsehood on a world scale, falsehood which had woven a net over the whole globe, falsehood disguised as truth. It would not be easy for people to cleanse their minds of it, to sweep clean the flagstones of cathedrals worn by many knees. "Perhaps I'll comfort you with some truth?"

"Truth may kill a man too, if there's too much of it."

"In a revolution there's nothing that comes a little at a time, except bread."

"Thank you, thank you very much, you've given me comfort all right!" The lines round Suprun's mouth trembled. "And d'you know how much easier I can breathe now? It's as if a man had a noose round his neck, choking him so his eyes were popping out, and then they loosened it a mite—here, take a mouthful of air, poor man. Fine comfort, eh?"

"You're talking rot," Miroshnichenko frowned. "As I see it, it's you who've put a noose tight round your neck with that wealth of yours. What has it given you? Land and money. And what has it taken away? It's taken your happy laughter, it's spoiled your kindly heart and exhausted your generosity. In the old days you often treated me to apples you'd bought at the market with hard-earned coppers. But as soon as you'd got a big orchard of your own, you put savage dogs there to keep folks away from you and yourself loaded cartridges with salt and bristles. And who for? For an enemy? No, for the backs and buttocks of children, you grudged an apple to a child; the apple you didn't have to buy, the apple growing on your tree meant more to you than a child's blood. When you brought apples from the market you were a human being; tell me then—why was it that when you'd your own you turned into a snarling dog? That's what your wealth did to you. I've no ill feeling towards you. I'm sorry for you. You're a wise man and a proud one. We shall leave you ten whole dessiatines of your former land. Isn't that more than enough to feed three? Or maybe like the tsarina you don't want to eat plain galushki, you want golden ones? Climb out of your noose, live just a little while not for wealth but for your family, buy Olessya those Gipsy ear-rings at last. I remember she begged for them with tears twenty years ago, and you got angry and called her names. And you haven't bought them to this day."

"You've got those ear-rings on the brain. If I were you, I'd pay less attention to women's whims, or you'll be getting like a woman yourself.... I've heard you out, Svirid. Everyone says you've a glib tongue. With this new government you won't be twisting the tails of oxen, you'll be a big man. And that may be just as bad for you as wealth for me. Tell me one more thing: tomorrow you slice off some of my land, and how do I know you won't want to do the same again the day after?"

"If you hire labourers anything may happen, I won't make promises."

"In other words, Svirid, I've got to start again from the beginning?"

"If you can."

"That's a true word," Suprun nodded and wondered about Miroshnichenko—what do you live for? You're in the Party, of course, but all the same you ought to have taken a cow from the estate, not just some dahlias. You won't go to Heaven anyway, you're a Communist!

They parted each taking away his heavy tangle of thoughts and feelings, not knowing how they would meet the next day, or what turn their lives would take.

In a man's mind the great and small always jostle one another, his thoughts are like newly threshed wheat, the good grain mingled with the chaff. This was how it was now with Suprun Fesyuk. He walked along the road thinking so hard of the land and a hundred other things, that his head ached. Suddenly he saw a twinkling light in the window of the widow Fedora Kutsaya, a notorious moonshiner, and turned into her yard. She came to the door at once, startled by his knock.

"Who's that?" she asked from the doorway.

"Let me in, Fedora. It's Suprun."

"Oh, mercy, is it really you?" she cried gladly, laughing as she flung the door wide. "I never expected such a guest. Thank you for honouring us...."

Fedora fussed about him and led him inside, her full gathered skirt catching his legs. Kuzma Vasilenko was sitting at the table, stupidly drunk with liquor bought with the money given him by the kulaks. He, too, was surprised to see Suprun. He wanted to rise, wanted to say something witty, but neither legs nor tongue would obey him.

"He's got a full load on," said Fedora with a gesture towards Vasilenko. "What kind'll you have?" A smile played in her quick eyes and full lips.

"Well, it's not *that* I've come for, exactly, only let it be just between ourselves," Suprun stammered.

Fedora pricked up her ears, smiled secretively and crossed her arms on her stomach. The swell of her white breasts showed through the opening of her shift.

"Now, what could such a welcome guest want, I wonder?" she said, lowering her already husky voice, and only now did Suprun realise how devilishly attractive her red cheeks were and how seductive the smile on her full lips.

"I want a pair of ear-rings, Fedora," he said, twiddling a finger round his ear for greater clearness. "People bring you

all sorts of things, I know. Maybe you've got trinkets like that?"

"Do you want golden ones?" Fedora's voice was business-like and she extinguished the glint in her eyes.

"What else? Gold, of course," said Suprun, just as though he never bought any other kind.

"I'll try to find you some. To mark your first visit."

She ran into another room, locked the door and started banging at something.

The house door creaked. Suprun started—he was not particularly anxious for anybody to find him visiting Fedora Kutsaya. A barefoot boy appeared. His elongated, melon-shaped head was topped by a tattered old cap with hair that badly needed cutting straggling out from under it. He saw Vasilenko at the table and went straight up to him.

"It's time to come home, Father. Mother said she'd come here after you with the rolling pin if you didn't."

"Ah, it's you, is it, Klim?" Vasilenko's first reaction was surprise, next he picked up the bottle with an unsteady hand and poured out a glassful of liquor. "Drink up, son, it's good stuff."

Klim took the glass, looked at it and his face became serious, staid, like that of a real tiller. Then he drained the glass at one breath and set it down, his small mouth twisted with the bite of the spirit.

This was too much even for Suprun.

"Klim, for fear of God if you've no fear of man. Who's ever heard of a kid like you taking all that at a go?" And he pointed at the empty glass.

"I'm used to it," laughed Klim, not at all put out, and reached out a thin hand for a piece of bread.

It was none of Suprun's business to teach someone else's son, especially in his father's presence, but still he expostulated.

"You'll come to no good, lad, if you follow your father's ways. It's nothing good he's teaching you. You listen to your mother, she's a martyr."

"But I shan't be with father much longer, I'm going to town to take a course," Klim answered casually, and stuffed his mouth with bread.

Suprun knew that Klim and Olexandr's son Yurko had been the best scholars at the village school, and were both set on continuing with their education. Didn't want to wallow in manure, if you please! Well, Yurko might make good, but

what about Klim who already shirked work and liked a drink too well?

Fedora reappeared—her manner very grand, gave Klim an indifferent glance and opened her clenched hand to show Suprun what it held. There were two pairs of Gipsy ear-rings—one black with a sparkle, the other glowing like a chip of the sun.

"I'll take those," Suprun picked up the better pair from Fedora's hand. "How much are they?"

"I don't take money, only grain."

"Much?"

"A sack of wheat."

Suprun's brows drew together—wasn't the woman asking too much? But his hesitation lasted only an instant.

"I'll bring the grain tomorrow. Can I take these trinkets now, or won't you trust me?"

"There's no one in the village wouldn't trust you. There! I'm actually sorry to part with them," she sighed, accompanying him respectfully to the door.

Once outside, Suprun opened his hand and gazed at the hoop-shaped ear-rings, suddenly doubting the wisdom of buying them. That doubt kept flickering through his slow-moving, heavy thoughts all the way home. He was not at all surprised to find Olessya still sitting on the log beside the barn, elbows on knees, chin cupped in her hands. Hearing his footsteps she rose quickly and went to meet him. Casually he pressed the ornaments into her hands—twenty years late.

"What's that?" she asked, opening her fingers, and gasped. But it was not simply a pair of ear-rings she saw, it was her lost youth, and tears welled in her eyes and hung on her girlishly thick eyelashes.

"Silly woman," said Suprun, shaking his head reprovingly; tears did not soften him, they angered him. "You cried when I wouldn't buy you the ear-rings, and now I've bought them you cry again."

He did not notice Ignat creeping up behind him. The lad saw the ear-rings and nodded approvingly.

"Now that's good sense. This is just the time to buy them. Gold's always gold, whatever government comes."

XIV

Levko wakened, opened his eyes and a chill of alarm raised gooseflesh—there was no Nastechka beside him. His heart beat hard in the silence, driving fear through his body.

The boy raised his head and looked at the window; pots of geraniums stood on the sill, but the prankish moon had tilted the window over, dropped it on the sacking that covered the floor, and there, too, lay shadow-flowers. Levko was afraid to look at the moon, for he knew that if you did, you became a sleepwalker and wandered about the village on moonlight nights without knowing what you were doing; you could even walk about safely on the roof of the bell-tower—so long as nobody wakened you; but if anyone called out, then you fell down and were broken to pieces on the ground.

The last mists of sleep left Levko's eyes, making way for more mind-pictures than any pair of eyes could ever encompass at one time. But between himself and the distant bell-tower, the fields and meadows, mists of fear drifted—for you never knew what was hiding behind the door, on top of the stove, under the table or under the benches. What if the water pail started dancing or the shaggy house-goblin suddenly jumped out of a pot?

But it was after third cock-crow! That thought was a great relief and the little boy ventured a quick peep at the moon. It was wearing a ring of gold like fox fur—that meant rain. But then why was the cricket chirping? For that meant fine weather.

From the signs and omens which he heard daily from his elders, the child's thoughts drifted away.... He would grow wings and fly right over the village, while all the kids would look up and envy him, all the boys and girls gathering sorrel leaves on the common or watching their flocks of grey geese. And Rascal the gander would stretch out his neck like a snake but he would not hiss, only flap his wings. Goosey-goosey gander, don't you wish you were like Levko? You can't fly any higher than the willowtops, but Levko flies under the very clouds where the rainbow lives, and the thunder, and the lightning....

Thunder and lightning frightened him but he loved the rainbow. He always thought of it as a girl with coloured ribbons streaming from her flower ring, like a bride. Spring was a girl too, but Rainbow lived in the clouds while Spring walked the earth. You might even see her on the meadow when the willows were putting out their leaves, or in the fields by the brook when she was getting water, or on the river, in a silver boat with golden oars. He and Nastechka had often gone to the river, the meadow and the fields to meet Spring. But he had never really seen her, not properly. While he was looking one way, Nastechka would

point somewhere else and say, "Look—she's just passed over there!"

He would look quickly at the weeping willow with its thick drooping branches covered with tender green and see something stir the slender twigs and disappear. Again he had just missed seeing her! He could have cried with disappointment. But Nastechka would pull his sleeve and point to the crown of the bushy willows, bowing and straightening in the wind.

"Look, look! She just peeped out! In a green skirt and a crown.... Didn't you see her? Oh, you slowcoach!"

Again he had not seen either green skirt or crown. And so brother and sister would run in the wake of Spring, splashes of bright sunshine before their eyes, the silky golden heads of buttercups beneath their feet, and thin-legged grey wagtails like fragments of the sky rising in flight before them. But where was Spring? They would run a little farther and all of a sudden Nastechka would stop, nod, point.

"Lo-o-ook, over there—she just ran by the lake!"

One day they ran like this to the little lake, round as a saucer. The curly-headed willows on its bank had taken hands like children for their green roundelay, and right by the edge swam a big grass-snake, as thick as a rope, its smooth head raised. The children squatted down with a gasp of astonishment and gazed fearfully at the two nasty-looking yellow patches on its head and the silent ripple it left.

Quite close to them the snake rose from the water, twisted its head round, then crawled out on to a twig. Its weight pulled the poor twig right down to the water where it lay trembling while the snake, undulating smoothly, crawled right up the tree. And all at once the children saw it was making its way to a tiny nest.

"Oh, oh, that's a nightingale's nest!" cried Nastechka and looked about her. Filled with sudden courage, the children ran to find sticks. The snake was just arching over the fledglings when Nastechka and Levko set on it from both sides. The snake flattened out and— splash!—it was in the lake again! The little girl, furious, gave it another whack for good measure, right there in the water, then burst into tears.

"The horrid, nasty thing, wanted to eat up the baby nightingales!"

"But we gave it a good beating, it won't forget that in a hurry!" Levko comforted her.

Nastechka, however, remembered that snake for a long, long time. She reminded her little brother that all their

mother's family had been called nightingales; Mother had often called them her little nightingale fledglings, and said one day they would sing like Grandad. They knew that once some very wise and clever people had come from a big city to hear Grandad, and he had sung them sad songs, but the gay ones he had not wanted to sing. Now Grandad never sang, he only coughed and laughed till he had to wipe his eyes when Nastechka danced and sang:

I hired myself a zither,
I danced till morning sun,
Hey!
I danced till morning sun,
Heels rattling like a drum,
Hey!

"Real neat and nimble," Grandad said with satisfaction to his sister, Granny Olena. "And that 'Hey!' she thought up herself to help the dance. Aye, she's got dancing in her bones, that she has!"

But Granny had no use for either song or dance. All she did was scold both grandfather and granddaughter.

"The old 'un's as bad as the young, sinners both of them." The only kind of song she recognised was psalms; to her the old man's singing and tobacco smoking were hell and damnation.

While Levko remembered all this and dreamed how he would see Spring for sure next year, dawn broke beyond the neighbouring vegetable patches. Blue as spring water it flowed round Karpets' barn, then little white clouds came drifting like a flock of sleepy geese. The fine dahlias his father had brought from the manor garden looked in at the window with dew-wet heads; the tips of their petals glowed crimson, but shadows still lay in their hearts. Light came into the room. Now Levko could see Nastechka asleep on a bench and his father's large feet sticking out over the end of the sleeping berth.

Levko was just about to climb up to his father when he heard the distant sound of a motor. He became all eyes, staring at the window. The sound came closer, then a motorcycle with a sidecar appeared on the road like some dark beast, trailing a plume of dust behind it. And on the seat was that man, the lanky one with the big glasses and a bullet-scar on his cheek who had come twice before. He had a very funny name—Zamriborshch. The first time they heard it both Levko and Nastechka spluttered. Their father

opened his mouth to scold them, but had to laugh instead. And Zamriborshch was not a bit angry, he even lifted Levko into the sidecar and gave him a ride down the street. Oh, if only he could have another ride like that today!

The motorcycle roared up to their gate, panted and stopped. Levko jumped out of bed shouting wildly: "Dad, Uncle Zamriborshch has come! On his motorcycle!"

Miroshnichenko rose as Levko flew outside, bumping his nose against the door in his headlong rush.

"Good morning, Uncle Zamriborshch! Have you come to see us again?" he called gaily to the visitor, who was wheeling his machine into the yard.

"Yes, Comrade Levko," Zamriborshch answered formally as though talking to a grown-up.

"Comrade Levko" became grave and dignified in an instant, hitched up his trousers and shook hands with the smiling visitor.

"Uncle Zamriborshch—will you give me a ride again?" Levko's long eyelashes flew up.

"I don't know..." said the man thoughtfully. "It'll take a lot of petrol, you know."

Levko's face fell, but Zamriborshch smiled.

"We'll manage it somehow! Of course I'll have to humour a fine Cossack like you—only you must pay me for it."

"But we haven't any money," said Levko, becoming more downcast on hearing this. "We're very poor."

"Oh, I don't want much. Just sing me a song and I'll take you."

"Will you—really?" said Levko doubtfully, amazement on his sunburned face.

"Yes, really."

"What d'you want me to sing?" Levko asked quickly, still afraid of quite believing it.

"Let's see—perhaps the one Nastechka sang, the one about the nightingale that sang all night on the meadow. Do you know it?"

"Of course I do." Levko cleared his throat and put his hand on the motorcycle for greater assurance. "But it needs someone else singing too. Maybe I'll sing you a song about another nightingale?"

"All right, let's have the other one. You know best," answered the visitor, hiding a smile.

Levko coughed again, glanced at the door and then his clear little voice rang across the yard.

Look, on high among the leaves
Nightingale his soft nest weaves.
He never sleeps the lifelong night,
He calls his mate until it's light.

Miroshnichenko heard his boy singing of the bird in a voice like its own. He remembered his dead wife and felt a swift pang, a foreboding in his heart. He waited for the end of the song, lest he startle Levko, then went outside to find his boy perched on Zamriborshch's thin shoulders and shouting with glee.

"Levko, what's happened to your trousers?" he asked in laughing surprise, seeing that one leg was long and the other short.

"A dog tore it yesterday, it was flapping and flapping on the ground, so Nastechka and I ripped it right off," laughed Levko, seeing his father was in a fine mood.

"Go and change into your others, you imp," said Miroshnichenko.

"My best?"

"Yes, your best."

"But Dad, I'm really quite all right in these," wailed Levko. For what could be worse than your best trousers? You mustn't sit down here, you mustn't lie down there, and as for turning a cartwheel—! In fact, all you could do was watch your trousers.

Chuckling, Zamriborshch went up to greet Miroshnichenko.

"I've been sent for you. I'm to bring you dead or alive."

"Who's sent you?"

"The vice-chairman of the district executive committee."

"Where's the chairman?"

"Gone off after one of those bands."

"What do they want me for?"

"Didn't say. A member of the regional committee's come and he's giving hell all round. From what I heard, he's mad about the way things are going at the collective farm."

At this moment Nastechka came flying out, plaiting her hair, her face rosy with sleep and cold water.

"Good morning, Uncle—" (a splutter) "—Zamriborshch!"

"Now you behave, or I'll take my belt to you!" Zamriborshch threatened with a portentous frown.

"Oh no, you won't, oh no, you won't!" chanted Nastechka, dancing about him.

"Le 's get going, Svirid Yakovlevich."

"You've certainly picked a bad time," said Miroshnichenko sourly. "We're dividing the land up today."

"Can't be helped."

"All right, let's go, if it's all that urgent."

"But Dad, what about breakfast?" cried his daughter reproachfully. Fancy not asking a guest to breakfast! She raised her eyes to Zamriborshch's face. "Please come in," she said politely. "While you're resting I'll cook some potatoes, it won't take long, and you can have them with cucumbers."

"Thank you, dear hostess, thank you, but we haven't the time."

Zamriborshch lifted Levko up behind him on the pillion, while Miroshnichenko with some difficulty wedged himself into the side-car.

"We'll have to go to Timofi Goritsvit first," he said.

"But you must take something to eat on the way!" cried Nastechka, greatly troubled. "You'll be hungry!"

"Never mind about it, daughter."

But the girl was already flying into the cottage as the motorcycle left the yard.

How wonderful it was to ride like that; your eyes closed of themselves for sheer bliss, and the wind filled your shirt out behind. You could ride and ride like that and never stop. What a shame Uncle Timofi lived so near!

Dmitro was already busy in the Goritsvit yard, sitting astride a carpenter's bench whittling teeth for ash-wood rakes with a sharp knife. They saw Dokia returning from the vegetable plot, her skirt tucked up, a wooden milk-pail filled with potatoes and cucumbers in her hand. Since they had no cow, the milk-pail was used for vegetables. When she saw the visitors she bowed, smiled and hurried indoors. A moment later Timofi came out, fully dressed. Miroshnichenko opened the gate and went inside.

"Well, Timofi, today you're in charge of all our land," Miroshnichenko made a sweeping gesture.

"Me in charge?" asked Timofi, startled. "Where'll you be?"

"I've got to go to town. You'll have to manage without me."

"That's too bad," sighed Timofi. "I did want us to divide the land together."

"D'you think I'm not sick about it too? I've been dreaming of this day.... Well, think you can manage alone?"

"I'll try," answered Timofi, glancing at the cottage door where Dokia had just appeared. "Only not a word to *her*, she's afraid, very...."

"She'll hear of it just the same." Miroshnichenko lowered his voice and glanced at Dokia.

"Not right now, anyway."

Dokia and Dmitro came up almost simultaneously from two sides.

"Setting off?" asked Dokia.

"Yes, just off," Miroshnichenko replied.

"Well, God be with you." She rested her handsome face in the palm of her right hand, propping up the elbow with her left, which is the way of country-women, and gazed past the men to the distant blue-misted fields.

"Kneel down before the icons, Dokia, say your prayers, maybe something'll come of it," said Miroshnichenko, laughing. But ignoring the joke, she answered gravely: "If our prayers could but reach God's ear."

Nastechka came running into the yard, carrying a small bundle wrapped in a clean white cloth.

"Here's something for the road." She handed the bundle to her father, met Dmitro's eyes, then dropped her own and gazed earnestly at the ground, tracing vague lines on it with her toe.

Dokia and Miroshnichenko exchanged glances, smiled enigmatically—and Nastechka blushed. She knew that Aunt Dokia often said she would like to have a quick, clever daughter-in-law like her. Was she just joking, or did she really mean it?

Dmitro knew all about it too, but of course he made no sign, except to steal a glance at the girl now and then as if trying to guess her thoughts.

Nastechka stood listening to the grown-ups talking about the land and about that day, afraid to raise her eyes to Dmitro, staring at her bare chapped foot, and the designs it traced on the ground.

XV

The sun looked down on the earth from under clouds like shaggy eyebrows and marvelled—why were there so many people out in the fields? They flowed together from every part of the village, for all the world as though it was Easter time and people were flocking to church. Worn boots and bruised feet brushed away the early dew, grey and unsparkl-

ing, trampled upon early shadows, then halted on the furrows which held their happiness.

Most of the people gathered round Timofi Goritsvit as he walked along in silence with his white, newly-made land measure. He could feel hundreds of eyes upon him; some were hopeful and kindly, others stabbed in hatred. Yurko Pidoprigora kept close beside him. This flaxen-haired boy held the lists in his hands because the red-whiskered Taganets, secretary of the village Soviet and former district clerk, had drunk himself stupid before daybreak and refused to have anything to do with the lists or even with his allotment.

"If you've a horse you need harness, but I've got my handwriting and I can get along without any of your land," he had maundered, licking his thick lips which were used to lies and unearned food.

A short distance from the pond, just where the Novobugovka land joined that of Lyubartsi, Timofi came to the boundary of Safron Varchuk's land and paused. His eyes sought and found the elderly bearded bee-keeper Marko Sinitsa. He smiled at him and glanced at the sun. It had just slipped out from behind narrow rosy clouds, driving the frightened shadows before it with golden arrows until they paled, broke in confusion, fled along the valley and sank into the pond with a play of sparkling ripples.

Timofi could not find the words to convey all that he was feeling. First he wanted to cross himself before the sun, but he thought better of it and turning to the peasants said rather quietly, "Well—shall we start the good work?"

"With God's will, Timofi, with God's will," answered a number of voices, and Marko Sinitsa crossed himself three times—he was the first to get his land. His wife did the same and then burst into tears, wiping her eyes with the end of her kerchief.

"Hush your noise, silly woman," her husband hissed at her. "What a time to cry!" And he drove a marker down at one end of his strip.

As the measure turned in Timofi's hands, tracing the first plot, Safron Varchuk, Larion Denisenko, Ivan Sichkar and Yakov Danko hurried to Timofi.

"Stop, Timofi!" wheezed Varchuk, panting, his hand against his heart. "Stop—d'you hear me?"

Goritsvit did not vouchsafe him so much as a glance. With calm, even steps he paced the land, immersed in a mental

reckoning to sum up his own joy and that of the others, and the tears shed by Marko Sinitsa's wife.

"Stop, Timofi," Varchuk's dark hand gripped the white measure. "I've got to talk to you."

"We'll talk after you've rested. You're all out of breath, Safron." With quiet assurance Timofi removed the rich man's hand from the measure and went on.

A voice rasped a curse. Larion Denisenko raised his knotty stick but Ivan Bondar tore it from him and flung it aside.

"What do you want, you bastardly son-of-a-bitch?" snarled Larion.

"I just want you to live a bit longer, that's all! I'm sorry you've such stupid brains inside a clever head."

"You'll be sorry when I spill your guts for you!" bawled Larion, thrusting his head with its wheel of shaggy hair into Ivan's face.

"Shut your mouth, Larion!"

"Or you'll find yourself carried out on these stakes!" somebody shouted from the crowd. Stakes and boundary markers carved with care from the hardest wood were brandished in the air.

Larion Denisenko glared at the crowd, and then compressed his lips, barely visible through the whiskers on his flat face. Those people looked as though they might really impale him on their stakes.

The boundary line brought Timofi to the road; he stopped.

"Put down a hundred and two sagenes in length, son," he said to Yurko, and turning to Varchuk asked, "Well, Safron, haven't you gone off the boil yet?"

Varchuk and the other rich men advanced on Goritsvit; only the virgin whiteness of the land measure blocked the road to their old hatred. Behind them Bondar, Kushnir, Sinitsa and Olexandr Pidoprigora watched alertly, while Polikarp Sergienko fell back to the boundary line and stretched out his long neck to make sure of missing nothing.

Safron's dark, lustreless eyes bored into Timofi as he asked, as calmly and loudly as he could, "By what right, Timofi, are you taking farmers' land?"

"Don't you know that yourself?"

"I'm waiting to hear."

"The Revolution gave that right, that law," answered Timofi, giving Varchuk back look for look. Varchuk lost control of himself.

"You lying blackguard!"

"Blackguard yourself—and bloodsucker!"

"Listen, good people, the Revolution gave quite a different law!" shouted Varchuk. "It gave the right to take estate and government land, but ours is to be left alone!" He snatched a newspaper from an inner pocket, unfolded it and waved it over his head. "Here! Here is the real law, printed!"

"Read it," said Goritsvit with outward calm and a sinking heart. What if there was something new in the latest papers, something he had not heard about?

The men closed in, forming a deep wall round him and Safron, who raised the newspaper to his very whiskers, thought a moment and then said in a loud voice: "This is the land law passed by the Workers' and Peasants' Government on the 5th of February, 1920."

"Who signed it?" somebody asked.

"The law is signed by the chairman of the Ukrainian Revolutionary Committee, Grigori Petrovsky. Is he good enough for you?" Varchuk's voice rose and swelled.

"Don't act it, just read it," snarled Stepan Kushnir, looking over Varchuk's shoulder at the paper—for the man was quite capable of giving everything a different twist.

"Here is the law!"

Varchuk shifted to an easier pose and coughed into his sleeve.

"'The Workers' and Peasants' Government of the Ukraine, restored by the blood of the Russian and Ukrainian workers' and peasants' army, entering upon its state duties, considers itself bound to free the peasants of the Ukraine, finally and for ever, from the power of the landlords, to provide them with land, and with their help to create the conditions for the establishing of the power of labour on earth.

"The Workers' and Peasants' Government proclaims for the universal information of workers and peasants, and of the civil and military authorities of the Ukraine:

"1. Henceforth, the right to use the land on Ukrainian territory is enjoyed only by working people.

"2. All the farms belonging heretofore to working peasants, Cossacks, former state peasants, etc., remain inviolable, and their owners can in the future, freely and without let or hindrance, use all the land in those forms in which they have enjoyed its use up to now—homestead, farmstead, hamlet land, common land, etc.'"

"You have heard the law!" Denisenko bawled. "Nobody has the right to touch our homestead, farmstead or common land! Do what you like with the estates."

Goritsvit cut him short.

"A smart trick! Must have spent a long time looking for a loophole. Do you still think laws can be twisted? Oh no, not any longer. The new law was not made for your sort!" Never before had he made such a long speech, but now the words simply came pouring out. "Good people, all that trickery of Varchuk's and Denisenko's is not worth a good spit. The law says plainly — farms belonging to *working* people should be let alone."

"And what d'you call ours?" Varchuk cried furiously.

"Yours are watered with other folks' sweat!"

"That's the way, Timofi! Thought they'd dupe us!" cried Bondar in high delight, thinking the while: Good for Goritsvit! Found his tongue at last, and what a tongue!

A terrific hubbub rose then, with the kulaks trying to prove their point and the poor peasants theirs; nobody listened, everybody shouted and threatened. Timofi, however, turned his measure and began pacing off the width of the plot, just as though none of it concerned him in the least. Very soon the kulak group retreated to the road, amid jeering shouts and whistles, and trailed back to the village. Their weeping, scolding wives came hurrying out to meet them. Varchuk frowned and gestured for them to be quiet.

"There's nothing doing, women. Go back home."

"I'll scratch that Goritsvit's eyes out!" hissed Nastya Denisenko, her eyes glassy with such fury that everyone felt a vixen like that was capable of anything.

The poor peasants' wives, however, soon cooled Nastya's belligerence. Without mincing words they called her a bitch, and had so many biting remarks to make about her lovers, that she fled in confusion—for it had never entered her head that the things she had so carefully concealed from neighbours and particularly from her family were known throughout the village. Her incurably spiteful eyes showed a gleam of fear, and then the shine of tears. With horror she suddenly saw all the shamelessness of her flesh which could no longer be hidden even by the finest clothes, for what was known to a few in the village would soon be known to all. If her husband and son came to hear of it!

More than one scene of joy and shame, happiness and rage passed before Timofi that morning, but all that was bad fell away as mud falls away from the white plumage of a swan, and only the good remained: the firm grip of horny hands which for a whole lifetime had longed for the land, the moist eyes, the grateful kisses of those who were standing on soil

which was their own. Poor peasants, widows and orphans spoke moving words, wished him good health and softly urged him to drop in in the evening for a glass of something.

"If I drink with all of you my head'll burst," Timofi protested.

"On a day like this it won't, Timofi, it'll only be the clearer," they assured him.

So he took from field to field a kind, faintly sad smile half-hidden in his eyes and the corners of his mouth, ever and anon glancing round with a tremor in his heart—when would Miroshnichenko come to measure out his, Timofi Goritsvit's, land?

At midday his happy mood was spoilt for a time by Suprun Fesyuk. Since morning he had been in his fields, awaiting Goritsvit and the villagers. He did not storm, he did not threaten, he only stood on the boundary, a figure of stone. And when Goritsvit went past him with the measure Suprun suddenly swayed, collapsed on the boundary and lay there prone, convulsed with sobs. "My land, my land!" he gasped again and again, passing fumbling hands like a blind man over it, clutching it, tearing up stubble and leaves and thrusting them into his pockets.

Timofi was sorry for the man. He helped Suprun to his feet, and picked up his hat.

"Don't take it so hard, Suprun, others have suffered more."

"But it's the land, the land," Suprun mumbled again and again, his fingers still convulsively clutching handfuls of black dust.

"It's not worth more than men," Timofi answered. "You've got sense, you ought to understand."

Silently the people streamed past Suprun, leaving him standing alone on the boundary ridge clawed and scratched by his own fingers.

Vasili Karpets, a bewhiskered peasant who knew as much about horses as a Gipsy, brought laughter to all. He had been so impatient for his allotment that he could not wait for sunrise, so he and his wife had driven to Sozonenko's land while it was still dark. Husband and wife had found it pretty cold in the open cart, and when dawn broke Karpets decided there was no sense in wasting time; he guessed at the boundaries of his land and started ploughing. His wife tried to stop him, but he called her a stupid woman and threatened to break the whiphandle over her shoulders. Mokrina, however, knew how much notice to take of that; she picked

up the whip, gave her husband a flick with it and then turned her attention to the horses.

Rich fat clods fell back from the ploughshares as they sliced through juicy roots, and Karpets' ginger-whiskered face beamed. Bent over the handles, he saw only the hind legs of the horses. When the ridges were uneven he crushed the clods with his foot gently, so as not to hurt the soil.

Karpets had no more words of abuse for his wife, he only shouted at her sometimes to drive the horses harder. When they came to the place where Karpets had mentally placed the boundary he stopped in doubt: supposing it was less than his half-dessiatine. He paced it out, decided he had not given himself enough and took his plough on farther, although his wife tried to dissuade him. When Goritsvit arrived with the other men, he said at once that Karpets had ploughed too far. And he was right. Karpets was furious.

"Look how many furrows I've done for that blasted Sozonenko, damn him. He's got something for nothing again! I'll sue him—make him pay for the ploughing."

"In that case, why don't you finish the whole of Sozonenko's land, and then take him to court?" suggested Stepan Kushnir innocently, and everyone around burst out laughing. Even Mokrina Karpets shook with laughter, ignoring the angry thrust of her husband's chin.

All the time Safron Varchuk and Ivan Sichkar hung about, watching from a distance. These two could trust one another in everything. With great feeling they poured out their souls to one another, revealing the malice seething in their dark depths. Still, they agreed that it would be unwise to stain their own hands with blood; that fool Fesyuk might give them away.

"Now's the very time to go to Batko Galchevsky," said Varchuk, despondently watching a sleepy wasp crawling slowly over a white flower.

"I can't go now," answered Sichkar, who in the course of one night had become much more cautious. "I'll go tomorrow."

"What's the difference to you, Ivan, today or tomorrow? And a day means more than a year these times."

"A lot of difference. Tomorrow I go back to prison, no suspicion can fall on me."

"All right, we'll have to wait," Varchuk agreed unwillingly, kicking the flower so that the wasp tumbled off on to the stubble. He ground it into the soft soil with his boot, then

watched from the corner of his eyes as the insect, injured wings vibrating, tried to wriggle out.

"Isn't that Timofi's whelp coming this way?" asked Sichkar, and Varchuk forgot the wasp.

Dmitro was crossing the field with his father's staid, sober walk. Two pots tied together with a cloth swung from his hand—evidently he was bringing dinner out to the fields.

"Can't you see? He's the very spit of his father."

Sichkar went to meet Dmitro, planting his stout legs firmly on the shoulder of the road.

"Where are you off to? Your father's not going to die of hunger before evening!" Sichkar's thick, greasy lips hung open, and his jaws twitched.

The lad flashed a hostile look at the rich man but said nothing; his whole body became taut as a violin string.

"Let's have a look, anyway, see what keeps a panhandler's soul and body together." Sichkar bent over the bundle, preparing to snatch it from Dmitro's hand. The boy pulled it away.

"Keep off! Stick your nose in your wife's pots!" Dmitro passed the bundle into his other hand and backed, keeping a wary eye on Sichkar.

"Look how impolite he is," Sichkar turned to Varchuk. "When I was a boy I'd have had my hair tugged for that—so!" He suddenly reached out a fat hand to Dmitro's head.

"Keep off, I tell you!" Dmitro paled and jerked his head back. But Sichkar grabbed a handful of the boy's wavy hair, pulled it and laughed.

"That's how they taught us to respect our betters—" He broke off with a gurgle, not knowing what hit him.

Dmitro, stepping back, had brought the pots down with all his might on Sichkar's head. The warm fragments scattered on the ground and a mixture of soup and milk porridge trickled down his cheeks.

"You—! You—!" Varchuk, dumbfounded by the unexpectedness of it all, once more ground the wasp into the soil, this time finally.

XVI

The old highroad stretched like a grey ribbon with lacy edges beneath an archway of ancient lime-trees that did not quite meet overhead. Time had long ago eaten away their hearts and the hollow trunks provided homes for wild bees or

mating wood pigeons. Sometimes, too, the rusty-looking head of an owl would peer out of some dusty hole, but Svirid Miroshnichenko felt a repugnance for these. He liked the beautiful and the mighty in nature. There had been a time when the Podolye woods had bred fewer loathsome creatures, and the bees had built their honeycombs on the ground because there were not enough hollow trees or banks for all of them. No wonder people said that somewhere close to Medzhibozh the bees had even kept the savage Tatars out of a woodland village once. Because they did not know these parts, the invading horde rode right into swarms of earth-bees, which rose in black clouds and attacked horses and riders.

The motorcycle hopped and leaped like an angry beast along the highway. Oak woods stretched on either side, and ancient trees had even invaded the high shoulder of the road, strewing it with acorns for four versts. A light breeze brought from the grove the scent of wild apples, fading valerian, the spicy aroma of rotting leaves and a damp mushroomy smell.

Miroshnichenko liked oak groves best in autumn. In springtime they were late in coming to life, they stood bare both above and below, because no white snowdrop, no pale primrose, no white, red or blue stavesacre could push its way up through the tough covering of leaves on the ground. Only an unassuming coltsfoot here and there rose from that cemetery of leaves. But in the autumn the oak woods were glorious, both in early autumn when their coppery acorns ripened, and later, in their finery of gold and russet.

Sloe berries hung in smoky drops on the shoulder of the road. His children had wanted to go berrying in the forest that day. Were they all right? With an involuntary sigh Miroshnichenko turned his thoughts to the village, it was such a pity he was not there to divide up the land for his fellow-villagers. Mingled with all this was an uneasy sense of something he had forgotten, something he had left undone. It was only as they came to the town that he remembered—he had not told Goritsvit to give Mariyka Bondar a little extra land.

Now she'll be cursing every bone in my body, he thought with a smile, wondering how Ivan could stand her temper.

Zamriborshch swung his machine round and brought it to a halt in style before the main entrance of the district executive committee building, startling two saddled horses that were busy eating the greenish bark of the young trees to which they were tied. Miroshnichenko frowned at the sight of this.

A fine place to tie horses! He unfastened them and led them to a weathered fence. But before he had fastened them up again, a messenger was calling him from the entrance.

"Hurry, hurry up, Comrade Miroshnichenko!" he shouted, waving both arms. "They're all on the jump, waiting for you."

"What's up? A fire?" asked Miroshnichenko climbing the steps. "Or has one of those bands started rampaging?"

"Not a band, but Comrade Kulnitsky," the messenger said, lowering his voice. "He's been blowing everyone up."

Miroshnichenko disliked the glossy Kulnitsky and his fine phrases, he thought him a dandified gasbag, all show. A summons coming from him boded not much good.

The office of Ivan Rudenko, vice-chairman of the district executive committee, was foggy with tobacco smoke. The blowing-up process was evidently ended, for everyone was standing, some preparing to return to their own departments, others crowding round Kulnitsky. His narrow, swarthy face with its handsomely curved beak of a nose expressed a mixture of annoyance, lofty disdain and condescension. Black leather encased him like armour from head to foot—a shiny leather coat smelling of castor oil, riding breeches generously faced with soft leather, a leather cap on his head and patent-leather top-boots on his legs.

The very picture our enemies draw of a Communist, thought Miroshnichenko, looking with some distaste at this most beautiful figure.

"Ah, here's Miroshnichenko!" Ivan Rudenko cried, and the pockmarks round his nose stirred with his smile.

Kulnitsky turned sharply, measured Miroshnichenko with a hostile look and asked in the tone of a public prosecutor, "Why are you late, Comrade Miroshnichenko?" Without waiting for an answer, he followed that up at once with another question, "Has the land been divided in Novobugovka?"

That made Miroshnichenko jump. What lay behind it? A reprimand for the delay, or something worse? He threw a quick glance at Rudenko standing just behind Kulnitsky, a glance which said "Help!" The vice-chairman, an old friend of Miroshnichenko from partisan days, half closed one eye and let his head sink. That was enough.

"Yes, it's divided," Miroshnichenko answered firmly, and Rudenko smiled his relief.

"Oh, so quickly?" Kulnitsky's lips twisted sarcastically.

"We rose early and went to bed late and so we managed to do it. Some have ploughed already, and one or two have even sown," Miroshnichenko continued briskly.

The sparks of mischief in Rudenko's eyes flew into his lashes.

Kulnitsky drummed nervously on the table, pondering something, then brought his hard fingers down with a decisive rap.

"Comrade Miroshnichenko, we'll have to take six hundred dessiatines of Novobugovka land. What do you say to that?"

Svirid Miroshnichenko felt dizzy and his throat contracted painfully. His mind's eye ranged over the village land and the thought of losing any hurt him as though it were all his own. It suddenly occurred to him that Suprun Fesyuk had felt the same about parting with his dessiatines, but then, Fesyuk had thought only of himself, while he saw hundreds of people before him. For them there was salvation in the land which this leather-clad dandy was preparing to deprive them of with a stroke of the pen.

"Six hundred dessiatines?" Miroshnichenko felt his voice was hard and flat as wood. "That's half the land the village was given by the Revolution."

"It is in the name of the Revolution that we are taking it." Kulnitsky placed one long leg forward.

"And have you thought what the peasants will say about the Revolution?" Miroshnichenko rubbed his eyes to clear away the mist before them. "Gives with one hand, takes with the other!"

"I am not interested, Comrade Miroshnichenko, in what petty-bourgeois elements think, it is not they who will decide the future."

"Mind what you're saying, Comrade Kulnitsky!" Miroshnichenko exploded. "Remember, these petty-bourgeois elements feed you, and defend their grain with their own blood, too!"

"And breed bandits, atamans and batkos," Kulnitsky said acidly.

"And they'll breed them faster still if you take away the land! Leave that sore spot of the village alone, you're no doctor for it!" The blue glint of the sea in Miroshnichenko's grey eyes darkened.

"And that's a Communist I'm listening to!" Kulnitsky dropped his voice ominously. "He says there'll be more bandits. Maybe he's hankering after the title of ataman himself?"

Miroshnichenko's lips paled. Had the other continued he might have done anything—thrown Kulnitsky out of the window, perhaps. But the dead silence was broken by Rudenko's reproving voice.

"That's going too far, Comrade Kulnitsky. Don't you know Comrade Miroshnichenko? How can you say things like that?"

Kulnitsky's thin face flushed, but he controlled himself—he knew he really had gone too far. And it was in a much calmer tone that he addressed Miroshnichenko again.

"You evidently didn't understand me properly. We are taking that land for our common cause—for the Lyubartsi State Farm. We've got to help."

Miroshnichenko sighed with relief and almost smiled. A weight had rolled off his shoulders.

"We can't give the Lyubartsi State Farm a single dessiatine. There's a decision of the Ukrainian Revolutionary Committee about the farm, and we can't go against it."

"But we've got to help them! Assistance can't be a violation of the Committee decision. They say your land's better."

"The very same black soil. But the way they farm it, the best soil on earth wouldn't help them. It's their management you've got to change, not their land," Miroshnichenko said hotly.

"And just what is it about their management that doesn't suit you?" Kulnitsky's protruding eyes were angry.

"Plenty! They're not farmers, they're city people on vacation in the country."

"They are all good Communists, Comrade Miroshnichenko," Kulnitsky snapped.

"In their right jobs maybe they're good Communists, but for the peasants, they're just summer visitors. Why, who's ever seen real farmers working an eight-hour day on a proper farm at harvest time, when a day feeds a year!"

"It's the working day in industry."

"And it's because of that working day that the grain fell from the ears before they got round to reaping, and now they're holding out their hands to the state like beggars—'Help us out, we're in a bad way!' It ought to be the other way round, *they* ought to be helping the state. No, I wouldn't give a broken penny to a state farm like that, let alone land."

"You utterly fail to appreciate the importance of big farms! If we can only have state farms all over the country, and then

unite them in giant trusts, we shall achieve economic emancipation from the small property-owner. That's the object to which we must direct our efforts!" Kulnitsky concluded hotly.

"I'd stumble and catch my feet in that emancipation as if it were a melon field," said Miroshnichenko with barely concealed mockery. "One thing I do know—at present it's not trusts, it's the peasants who must have what's due to them. If you kill the peasant's age-old hope of land, then he'll only regard those trusts of yours as a new kind of serfdom."

"You're not a Communist, you're just a weakling!" Kulnitsky snapped, and bore his leather-clad form out of the room with picturesque elegance.

"And you're just a stuffed leather coat!" Miroshnichenko shouted after him. He always finished anything he started, even a quarrel.

"I shan't forget that," Kulnitsky said from the doorway. "We'll be meeting again—under different circumstances."

"Very likely," Miroshnichenko agreed.

Alone in the room with Rudenko, Miroshnichenko flung the window open.

"Smoked this place up, you can choke in it." With a grimace, he mentally shook off the foul after-taste of his quarrel with Kulnitsky.

"What's got you into such a warlike mood today, Svirid?" Rudenko asked, looking at him curiously.

"Ugh—those smarties in their leather coats are ruining a great cause." Miroshnichenko began to seethe again. "He thinks Revolution means only shooting and mass meetings, handsome promises and conferences."

"I don't know what he thinks, but you've made yourself a dangerous enemy. I don't envy you."

"Oh, to hell with him, Ivan. Give me that motorcycle of yours again. I've got to get back and allot the land."

"All right, Svirid, get it finished as quick as you can. Because if Kulnitsky does come before you do you'll have no end of trouble. He'll make you out an old liar."

"I only hope he keeps off till the day after tomorrow." Miroshnichenko wrung Rudenko's hand.

"Well—and so petty-bourgeois feelings are still well rooted in you, eh?" The shallow pockmarks round Rudenko's straight nose stirred again with his smile.

"Too deep!" sighed Miroshnichenko. "When Kulnitsky started talking of those dessiatines, I felt he was tearing my heart out."

"No wonder they say our peasant's got a heart on one side and a clod of earth on the other."

"I don't know about that, but we've got it in our blood all right, that's a sure thing, Ivan. Can't you feel it yourself?"

"I can feel it, Svirid," Rudenko answered, then remembered something and smiled. "I almost forgot to tell you—we confiscated a stock of cloth from a profiteer's underground shop the other day. Well, we don't want to let down a certain Kombed chairman, so we've set aside five hundred arshins for your school."

"Thank you, Ivan." Miroshnichenko looked with gratitude at his friend. "Now we'll keep the school together."

"And start another rumour going, maybe?" laughed Rudenko.

"Never. If they get stuff to make their children's clothes this year, they'll be more sure of getting boots as well next year. You have to understand the peasant, Ivan, and feel for him, not abuse him."

"I'll do my best, Svirid," sighed Rudenko with exaggerated fervour, and the friends burst out laughing. They did not want to part, but the land called them both.

Soon Zamriborshch was driving Miroshnichenko at top speed back to Novobugovka. In the middle of the oak woods, however, the machine snorted indignantly, hesitated, jumped like a black grasshopper and stopped.

"Take a walk, while I fix this thing." Zamriborshch jumped off. He wheeled the motorcycle to the shoulder of the road and Miroshnichenko strolled to the edge of the wood, crushing a fairy ring of slender-legged mushrooms. Once upon a time he had thought this kind poisonous, but during his partisan days he had discovered that they were not only edible, but actually very good with their faint taste of garlic.

Grand old oaks rose majestically from the underbrush at the edge of the wood, with fragments of sky gleaming blue through their leaves like springs of clear water rising from the green grass. Here and there pendant acorns or the silhouette of a bird stood out against this September blue. Close by, two jays started bickering like fishwives; for a short time they disturbed the harmony of sounds, but the delicate voice of the woodland depths was even clearer by contrast.

A spring bubbled beneath an arch of bird-cherry and wild apple-trees, and flowed away in a tiny brook, crystal clear as tears. On either side of the brook grew tufts of curly, delicately fine grass, each blade so slender that a dewdrop seemed too heavy a burden. Miroshnichenko frightened

away a water-beetle swimming on the surface, drank deeply of the spring and then lay down close to it, his head on his folded arms.

A lover of symphonies, seeking to delight in the beauty and magic of new melodies, should spend a dreamy hour in a wood of young pines, eight or nine years old, but a less musical person would find the gentle murmur of a mixed forest pleasant enough. This murmuring now enveloped Miroshnichenko. He dreamt that he was drifting lightly over the woods, looking down to see his village, when a pitiful squeak awakened him. He opened his eyes and what he saw startled him and stayed in his memory for a long time. On the very edge of the water sat a large, pop-eyed frog holding the legs of a tiny bird in its great jaws. The trustful little blue-tit had alighted to drink; now in mortal terror it was wildly flapping its wings, crying for help in pitiful squeaks.

Miroshnichenko jumped up, ran to the spring and placed his boot on the frog—not too heavily, lest he should hurt the bird. Bubbles appeared at the corners of the frog's great mouth and it released the blue-tit, which had barely strength to reach the bank, working frantically with wings and tail. The frog dived quickly into the spring.

XVII

The brothers met not in the cottage, but in the barn. Vasilinka wanted to join them, but her father sent her away. So she ran down to the pond and seated herself in the boat, hunched forward over arms crossed on her knees. She wondered what secret it was they were hiding from her now—grown-ups could not live without hiding something.

The tiny boat rocked on the water, lulled to sleep by the rustling of the reeds. Vasilinka slapped the water and paddled away from the shore with her hand, to see if there was any fish in her nets for Uncle Danilo. She reached the middle of the pond when a little star burst in the sky like a flower and fell glimmering into the woods.

In the barn the three talked quietly.

"You're not the first, brother, and you aren't the last. Others have come back, officers too. Of course nobody turned out the band to meet them, but they weren't stood up against the wall either. That's the way it is. They live quietly, they work—some of them even get a ration. And some went to fight Wrangel, so their families get land just like anyone

else." With this and that Olexandr tried to buck up his brother.

"And did they take those officers for the front?" asked Danilo, with more animation than he had hitherto shown.

"And glad to have them. The new government's an enemy only to enemies. That's the way things are."

"Maybe I could volunteer, too?"

"Don't be in a rush," Miron the forester advised. "You never know these days who's going to be on top tomorrow. The best thing is to lie low, hide like a hare behind a hummock."

"Why didn't you wait to get your land, Miron?"

Olexandr cast an amused glance at his brother. "You could have hidden behind a hummock and watched others get their allotments."

"It was the government that gave me land. That was none of my doing. Who'd refuse it if it's given?"

"So you've got an excuse ready, in case you need it, eh?" Olexandr frowned and turned to Danilo. "We'll be waiting for you tomorrow at dawn, at the crossroads outside the village. We'll go to town, all three of us, since that's the way of it."

"Thanks, brother. What shall I do with my revolvers? Throw them into the pond?"

"No, they'll want to know what you've done with them," said Olexandr. "They have to be handed in."

"But what if some devil grabs him on the way, with a gun in his pocket? He'll be done for then," said Miron, shrinking with fear.

"Give them to me, brother. That'll be best," said Olexandr decidedly.

Danilo took the two flat Brownings and his cartridges out of his pocket, and handed them to his brother with a sigh of relief.

"I think that's the lot."

"Let's sit down for luck on your way," said Miron.

A smell of fish and honey came from him. In another ten years he would be grey, and the very picture of a kindly old bee-keeper. Just now, however, his kindness was overlaid by fear which made him twitch his whiskered upper lip as though bees were flying close to his face in spite of it being night.

The brothers sat down where they were, on the threshing floor, their hands feeling the depressions left by the flails, their fingers sensing the coolness. Then all three rose,

walked through the yard to the big gate and kissed in parting.

Danilo had crossed the dam when he heard the patter of a child's footsteps behind him.

"Uncle Danilo!" Vasilinka came running up with a bag. "Take some fish home with you, it'll be some sort of a present." She handed him the homespun bag. Water trickled from the bottom and the freshly caught fish twisted and jumped inside.

That wrung Danilo's heart. Instead of him bringing a present for the little girl, it was she who was giving him one.

"Thank you, Vasilinka. But I don't need it...."

"Why not?" This was a surprise. "They're quite fresh, look, they're still alive. They're all carp, like gold, they are."

"Carp, you say?" he repeated.

The child nodded. "In autumn, when the stars are out, it's awfully easy to catch them in a net-trap, if you put in crushed sunflower seeds for bait."

"You know what we'll do with them?" Danilo went to a willow leaning out over the water.

"No."

"Let's take them and put them back in the water again. Let them remember us with words of kindness."

"But fish can't talk!" laughed the little girl.

"Maybe they can't talk but they can remember us; after all, they'd rather be in the water than in the pan."

Cautiously he climbed out on to a small landing stage under the willow and took a carp out of the bag. It lay on his hand like a bar of dull gold, its gills moving heavily.

Danilo let it slip out of his hands. For an instant the fish lay motionless in the water, then it seemed to give itself a little shake and disappeared into the depths. Danilo released the others too, and gave the bag back to Vasilinka. She looked at him inquisitively, then asked, "Uncle Danilo, tell me—only tell me the real truth—why were you sorry for the carp?"

Danilo's lips trembled and it was with something between a laugh and a sigh that he answered, "Because your uncle's like a carp himself now, Vasilinka."

"Oh, you *are* funny!" laughed the little girl, and snuggled up to him.

That laugh brought tears to his eyes. He gave her a hug, said good-bye and almost ran to the oak wood.

A dew-wet silence met him at the edge. In the sky, dark as fertile soil, shone the Plough, reminding people that the highest human wisdom lies in tilling the fields. Now and then Danilo stopped by a tree to concentrate on his emotion, to

see more clearly the vision that beckoned in the distance, the vision that he had carried like a holy relic through all the misery of separation.

He knew that there were few really happy marriages. Even those who marry for love often fritter away their treasure in the trivialities of daily life, so that after two or three years they no longer think it's paradise and simply bear a creaking marriage yoke in weary disillusionment. But his marriage had been a melodious song. At first he feared the shadow of Nechuiviter might darken his happiness. He was tormented by the thought that the girl had known another's tenderness, another's kisses and more perhaps. But he need not have worried. For Nechuiviter, Galya had friendship, for him—love. When they married she was a pretty girl with wonderful golden braids. With him she became a lovely woman, her child-like face opened from bud to flower, her slight figure developed and often his fists clenched when he saw some loafer ogling his wife too frankly.

"May you get salt in your eye," he would say to himself three times, for the peasant superstitions still lived in him, teacher though he was. He had moments of despair because he could not buy her decent clothes, and it was she who comforted him saying: never mind, some day we'll have everything we want. What had she meant? Not his salary, of course, but that future which Nechuiviter had promised for all of them. Danilo could not offer her even that.

How would Galya meet him? What remained of her love? Suppose it had turned to bitterness? He had cut off all other roads for her. Unbearable pain clutched at his heart. For she was his very life.

The woods thinned out in glades and paths. The moon, just risen, showed him the dark outlines of houses. Danilo went to the edge of the cutting, and from there through the vegetable plots to the centre of the village.

At the end of a narrow lane he saw an oaken cross, like a giant with outstretched arms. And on its wooden shoulders sadly hung a white homespun towel. Entering another street, he saw a similar cross, and a third beside a sleeping cottage. Crosses stood on guard everywhere. That spring, when typhus had mowed down young and old alike, the village had implored God with these crosses to protect it against this disaster, and they still stood at all corners and by every well, mute witnesses to human ignorance and human suffering.

He passed an orchard, slipped across a street and saw before him the small school built by the community. Was she

really here, so close—his love, his life? Danilo stopped beside the stile with an acacia creaking over it. He wanted to hurry, to run to the school, to that little window through which his wife and little Pyotr looked out every day at the sun and the clouds, and perhaps even looked to see if he was coming at last. But all his strength seemed to have drained away. Swaying, he went round to the other side of the schoolhouse, to the little brick porch leading to the teacher's room, and sat down in the shadow on the cold step. He listened, as though the school held a voice even in the night-time, as though it could tell him—all is well, nobody is here but your own family.

The coolness of the step drew the feverish heat from him. He rose—uncertainly, like a drunken man, and tapped on the edge of the window-pane. He waited a minute, an endless minute, and tapped again. Then from inside came her voice, musical as a bell, a voice that made his heart want to leap from his breast.

"Oh—who's there?"

He wanted to smile but tears choked him.

"Galya—it's me, Danilo."

He heard a cry, heard something fall, heard his wife run to the door. He sought in whirling thoughts for words, the best, greatest, tenderest words, but could think of nothing fairer than those with which he had always greeted her when he returned home from a journey. "I've come back, my heart."

After an eternity the peeling door creaked open and his wife, weeping, flung herself on his neck.

"Danilo, my beloved, it's really you!"

He put his arms round her and held her close, forgetting to say a single word. Then awkwardly he drew her, almost carried her inside, silently kissed the braids that lay heavily over his arm, carried her to the window in his arms and stood gazing at her happily, drinking in every familiar feature. Suddenly he remembered he had a son. But had he really? Perhaps it was a dream, a fantasy?

"Galya—do we have a son?"

"Yes, Danilo." She slipped out of his arms, and led the father to the cradle.

Stooping, he walked all round the cradle, touched the rail with his finger and at last said, "I've come back, my heart."

Galya burst into tears again. She found his hand, drew him to the moonlit window and gazed through her tears at her husband's face, pale with emotion. This was her destiny, her future standing before her, she had chosen it herself, she had

been proud and happy, and now her heart was breaking as she thought of what might happen to them. She would do anything, anything, if only they could be together, if only their child did not have to grow up without a father.

He saw the tears in her eyes, mysterious in the moonlight, and remembered how somebody had once said his wife's eyes were like cherries in the morning dew. It was true, they glowed and shone wonderfully against the paleness of her face. Danilo touched his wife's lashes with his lips and tasted their warm saltiness.

A cockerel crowed suddenly in the shed, another followed and wakened the child. He stirred and began to cry. Galya hurried to the cradle, picked up the boy and rocked him in her arms, humming a lullaby, then put him in his father's arms.

The tiny human being nestled close to Danilo and the mother, forgetting all grief, smiled through her tears at the two of them.

"He's got two teeth already," she said proudly.

Danilo could not really judge the importance of this great news, but seeing how it seemed to please Galya, asked in wonder, "What, really two?"

XVIII

It was very late before the Novobugovka people left the fields. Some had not yet got their land, others were busy hammering in markers, while others again had harnessed their horses and begun to plough. The thin nags strained every sinew, pulling badly made ploughs, and nobody was surprised to see that some of those ploughs were worn almost to breaking point, while others had Austrian bayonets for ploughshares—bayonets which had sliced through pale flesh in the war and now sliced through the dark soil.

Timofi Goritsvit, hungry by the end of the day, rarely looked about him, but nothing escaped his notice. His legs were kept busy and even his tongue—in fact by evening he was quite hoarse with talking, something that had never happened to him before. A few more days like this, he thought, and I'll have no tongue left at all. He glanced under his brows at his son and smiled. Didn't think twice about breaking that pot over Sichkar's head. And wasn't scared, either. Good lad!

The good lad, meanwhile, was carefully keeping out of his father's way, having been well scolded and told that he

should have more respect for his elders, and that his mother didn't make milk porridge to be poured over people's heads. Dmitro wanted to run back home and get something else for his father to eat, but Timofi would not let him.

"I've never yet had two dinners brought me in one day," he said, and the peasants laughed.

Vasili Karpets hurried to his cart and came back with vodka and a hunk of barley bread, rubbed with garlic.

"Here, take a drink, Timofi, to cheer you up." Vasili had quite forgotten that he was to go to law with Sozonenko; the liquor showed in his walk and in his broad face with its halfmoon of copper whiskers.

"I don't drink when I'm working, Vasili, thanks all the same," Timofi declined.

Vasili, however, was in no way abashed.

"You can drink to the Revolution, Timofi, even when you're working—when it's such great work as today's."

Then Timofi thrust his measure into the ground, took the glass and the bread and looked at the people round about him.

"To the Revolution!"

"Long live the Revolution!"

The glass went from hand to hand and everyone ceremoniously drank to the Revolution as they stood in the fields—for it was the Revolution which had made those fields theirs.

The molten clouds in the west had smouldered to ashes and merged with the darkness when Goritsvit returned home with his son and Kushnir. It was darkest in the hollows where the mist was rising over the rustling willows and gently enfolding the earth. Timofi hugged Dmitro who pressed close to his father as he had in childhood. They had no need for words as they stood silently for a moment, gazing at the vague outlines of trees over the stream, listening to the song coming from the end cottage.

"Why didn't you go to your carpentering today?" asked Timofi, when they had crossed the bridge.

"I couldn't," Dmitro answered with a sigh. "How could anyone in the village work today?"

"The call of land, eh?"

"What d'you think? I was hoping ours would be measured out."

"Patience, son."

"I haven't any left. And where'll we get a horse? Ours can hardly walk."

"We'll likely have to borrow from Grandad and maybe from Miroshnichenko's brother too. Don't miss work tomorrow, son, or old Gorenko'll lay his measure across your shoulders."

"Like as not," Dmitro agreed with a smile.

"He's always got it handy. But I'll try to get away and come in the evening, at least."

"Well, if it's evening—all right." Timofi placed his tired arm around the boy's skinny shoulders, and then called to Stepan Kushnir: "I say, Stepan, I don't remember seeing Vasil's widow out in the field today."

"Olga wasn't there," Kushnir threw back over his shoulder as he strode in front through the mist.

"She's not ill, is she?"

"I don't know."

"Go and find out, will you?"

"All right," Kushnir agreed, although hesitantly.

That night he had meant to go and see the blacksmith's daughter Yulka Shapoval, the first time in a week. Yulka had a sharp tongue and an attraction that lay in her figure more than in her face. The folds of her simple clothes could not hide the seductive charm of her young body with the firmly moulded breasts which seemed to be ripe for maternity. Stepan, not particularly shy with the girls, caught himself thinking almost the first time in his life that perhaps he should marry and settle down with a wife and children. Yulka fascinated him, but would not let him lay a finger on her breasts—and the slap she gave his questing hands was as hard as a man's. Where had she got such strength? He actually asked her that one day, but she only smiled mysteriously.

"I was letting you down easy, not hitting really hard."

"Putting yourself out of reach?"

"No—just the opposite," she answered and for some reason sighed.

With the idea of meeting her family, Stepan went to her father to have an iron rim put on a wheel. While the metal was heating on the forge, the smith called his daughter from the garden. She flushed in embarrassment when she saw Stepan. Her father laid the rim on the anvil, gave Stepan the tongs and told him to keep it firm, while Yulka picked up the heavy hammer. Before the amazed Stepan realised what was happening, father and daughter had finished hammering his rim and pulled it over the wheel. Then he saw that she had indeed let him off lightly, and he reflected sadly that it would

be a tough job for a husband keeping the upper hand with a wife like that.

Stepan said good night to Goritsvit, went home and washed at the well, changed his clothes and set off to see Olga.

The moon was rising over the orchards, and somebody was whetting a scythe in its light, preparing to get in the millet or the late buckwheat. Here and there lights were extinguished in the cottages and the silence of night enfolded them. Stepan went to the Pidoprigora gate and stopped, irresolute. Should he go in or not? He feared the crazy chant of Vasil's old mother and Olga's tears. But at last he opened the gate and entered the yard. By the shed a heap of threshed straw gleamed in the cold light; the wind raised separate straws, now here, now there, and they sang faintly, like the notes of a pipe.

A light was still burning inside, but the door was bolted. He pulled at the ring, and a moment later Olga appeared. She looked like a nun, with black brows standing out sharply on her thin white face and dark circles under her staring eyes. She did not smile, she spoke no word, and only a tiny line running down the side of her mouth twitched nervously. Stepan felt the great distance which suffering had placed between them; his conscience pricked painfully—how could he have been thinking of flirtation, of love only a moment ago?

"Olga Viktorovna, why didn't you...." He did not dare even to address her simply by her Christian name.

Her staring eyes widened, her eyebrows flew up in a broken, tragic line. Stepan felt ashamed of himself and said simply:

"Olga, why didn't you come to the fields?"

"The fields? Why?" And suddenly her eyes were brimming with moonlight.

"Why?" Stepan stammered. "To get your land."

"Land?" She repeated the word in a strange voice which still, even in her grief, was clear and melodious. "I don't want any land. It took my Vasil away from me.... I don't want anything." She clutched at the doorpost and gasped for breath.

Stepan gripped her shoulders with both hands, fearing she would fall. The single tear that fell from the widow's eye seemed to burn his hand to the bone.

"Olga—don't!" he implored, feeling the shaking of her shoulder beneath his hand.

"Go away, Stepan, don't torment me." She straightened up, and he felt blinded by the gleam of her tear-filled eyes and the pain on her tortured face.

"But the land, Olga?" Once more he tried to bring her thoughts to the thing dearest to a peasant.

"It won't bring Vasil back," she said with tears in her eyes.

"That's true, of course, land won't bring back the dead." Kushnir's voice took on a stubborn note. "But without it you can't live, either. The land is a great thing."

"*You* take it, I don't care."

She stepped back into the entry and then disappeared through the inner door.

Stunned, Stepan stood where he was for a moment, still seeing the woman's face before him. He remembered that he had planned to spend the evening with Yulka, but for some reason her attraction had paled. Sunk in thought, with hanging head, he left the house.

Beside the shed something sighed softly, and for a moment he imagined it was Olga. He looked about him—but there was nobody, only the straw gleaming greenish-gold in the moonlight, singing like invisible pipes in the wind.

XIX

From the north the town began with deep gullies running in broken folds almost to the highway and topped with humped granite spurs. Beyond the gullies lay dry land strewn with grey stones like skulls and bones, making one think of a washed-out graveyard of giants. But on the other side of the road the rich black soil stretched to the very horizon, turning its back, as it were, on the grim, stony primeval waste.

Before the war, rugged quarrymen used to dynamite the granite rocks and with the stones make homes for the living and crosses for the dead. Now, once a week, a market of sorts was held in this old quarry. Melancholy horses dozed under the warm sun and suckling pigs squealed their shrill protest at being taken from freedom and mud and thrust into dark sacks. Trade was not very brisk, but on the other hand, the most amazing things were sold illicitly here: beautiful clothes obtained at the point of a gun, pantokrin pills and light machine-guns.

As they approached the gully where the market was in full swing, Olexandr stopped Danilo with a hand on his arm.

"Come on, let's take a look at this assembly," he said with a jerk of his head.

"What for?" asked Danilo in surprise.

All the way here he had been thinking his anxious thoughts, trying to see ahead, even if only for one day. His cheeks were still hot with his wife's kisses and tears, and little Pyotr's baby talk still rang in his ears. Before he left, he and Galya had sat on the stone door-step and decided it would be best to conceal nothing from the new authorities.

"Miron and I want to get you a pair of top-boots. For us, men, boots are the main thing," said Olexandr.

"Yes, you won't get far in those," and Miron pointed at Danilo's old patched boots, the kind worn by seasonal labourers.

"All right, if you've the money," Danilo assented. "Maybe I'll be able to pay you back some day." That would give him another half-hour of freedom, and he was glad to postpone even for that brief space the dreadful moment when he must face the military commissar and the Cheka.

The brothers descended a stony path into the gully. Suspicious-looking individuals slunk about whispering insinuatingly or displaying goods from under their coats.

The brothers stopped beside a cobbler slumped on his stool, hammering a sole to its upper. A tall, husky fellow in one boot stood behind him, eating bread and pork fat with obvious relish, his eyes ranging over the crowd. Danilo was struck by his unusual face, particularly the hooked nose with cheeks slanting from it to his ears, as though escaping the vicinity of that ferocious beak.

Miron enquired the price of some top-boots with the broad toes fashionable at the time. The cobbler looked up at the brothers, and without removing the nails from his mouth, told them, "They're for sale, but only for good money."

"What d'you mean by good money?"

"The tsar's. I've no use for any of those other governments."

"And have they any use for you, Vasyuta?" laughed one of the customers.

"Makes no difference to me," mumbled Vasyuta, without stopping work. Then he removed the nails from his mouth and began lazily bargaining with Miron.

While this was going on, Danilo noticed the husky fellow in one boot eyeing him intently. Then the fellow slid up to the brothers and drew Danilo aside.

"See here, mate," he whispered, his beak almost in Danilo's ear. "I can help you get some real boots, good enough for a general."

"Where are they?"

"We'll find them, if you can find me a little toy." The fellow's mouth was right against Danilo's ear.

"What toy?"

"Don't play innocent, mate. You were fighting not so long ago, sticks out all over you. Bring me one of these toys," he held up his forefinger and moved it as though pulling a trigger, "and I'll get you boots, the kind you won't wear out in ten years."

Danilo turned pale. Was this provocation, or was it an ordinary black-market deal? He went up to his brothers, pulled them away from the cobbler and all three walked rapidly to the district executive committee. There Olexandr gave Danilo a mess tin with food and his guns, clapped him on the shoulder—don't worry, lad—while Miron made the sign of the cross over him.

On the top step Danilo looked back once more and tried to smile at his brothers, but his lips trembled pitifully. Abruptly he turned and with eyes shut tight he crossed the threshold as though stepping over a precipice.

A young girl with cropped hair and a red bow pinned to her blouse came forward to meet him. She was humming, and her whole carefree look said that she had found her place in the world.

"Would you tell me where the military commissar is?" asked Danilo.

"Come this way," the girl answered.

She led him to a large room with a barrier, behind which a Red Armyman with a bandaged head was pecking out words on a typewriter.

"What's your business, please?" asked the girl, with a glance at another door bearing a sign: "Military Commissar".

"I've come to give myself up," said Danilo, dropping his eyes.

"Bandit? Or one of Petlyura's?" asked the girl, without the slightest sign of surprise.

"Petlyura's."

The Red Armyman with the bandaged head glanced at Danilo and went on with his typing. Obviously this was not the first such visitor.

"Will you wait a moment, please." With the same lack of haste the girl disappeared through the office door.

That moment was an eternity. But at last the door opened again and the girl called him. He entered a tidy room and halted before a youth of about twenty or twenty-two in Red

Cossack uniform. Could this be the famous squadron commander who had terrified the White Poles and challenged the fiercest enemies to a sabre fight? Olexandr had told him Comrade Klimenko had not left the battlefield even with two bullet wounds. His Cossacks had held him up and he continued to command the battle until the encircling pincers were broken and he was able to lead his men out of the ring.

Lines of painful distaste lay round the man's eyes and lips. Over his high forehead curly hair fell in confusion, pale below like ears of rye, dark russet on top.

"Sit down." He nodded towards a chair and seated himself opposite Danilo. "A local man?" The early lines on his forehead twitched.

"Yes, from Novobugovka."

"Who's your father? Kulak? Priest?"

"A poor peasant."

"Is that so?" said the commissar in surprise. "Tina, get me a questionnaire form."

The girl went to a cabinet, rummaged through the papers and then laid before Danilo a sheet of stiff paper which was to contain his whole life story.

"Have you been back long?" asked the commissar in a level voice and got out a pack of cigarettes. "Smoke?"

He held out the pack and Danilo drew out a cigarette. Sweat beaded his face as if he were pulling a millstone.

"I came back the day before yesterday. I was a sotnik...." He was in a hurry to tell everything about himself, to get the torment over.

"Why did you desert your ataman?" Now Klimenko's eyes and the lines round his eyes and mouth looked gay. "Petlyura's candle burning down, eh?"

Danilo could understand the young commissar's gladness—he sensed in it the triumph of the victor. But had he also the magnanimity of the victor? Thoughtfully Danilo answered, "Burning down at both ends."

"You're right there, at both ends!" The commissar's almond-shaped steely eyes flashed.

Danilo felt a surge of relief. At least this was not the commissar painted by Petlyura propaganda and his own morbid imagination.

"Tell me just how you came to us." The commissar drew a sheet of paper closer and his two-coloured mop of hair fell over it. "Take your time," he added, seeing Danilo's nervousness. He had sufficient experience to recognise the kind of man before him.

Danilo began his story, which at once interested the commissar. He asked a great many questions about Pogiba and Barabolya; he carefully checked and noted down distinguishing marks by which they could be recognised; he could not forgive Danilo for not having put an end to Pogiba, and then drew three conclusions: snakes will bite wherever they are, the sotnik was not really a regular officer, his job was teaching school.

When Danilo, sweating profusely, ended his story, Klimenko asked only one thing, "You haven't forgotten anything important?"

Danilo appreciated his tact, for what the question really meant was—had he concealed anything?

"I've told you everything, all there is." He looked straight into Klimenko's eyes. "My wife and I decided I ought to tell the whole truth, no matter how damning."

"You were quite right." The commissar nodded approvingly. "Now fill in the questionnaire."

At that moment the door opened to admit a thin, swarthy youth who helped himself along with a stick.

Klimenko hurried forward, greeted him with every sign of pleasure and gave him a chair. His right eyebrow, always somewhat higher than the left, now had a mischievous tilt.

"Come for information again, Kindrat, or just to sit and chat?"

"It's information I'm wanting," sighed Kindrat despondently. "Will you or will you not tell me something about yourself? I've asked you a dozen times."

"Another time, I'm busy today."

"That's what you always say. Can't you understand, the material I want is needed for history?"

"Not history, Kindrat, just your pamphlet," said Klimenko, and to smooth over any derogatory implication he added apologetically. "I really can't manage it today. But look, you write about Petlyura's gang too, don't you. Maybe you can get something from a former sotnik?" He indicated Danilo, who was just finishing his questionnaire.

"That will certainly be interesting," the youth agreed eagerly, and moved his chair closer to Danilo. "Will you tell me everything frankly? But absolutely frankly, you understand?"

"I will," Danilo agreed reluctantly. "I'm afraid, though, that there is much that I don't see the way you do, and you may think I'm not being frank."

"It's the way you see things, that's most valuable to me," Kindrat assured him. "Look—were you in any party before the Civil War—Social Democrats, Workers' Party, Ukrainian Labour Party for instance?"

"No. Party fights never interested me, I kept out."

"What did interest you, then?"

'Literature and ethnography."

"Did you collect anything, or have anything published?"

"A few ethnographic notes were printed."

"And how did you come to join Petlyura?"

"That's not a very pleasant subject."

"I understand, but all the same, what was it that attracted you, an intellectual, to him?"

"Circumstances, that's all." With a sigh Danilo gazed at the window, marshalling his thoughts.

Outside, dark clouds gathered on one side, while on the other the sun shone brightly. Sparrows were squabbling in a hollow and the warm sunshine was drying the dew off the knot-weed. A young woman, her supple body swaying, crossed the road with two buckets of water that caught the sunshine. All this was life. But how call that sickness which he,. and not he alone, had gone through? And what use explaining to this green youth who would anyway lump him together with all the rest in his pamphlet?

Once more he measured Kindrat with his eyes and began.

"I remember very well the spring of 1918 when that circus hetman Skoropadsky took the Ukrainian throne. In his Kiev circus he kissed the landowners and said solemnly, 'I pray to God for strength to save the Ukraine.' You know it was not from God he got his strength, but from the Kaiser, and because of that the Ukraine was flogged by punitive expeditions. Not that it stopped at flogging. In our Podolye region and Brailov country the Germans and the Haidamaks actually had queues lined up for the gallows—there weren't enough for all the unfortunate peasants who had displeased the master or his agent. Well, the villages took up axes and pitchforks. Peasant detachments formed in the woods and prepared to fight to the death. And just at that time Petlyura raised his forces in Belaya Tserkoy, printed his universal proclamation against Skoropadsky, called him the tsar's hireling, a traitor, a self-styled hetman and declared him outlawed for crimes against the independent Ukrainian republic, for mass arrests, for the destruction of villages and for violence against workers and peasants. A lot of people believed in him at that time, and I was one of them. I left my

wife and went to Belaya Tserkov to free the Ukraine from foreigners and from our own landlords too. I thought I was fighting for liberty, sweeping away the garbage of feudalism. Well, you know the rest. What I left was bad and what I found was worse."

"That's right enough," Kindrat nodded. "But when you realised that Petlyura's line meant betrayal, why didn't you leave him sooner, and join the Reds?"

"I was afraid," Danilo confessed. "And not just for my own skin. You asked for frankness, well, I'll tell you everything that's kept me back all this time. It was Ukrainian patriotism. Right from the beginning Petlyura appealed to our national feeling, and made us believe that the Bolsheviks were against the Ukrainian nation. And strange as it may seem, some of your own military and political leaders helped him. What worried me mostly, and not me alone, was the idea that in conditions of imperialist development any national movement could only be counter-revolutionary in character."

"I suppose you're referring to things said by Bukharin and Pyatakov?" asked the commissar.

"Yes, and also to the appalling things done by Muravyov and some of the local leaders. Ukrainian intellectuals were greatly distressed by the obstacles to our national regeneration and development, the lack of clarity about Ukrainian statehood and language, and then Muravyov, with his provocative slaughterings, cast a very black shadow on the Bolsheviks. For a time, Petlyura used all this cleverly and played on the wounded pride of the Ukrainian intellectuals. I expect you know what a fine talker he is. He has no gifts as a general, no statesmanship, no literary ability, not even the ordinary decency of an honest man, but he does have a real silver tongue. He relied on foreign bayonets and that silver tongue—and still does.... Well, there you have the reason why I didn't leave him sooner. The lack of clarity in the national question troubled me until very recently."

"You say it troubled you. Does that mean it doesn't trouble you any longer?" the commissar asked, remembering the Muravyov blood bath.

"Not as much as it did, though I haven't got everything quite clear yet."

"What made you think differently?"

"Petlyura himself. I saw he was just making use of our national feeling while he sold the Ukraine to foreigners. And then, too, I was very much impressed by the Red Army

Order signed by Lenin which said the Red Army came to the Ukraine as the protector of the Ukrainians and of Ukrainian culture. So there you have it all—the fall and sufferings of one man." Danilo smiled without mirth and rose, asking, "Do I go to the Cheka now?"

As he spoke the words he felt a nasty little chill—the most terrible moment of his life was approaching. He had heard so much about the Cheka that even the very name in a newspaper article scared him.

The commissar looked at him through narrowed eyes, and fine lines sprayed out from their corners.

"I don't think there's any need for that. They all left today for an outlying village of this district. I'll hand in your papers."

"What shall I do, then?"

"Go home," smiled the commissar. "But first, you could go and see the head of the education department. They're planning to start refresher courses for teachers soon. You could take a course, and then go back to teaching."

"And will they give me teaching work—me?" Danilo could hardly believe his ears, he thought the man must be laughing at him.

"Most certainly. We're short of teachers. But you'll have to work hard."

"My God, I'll work for three." He fell rather than sat down on his chair, felt in his knapsack for his guns, then raised his hand again to wipe his forehead. He looked with inexpressible gratitude at the commissar, who watched him with a sly twinkle. "Better leave God out of it now, He'll hardly be of help."

Danilo nodded happily, thinking—my God, is it possible that all the fears and troubles are over, like in a fairy tale?

XX

The earth cannot live without sunshine, and man cannot live without happiness. In the hours of greatest suffering and trouble the heart is like a spring that clears itself of slime; that is when one learns the real meaning of humaneness and of happiness too. At such times one comes to understand, with amazement, how little and how much one needs in life, how badly one had followed one's own path, how mechanically one had said "good day" without making the day good, and, worse still, actually complaining about it, for the motes

of the commonplace frequently dimmed the tender rays of sunshine.

Such were the thoughts crowding Danilo Pidoprigora's mind as he looked at the earth, and his wife, and his child. He saw the sunshine and smiled at it, he blew through Pyotr's soft hair and felt a swooning happiness, he kissed his wife's slender feet, adoring and worshipping her.

His wife lay on her unbound hair as on a golden sheaf, and her sweet, almost childish face made him think of Ribera's "Saint Inez". She was still shy of letting him see her naked breasts and dropped her great eyes that did not yet know there could be genuine passion and a lie. He was sometimes frightened by this—what could she find to love in him? Perhaps she had simply married him as girls of sixteen sometimes do, themselves not knowing why. A new moon in the sky, the intoxication of a kiss—and girlhood is gone for ever like a ripple on the stream....

No, his Galya's love was not like that. Her heart had already turned to Nechuiviter when he, Danilo, first saw her. For her, Nechuiviter had been the rousing tocsin while he had been the flute softly winning the ear with familiar melodies. The tocsin had awakened a glad, far-reaching response, it had resounded from the Ukraine right to Siberia. but the flute's message was simpler and more personal, it spoke of nights in May, fragrant haystacks, rosemary and love. The girl yearned awhile for the magnificent unknown, and then turned to familiar, cosier shores. And in the evenings, instead of the words revolution, party, uprising, rotting tsarism, bourgeoisie, Cadets and Octobrists, she heard—sweetheart, love, dear heart—and, only very occasionally, something about the Ukraine's autonomy and her national demands.

In the summer they met, in the winter they were married. All the guests invited to the wedding were there, all came except Nechuiviter, for on that very morning the gendarmes, after searching his room, arrested him. He only managed to slip his landlady a silk kerchief for the bride. But that flowered silk did not lie on her head, it lay like a heavy reproach on her conscience. Galya hid it from herself and her husband, and it was only now that she put it on because she had nothing else. And for some reason it occurred to Danilo that perhaps Bolshevism, too, took time to become a need and it did not come easily to everyone. But he could work it out later, just now he only wanted to enjoy the happiness of a

man returned to life, to become completely immersed in this happiness.

Night came into their room in a flood of unbelievable blue, and the countless stars of September appeared in the sky. But maybe they were not stars, maybe they were heavenly tears trembling on the eyelashes of night and falling on the earth? And he felt the night, the stars and his wife's shy smile soothe and smooth out his crumpled spirit, bathing it in fresh hope.

"Galya," he whispered, bending over her half-uncovered bosom and sliding his arm under her shoulders.

"What is it, darling?"

"Nothing. Only it's wonderful that there is such a word—Galya."

"And Danilo—that is how I have thought of your name too."

He bent lower over his wife until he felt the soft touch of her eyelashes on his cheek. And that, too, was pure happiness.

Every man, no matter how bad, has a holy of holies in his heart or in his memory. Danilo had two such sanctuaries: childhood memories of land in spring—with its glades yellow with buttercups, and its smooth ponds—and his wife. In those years of separation he had dreamed of the land of his childhood—land on which linens were spread out to bleach and on which the soles of his bare feet had hardened. In his dreams the land had appeared a hundred times fairer, and walking on it he always saw his wife. But when he spoke of it to his mate, Yevsei Golovan, the man merely smiled patronisingly and said: "That's all idealisation, stylisation, the unpurged psychology of the country yokel, for whom a long-horned ox is a priceless treasure and a blushing girl the ideal of beauty."

Golovan had been spoiled rather than educated in Western Europe, he had acquired the highest admiration for its "practical common sense", the "stability" of the western countries, and the psychological analysis that unravelled to the last thread all the emotions of queen and prostitute alike. He knew a number of languages and spoke Ukrainian with the cold indifference of a foreigner. Stylisation was what he dubbed all that made up the inner world of the Ukrainian, and renounced it as something unworthy and antediluvian. The feel of his native soil, the simple song of a girl, a woman's goodness could not move him. He was accustomed to live and love in a practical, businesslike way, at a faster

pace than the blushing village girls lived and loved beneath the Ukrainian skies.

Why did Danilo think of this now? Simply because his happiness of the present still bore the shadow of the past and fear of the future. For after all, who could say what might happen to him tomorrow? The southern wing of the front still hovered over the Bug. But he drove away sombre thoughts and went up to the cradle. In a basket of reeds slept a tiny human being, now and then smacking his lips as though dreaming he was at his mother's breast. How wonderfully everything was arranged in this world!

"Is he asleep?" asked Galya anxiously, rising from the bed.

"Yes." He laid his finger to his lips and went to the table, where a sheet of paper lay beside a bottle of ink. Today, after a long break, he had returned with deep enjoyment to his ethnographic notes, weaving songs and sayings into them. They held for him the fragrance of the golden fields, the good smell of rye bread. They were imbued with a glowing faith.

Again the cockerels crowed in comically breaking voices; Pyotr wakened and began to cry. The mother hurried over to him and Danilo went to the window, smiling.

A shooting-star burst in spray that fell like greenish drops of dew, and in their light a tree stood out for a moment like a dark goblet. A britchka came along the road and stopped by the fence. Three men jumped out and ran to the school. Anyone could see they carried weapons from the way they held their arms. Their cautious steps hardly seemed to touch the blue-misted earth.

"Galya," Danilo whispered on a gasp, and moved away from the window, where the shadow of an unknown figure now stood.

Sensing disaster, she rushed to him, just as a knock sounded on the door.

"They've come for me, Galya."

He put his arms round his wife and kissed her forehead and golden braids.

"No—no—!" Her whole body trembled. "You told them everything, everything."

Are they Petlyura's men? came the searing thought, and now Danilo was sorry he had handed in his guns.

The men were banging on the door now. Danilo gently pushed his wife away and got an axe from under the bed.

"Who's there?" he called in a wooden voice, hearing the weeping of Galya and Pyotr behind him.

"Open the door, Citizen Pidoprigora," came the answer in authoritative tones.

"Who are you?"

"From the regional Cheka."

He heard the other two on the porch.

The axe fell from Danilo's hands. His wife screamed and flung herself on him, but he was already moving forward—he felt it was his whole body, not just his legs advancing—and with fumbling hands he unfastened the door. A flashlight blinded him and hard lips asked, "Are you Citizen Pidoprigora?"

"Yes," he answered mechanically, and the hard lips said, "In the name of the Republic, you are under arrest."

"What for?" burst from him.

"What for?" Galya thrust herself between them.

"You ought to know," was the pitiless answer, and a second flashlight danced merrily over the room, lighting up his wife's hair, the baby in the cradle and the clean sheet of paper on the table.

Held on both sides, Danilo was led out into the street and put into the britchka. His wife grasped his legs. She was torn from him, the britchka moved away. With a scream the woman ran behind it, her hair streaming out.

One of the men looked back and said: "A pretty piece!"

Danilo jumped up from the leather seat. "Let me go! Why are you taking me?" But strong hands held him. His head twisted painfully, he saw her fall. Small, far away from him, she lay like a sheaf lost and forgotten on the road.

The britchka rolled along the sleepy highway, with the ancient lime-trees on which all hopes seemed crucified swooping past like huge black birds, past the crosses protecting the village against typhus, and the horses' hooves beat out, "Che-ka, Che-ka", that dread word, again and again.

XXI

Ivan Sichkar's pond lay peacefully in the sunshine under a swarm of midges. Curly-headed willows grew on the banks, and lacy clouds were reflected in the water.

A boat slipped quietly from the bank. White-bearded Grandad Nikodim, glasses on nose, sat hunched in it reading the Bible. In the old days he used to read it on holidays only, but now that his hands were useless for any kind of work he pored over the Bible on weekdays too. The boat rocked

gently, the letters swam before his eyes and beyond the water he saw a distant kingdom, the wrathful Jehovah of the Jews, the gentle Jesus and his apostles. And the old man, mingling the long ago with the present in his thoughts, sighed deeply. In olden times God and his Chosen walked the earth, now the children of Satan trampled it. Why talk of others when he even feared his own grandson—and the old man turned his head to the tall fence that formed such a strong, dense protection round buildings, orchard and vegetable garden that a snake could not have slipped through.

Old Nikodim had no love for his grandson, a godless brigand, and although Ivan was going back to prison that day, the old man did not grieve about it.

If only they'd make a man of him there, the child of Satan, thought the old man. The bastard has no human feeling for man or beast. A profiteer to the very marrow, he is.

Danilo Zayatchuk appeared on the old road with its shallow ruts gleaming pale among the grass and knot-weed covering it. He saw oid Nikodim and a smile lighted his rugged face. He took off his worn old cap.

"Good day, Grandad Nikodim," he called over the dreamy pond. "How's your health? Going to last another winter?"

"Now what sort of health can an old man like me have?"

"The young ones aren't so chirpy these days, either." Zayatchuk's bald head gleamed in the sunshine. "People's health and lives get ruined before they are ripe nowadays."

The old man raised his finger.

"Fear not those who can kill the body, for the soul cannot be killed," he said, remembering his Bible.

"That's all very well, but it's a pity about the body too," sighed Zayatchuk, thrusting his fingers into his shaggy beard. "Is Ivan at home?"

"Where else would he be?"

"Getting ready for the road?"

"He ought to be ready by now. Go along, go along quick, or the vodka may go sour before you get there."

"It won't, Grandad, between us we'll see that it doesn't," laughed Zayatchuk and made his way gaily into the yard. There his eye was caught by something new—a hawthorn hedge had been planted inside the fence. The clever son-of-a-bitch, nobody'll be able to get over now, he thought, examining the thorny bushes. If they do they'll leave their eyes behind them.

By the gaping mouth of the shed Sichkar's labourer was greasing a britchka axle; although he wore rags for clothes,

he was whistling gaily, and his whole body and his grease brush seemed to dance in time to the tune. Zayatchuk had often noticed that this shock-headed feather-brained lad, actually only a boy, jigged even in church, and when there was dancing in the village he came in his rags and cut such capers that even the dead would have risen to join in.

"Where's Uncle Ivan, Pavlo?"

Pavlo Troyan turned briskly to Zayatchuk and pointed with his brush to the other end of the yard.

"He's in the vegetable plot."

"Is he leaving you?"

"Yes, seems like he's going," Pavlo answered, and started whistling another tune.

"Maybe there won't be much for you to do here? If so, you can come to me." Zayatchuk lowered his voice for the last words. He knew what a good, quick worker Pavlo was, and had often thought of getting him away from Sichkar.

"Maybe, and we'll not quarrel about wages if the food's fit to eat."

A twinkle danced in the corners of Pavlo's grey eyes. He was pretty sick of working for the harsh Sichkar who even thrashed his wife. The previous year Pavlo had wanted to run away with the Red Cossacks, but they had said he was not big enough for a horse and sabre and had refused to take him. A pity he had not thought of stealing his master's colt—they wouldn't have refused him then.

Zayatchuk came closer to Pavlo and said wheedlingly: "You won't go about in rags like that if you work for me, lad. Come along tomorrow and we'll talk about it." He turned and marched with dignity towards Sichkar's big vegetable plot.

Beyond the maize with its darkening beards lay unreaped millet bending to the ground, then came bluish cabbages and further on the drooping heads of sunflowers. In the midst of all this he saw the heavy bulk of Ivan Sichkar: he was lopping off old sunflower heads with a hatchet, leaving the curly young ones on mutilated stems.

These tall sunflower stalks made Zayatchuk think of human figures. He watched Sichkar working his shears and laughed.

"Cutting off the heads of the fathers?"

Sichkar seemed to understand Zayatchuk's thought. Waving the hatchet, he set his foot on a large sunflower head as he answered significantly, "The heads of the fathers have to come off, but as for the children, let them live."

His gruff voice and the mockery on his face ugly with herpes blotches, sent a cold chill down his visitor's spine, who began to regret trying to entice Pavlo away. Perhaps it would be better to discuss it with Ivan himself; after all, he wasn't so very well satisfied with his labourer.

Zinka, Sichkar's quick-eyed wife, came hurrying along the path—plump and short-legged, the broad sleeves of her white blouse flapping; the millet fell back as though in fear from her bright red skirt and sparrows rose with an excited chirping.

"Hurry, Ivan, our guests are getting angry. What a time to start working! Good day, Danilo."

"Good health to you, Zinka. Getting prettier every day." He smiled into the woman's plump face that seemed to be bursting with health.

"My pretty days are over." Pressing her hand to her breast she sighed for Ivan's benefit, and made eyes at Zayatchuk who might not be handsome, but was as strong as a bull.

Ivan glanced at his wife and his spirits fell. He had no very great desire to leave all this glorious freedom and go back behind bars. Why had he been so stubborn? He ought to have handed in the grain, and then he wouldn't be food for prison bugs. And it was all Miroshnichenko's fault. Well—Svirid wouldn't be treading the weeds much longer, he'd follow Vasil Pidoprigora.

Sichkar went to the path where his top-boots lay, shook the golden sunflower dust from his clothes and standing on one foot, began carefully winding the footcloth round his fat white leg. The sparrows were still chirping as they attacked the sunflowers. A mixed fragrance of hemp and bruised sunflower came to Sichkar's nostrils, and his anger against Miroshnichenko mounted.

Indoors, the table was laid, but the guests were standing round the doorway and the great chest. When the master of the house entered they greeted him in tones of sympathy, with sighs and long faces, and sat down on benches and stools. Somebody noticed that old Nikodim was not there, but Zinka explained, to a chorus of approving laughter, that since there'd been this new government Grandad never looked at a sinful glass, only at holy books.

"God grant our Ivan a good journey, and may he soon return to his farm and his wife." Larion Denisenko solemnly raised his glass. The guests chorussed "God grant it," and Ivan dolefully exchanged a glance with Nastya Denisenko who was probably sorrier than anyone else that he was

leaving the village. Even her spiteful eyes softened. Zinka intercepted her husband's look and seethed with fury, but she made no sign, only pursed her lips in a genteel way. If he could ogle that whore at a time like this, no need for her, Zinka, to worry about being faithful to him.

They did not stay long; there was no cause for merrymaking, and the majority were, in fact, thinking less about Sichkar than about their own land.

After seeing his guests to the gate, Ivan once more walked heavily round the yard, threw a bursting sack of food into the britchka, carefully placed two bottles of home-distilled vodka beside it and seated his wife at the back. Pavlo had harnessed the horses and was preparing to jump in when Sichkar took the whip from him.

"You stay home, I'll drive myself."

"But how about getting back?" asked the boy in surprise.

"The mistress'll drive," said Ivan. "She'll have to learn a lot of things, with this new government."

The spirited horses flew out of the yard and past the pond where old Nikodim, hunched in his boat, was still sedulously reading the Bible.

"Why didn't you take Pavlo?" the woman asked. "I'm frightened to death of these horses."

"Learn to do your own driving, the commune's coming," her husband cut her short, and said not another word until they came to the village.

Got his head full of Nastya, thought his wife and her anger mounted.

In the village Sichkar stopped at the houses of all his relations without missing one, near or distant. He would carry in a bottle, drink with them, come out and proceed further. He seemed to be showing off. The whole village could see how Ivan Sichkar took leave of his clan before going back to prison.

XXII

The September sun sank gradually behind vaporous clouds and instantly drew down a covering of near-bleached linen over the fields and far beyond the forest. In the bushes at the edge of the woods a machine-gun snarled and rattled angrily, echoing back from the trees in a thin moan like that of a frightened woman.

Dokia stopped by the stile, listening to the firing.

That must be another of those bands, she thought. Can they have attacked our committee? She sighed, thinking not so much of the band as of Timofi. He had left again before dawn to continue dividing up the estate and kulak land and was not yet back. Her heart was heavy; in trouble, a woman's heart always aches for her husband and all her near ones, praying to a god unknown that they might be protected from disaster.

Just think of it—how many years had passed since she had received the first clumsy caresses from her silent, stern Timofi! They already had a son, almost a man, yet she was still in love with him, and missed him like a lovesick girl when he was away, although never by word or sign did she let other people see it.... When Dmitro was born, when the world of motherhood opened before her with its troubles and joys, a fresh current flowed into her love, and Timofi was no longer only husband, but father too—perhaps because her own father died at about this time. Dokia's joy was almost painful when she met her husband coming home from work at dusk; she would press herself to him, lay her head on his breast and draw in the scents of the wide steppe or the fragrant forest still clinging to the folds of his clothing.

"Oh, you," was all he would say, and smile down at her with melancholy dark eyes, stroking her head as though she were a child.

"I've missed you, Timofi—missed you as if you were at that German war again."

"You funny you!" He would look at her gently and sink into his thoughts, his own cares.

The sun peeped out of a narrow gap between the clouds, casting the shadow-pattern of an apple-tree at the woman's feet.

The sound of horses' hooves came from the distance, closer and closer, then four riders appeared on smooth, handsome horses. Three were in Budyonny caps and the fourth, evidently the commander, wore a Kuban hat. They had carbines slung over their shoulders and red stripes down their dark blue riding breeches. A machine-gun tachanka driven at a furious gallop overtook the riders and the tall, wild-haired Cossack standing up to drive with a swagger shouted to the others over his shoulder as he raced past. The horsemen laughed, called something after him about Galchevsky's band and then their young voices began singing in harmony a song about the Bogun Regiment.

Going after bandits, and laughing and singing as if death

were just a joke, thought the woman wonderingly. And with misted eyes she watched them ride away.

Now they were turning the bend, disappearing—perhaps for ever. Their song had faded into silence, but Dokia's heart ached for these sons of other women as though they were her own.

She did not even hear a cart drive up to the gate, or see her tall, aquiline-nosed Timofi enter the yard.

"Dokia!" his dear voice came to her as though from beneath the earth.

She roused herself and hurried to meet him, her eyes taking in her husband's glowing face, Miroshnichenko beside the horses, and the plough, and the fishing tackle in the cart.

"Going away somewhere again, Timofi? Good evening, Svirid, come inside," she said, bowing him in.

"Good health to all," Miroshnichenko nodded from behind the fence. "No time to sit down, let your husband off as quick as you can. In the morning we start ploughing our new land."

"Estate land?" cried Dokia. She sounded as surprised as though she knew nothing, as though she had not been waiting for this land, dreaming of it, sleeping or waking.

"Not estate land, our own," the chairman laughed.

"Our own?" she said, in real bewilderment now. "Our dessiatine's sowed."

"Now the other's ours too. It *was* estate land but no more!"

"So it is estate land?" Dokia asked again, as though wanting yet more words to affirm her joy.

"I'm telling you—our own!" Broad-faced, sinewy Miroshnichenko rocked with mirth. "You just can't get used to the idea that it's ours now."

"Ours, ours!" she breathed. She stood motionless in the middle of the yard, feeling a great lightness and yet hardly daring to believe it was true.

Thoughts flooded her mind; her eyes saw nothing of the autumn sky, the little yard or the black, sagging fence pecked here and there by bullets. In her mind she saw fields, bright emerald in the early morning light, against a background of golden sky. They now had no tangles of rusty barbed wire, no trenches, even the fresh Red Army graves were washed by waves of spring grain, of stubby-headed wheat, with poppies flaming like red-ribbon bows as the sun rose over the earth. And it was no longer bullets but a flying quail that cut through the ears, happy at the sight of its fledglings tumbling

on the warm soil or rising on youthful wings. And she, Dokia, walked beside Timofi, walked along the path to their fields. The softly whispering corn ears caressed her shoulders and the fragrant dew bathed her feet.

Would all this really come to be?

She started as though she were seeing a picture of her wretched childhood projected on a ragged black cloud.

The arid steppeland.

The landlord's wheat.

Reapers, their faces hollow, their lips cracking till they bled. Infants gasping in the heat. Mothers with no milk in their dry breasts, only tears in their eyes, falling on their babies' wax-like little faces, on the hard-earned thirteenth sheaf.*

Her own mother, on the third day after giving birth, had been reaping the brittle, over-ripe wheat, never pausing to straighten her back. Gritting her teeth with pain, biting dry lips she reaped the thirteenth sheaf almost falling in exhaustion.

"Mother, mother, sit down and rest a moment."

"In a little while, daughter."

The mother stared at the sky in anguish with her pale, sad eyes, straightened up, wiped the sweat from her forehead, groaned, dropped her sickle and collapsed beside it. It cut her hand, but the blood did not spurt out, just a few thick drops and tiny bubbles of foam seeped from her numbed hand. And drops of sweat appeared over her dry, dusty lips.

And only then Dokia noticed, appalled, that her mother's face, sinewy hands and scratched feet were as black as newly-upturned soil tangled with roots.

"Life has flown away like a grey dove." Another reaper, charred by the sun and withered in toil, stooped like a humped shadow over her mother.

"An easy death, at work," said one of the labourers, almost enviously.

"Working for others, neither life nor death is easy," the words seemed to echo from the well of time.

The falling leaves rustled plaintively, her mother's grave swayed before her tear-veiled eyes and floated away with the other mounds, like a tiny boat carried away on hump-backed waves. The guelder roses on the bush beside the grave made a splash of colour as though it were a red

* All the remuneration the farm hands received from the landlord was every thirteenth sheaf they bound.—*Ed.*

kerchief, dropped and forgotten. And year after year the dew kept dropping from those guelder roses like unshed tears for the half-forgotten peasant woman who had been born in want, given birth to a daughter in pain, and died in misery on rough stubble owned by others. There, where the dewdrops fell, the grass grew thicker and higher.

Twice during the summer, the deaf cemetery watchman with the shaggy grey brows mowed the grass, and the wind sang through the low haycocks, melancholy songs about the stepsons of the land, different and yet alike.

...Dokia drove away the unhappy vision and followed her husband indoors.

"Get me something to take to the fields," said Timofi, with an affectionate look at her. "Well, my dear," he went on, "they've given us three more dessiatines of land. Glad?"

"Three dessiatines?" Dokia went up to her husband, hardly daring to believe it. "For keeps? Or maybe just for a year or two?" she went on doubtfully.

"For always. We're proper farmers now." Timofi paced the room with firm steps. "Get something fixed for tomorrow evening, folks'll be coming to see us, we've got to celebrate our good fortune. Maybe good fortune has come to sit down at our table at last."

Dokia nodded, then smiled at her thoughts, and fine lines rayed out from the corners of her brown eyes.

"I wish they'd give us half a dessiatine more, Timofi, that would make it five altogether, a nice round number."

"Look at that, you can count too!" Timofi laughed. He noticed, perhaps for the first time, that the skin round his wife's eyes was lighter than on the rest of her face.

"Wouldn't it be nice?" Dokia laughed too.

"Write and ask the Kombed for it then. Just word it like that: 'I'm half a dessiatine short to make it a nice round figure, so please give me a bit more.'"

"I would too, if that would help."

"Stand them a drink besides."

"I would too."

"Where would you get it?"

"I'd make it myself, it would burn with a blue flame, I'd make it so strong."

"I give up trying to understand women," Timofi made a gesture of defeat with his hands. "With good horses and good health you can make even this plot into a river of wealth as lusty as the Danube, and never go begging for grain to others, cap in hand."

Dokia's joy was too great for words. She pressed her body close to her husband's, and tears of happiness stung her eyes. Timofi smelled of the autumn fields, of late bitter leaves and pungent hemp which even when uncut smells of a tiller's sweat-damp shirt.

She remembered that both her father and Timofi, going out for the first spring ploughing, always put on their Sunday shirts. And this ploughing—did it matter less? Dokia ran over to the chest, raised the heavy lid, and took out a clean, slightly crumpled shirt. She wound it round her rolling pin and smoothed out the creases.

"Here, Timofi, put this on—for the ploughing."

He looked from his wife to the shirt, gave a surprised grunt but began obediently to change—Dokia knew better than he all the customs and beliefs connected with the soil, and while one might not put faith in them, it was wiser not to flout them. The fresh linen felt pleasantly cool to his skin. This shirt was woven of the finest thread which only Dokia knew how to spin. It was not without reason that folks said her fingers could turn plain tow into silver thread.

"Well, time to be going, Dokia—" He wanted to say something especially tender but could find no words. He put his arm round her and—amazing!—kissed her black braid. Then he turned and went out.

"Timofi—" moved and troubled, she overtook him in the entry. "I wish you wouldn't go at night. Galchevsky's band stops at nothing."

She spoke as though her husband did not know himself what was going on.

"Just gossip. If you're afraid of wolves, stay out of the forest, they say. The kulaks won't keep them in food much longer. And then Svirid is taking his rifle along. So keep your chin up.... Now, that's what I don't like, you're always worrying. Well, I suppose you can't help it—a woman." Strong and unhurried, he went with confident steps to the gate.

Her husband's harsh words calmed Dokia. So long as Timofi walked the earth everything would be well, she had nothing to fear. She followed him out with his heavy well-worn coat, for the old wound in his leg might trouble him in the field at night and it was best kept warm. With tears of emotion and happiness in her love, she watched him drive down the highroad, the road along which the Red Army riders had passed.

And nothing told her that she would never see her husband alive again.

The cart climbed a rise. For another moment she saw Timofi's head, then it disappeared beyond the trees bordering the highroad that seemed to plunge down into the dark, low-hanging clouds.

"What are you thinking about so hard?" Miroshnichenko's energetic face with the big blue eyes was smiling. "Still about the land?"

"Uhuh," Timofi grunted.

"We've stirred up a wasps' nest all right. The kulak tribe are howling. If they had their way they'd have more than one of us getting land enough for burial."

"Yes," said Timofi. "The landlords have run away, but they've left their seed in the kulak farms. They won't let go of their fields so easily. We'll have trouble with them yet, and plenty. Varchuk and Denisenko—they're not the kind to give anything away. I saw how they glared. Varchuk's face—it was twisted as though he was being buried alive." Timofi sweated with the effort of such a long speech.

"Nothing'll help them. What's past won't come back however they howl. But to hell with them, a nest of snakes. Let's talk about how we're going to enjoy life now."

That talk had to be postponed, however. They heard the thudding of horses, and then a light britchka raced past trailing a whirling column of dust. The sleek horses seemed to fly rather than gallop. The driver, a lean, black figure, crouched over the horses, his elbows raised, as though he were about to leap on to their backs. He turned and gave them a look of untrammelled hatred.

"Safron Varchuk," Timofi muttered.

"The devil! Where is he rushing so late? Surely not to take a look at the land he's lost?" Miroshnichenko rose a little in his surprise.

"Hope he's not joining some batko or other. They say he was thick as thieves with Shepel, and Galchevsky is Shepel's right hand."

The dust raised by the britchka slowly settled while fallen leaves fluttered like fledglings fallen from the nest.

A solitary figure could be seen coming towards them down the road with its lofty canopy of trees that seemed to stir the low, pendulous clouds.

"Look, isn't that your Dmitro?"

The slender, flaxen-headed youth was hurrying towards them with a light, springy step. His thick shining hair fell over his eyebrows.

"Good evening," he greeted Miroshnichenko. "Father, where are you going?" Then his eyes sparkled as he guessed. "To plough up the estate land?"

"Our own, Dmitro. There's no more estate land. It's all ours." Timofi did not even notice that he was repeating Miroshnichenko's words.

"Ours! I can't believe it," the youth smiled; he caught the edge of the cart and swung up lightly to sit on it, legs dangling, heels drumming against the spokes of the wheel. Every movement was filled with strength and energy, and no sunburn could hide the healthy glow of his cheeks.

"Can't believe it, eh?" roared Svirid. "It's not the same thing as slaving for others for next to nothing, lad. You'll be working your own fields now. Just think it over—what was the first decree of the Soviet government? About the land. I read a novel not long ago when I was in hospital, 'Useless Power' it was called. A depressing book, all about village life. 'A sea of simple ignorance', that's what it called the tormented, plundered labourers. And it was true—what difference was there between a labourer and an ox? The ox paced in front of the plough and the labourer behind it, working himself to death on someone else's land. But the Revolution raised us from a sea of simple ignorance into human beings. If it hadn't been for the Revolution, none of us would have known what life was, let alone this land."

"You even had to pay for room in the graveyard," Dmitro put in shyly.

"You said it," Timofi said with a nod of approval.

"Comrade Savchenko told us that at the meeting when he explained all about the alliance of workers and peasants," said Dmitro with more confidence.

Miroshnichenko looked at him with a smile.

"Listen well to speeches like that, lad. You've got to understand what it's all about, and, more important still, try to become a man of the new world yourself, a soldier of the Revolution. That's your road, Dmitro. And if you leave it you'll fall into a backwater. We hold our happiness in our own two hands. The great thing is not to let it slip through our fingers like chaff, not to become a slave of the soil, a greedy hog slave-driving yourself and your children for no good reason. Get me?"

"Yes, Svirid Yakovlevich," Dmitro answered, raising his eyes to Miroshnichenko's. "And where's our new land?" he asked, turning to his father.

"By the Bug," Miroshnichenko answered for Timofi. "It's good land."

"And is yours nearby?"

"Right alongside. Are you pleased?"

A radiant smile like a child's made the youth's face still more pleasant to look at. "I'll never forget today as long as I live!" he cried jubilantly and thought that maybe it wasn't the way to talk to the first Party member in the village.

"You're right there! These are days when our whole life's turning to the sun." Miroshnichenko moved closer to Dmitro, then touched his leg. "What d'you think you're doing? Trying to get your leg caught in the spokes?"

"No fear!"

"Stop playing the fool. Pull your legs in."

"I'm not playing the fool. Even when I'm whittling or planing something at the bench, I can always feel when the last shaving's off. Then I measure it with the calipers and it's right to a hair. And this is the same.... Do take me with you to the field!"

"We'll manage without you," said Timofi. "You've only just finished work, haven't even eaten."

"So what! On a day like this?... Listen, they're singing in the fields. No one could help singing now! Gosh, if only we'd got more horses," said Miroshnichenko dreamily. "If we could give a horse to every poor peasant.... Because many a man will have to go begging to those same kulaks for the loan of one, and share his crop for it.... How's your carpentering going, Dmitro?"

"All right," said the youth with reserve.

"I know, I know you're doing well. Old Gorenko's always praising you to the skies."

Embarrassed, Dmitro jumped down from the cart and turned unhurriedly towards the village.

"A nice kid," said Svirid Miroshnichenko. "Only he's as dour and silent as his father. True, he was a bit more talkative today because of the excitement."

"It's all right. He won't have to make speeches," Timofi shrugged. "He can shout at a horse, that's enough. And the land—he can farm it as well as any man. The fields need workers, not talkers."

"H'm. So that's your idea, eh?" Miroshnichenko snorted in mingled annoyance and laughter. "So you think all he

needs to know is how to shout at a horse? Queer ideas you get, Timofi. The Revolution was not made just so our children should go on in the same old way. Oh no, very far from it."

That was really well put, thought Timofi turning the words over in his sharp peasant's mind that was more used to settling practical questions than drawing general conclusions. Svirid really was a brainy chap, and how did he know so much?

XXIII

Fields rose in flickering glimpses, rose and drifted back only to rise again. Safron Varchuk's eye picked out among the many-coloured patches the landmarks of his own. All these had now concentrated for him into the figure 30. That figure pursued him like a nightmare, drew the soul from him. The very fields seemed to curve and circle before him in that figure. Thirty dessiatines, he thought with resentment, thirty dessiatines they're taking! Thinking of it made him writhe with pain.

The britchka raced past the Mikhailov farmstead and turned into Lityn woods. Safron sighed with relief, crossed himself, looked about him and sighed again. He was afraid the Kombed men might have guessed where he was going and set out in pursuit.

With keen, alert eyes, he peered into the forest on either side of the road, in the hope of seeing the batko's patrols. But there was nobody in sight.

The exhausted horses slowed from a gallop to a trot, and greenish foam dripping from the bits spattered the grey sand, mingling with the acorn cups that strewed it.

Safron jumped off the britchka and rubbed down the horses with a handful of soft oat straw.

Silence. He could even hear a fat cartridge-shaped acorn fall from branch to branch, strike the grass, rebound like a grasshopper and fall again to settle comfortably on the ground.

Could they have left? Varchuk shivered. Impossible! What if they've moved to another village? I'll find them. I'll find them if I have to go to the end of the world. I'll ask Galchevsky, I'll beg him to settle with all those Kombed bastards. Take thirty dessiatines, will you? May they choke you! The veins on his temples swelled, his head rang, he felt it would burst.

"Get on, you devils!" he shouted and venting his fury on the horses swung a vicious whip that left two dark lines down their backs.

The blacks moved wearily along the road. And the sun, heavy with evening, seemed to be following the britchka through the trees.

Dew was falling when Safron entered the quiet village. He looked about him and the knot of lines on his forehead was instantly smoothed out. Two batko's men stood on the small bridge eyeing the newcomer from under tall fur hats worn at a rakish angle. Unhobbled horses grazed nearby.

"Good evening, lads. Is the batko home?" asked Varchuk in a deliberately brisk, authoritative voice. That was the only way—if you sounded timid, they'd simply take your horses away.

"And who might you be?" A tall, clumsy fellow came up to Varchuk, playing suggestively with a sawed-off gun.

"Batko Galchevsky's cousin," Varchuk lied confidently. "I've brought important news about the positions of Baglyuk's First Cavalry Brigade, part of the Second Red Cossack Division."

"Is that so!" drawled the bandit significantly, and now his narrow eyes held a look of respect. "Go to headquarters, they're waiting."

"Where's headquarters now? Same place—the priest's house?"

"Where else?" The patrol was in no way surprised to find Varchuk so well-informed. "Where'll you find better food or a better bed!" he paused meaningfully before the word bed, and sniggered.

Beside the bridge, under a sagging fence sprawled a partly undressed thug, snoring lustily and quite untroubled by the swarms of flies that crawled all over his face. Near his head lay an empty bottle and a tall hat with the hetman's trefoil and a dirty yellow tassle. A necklace and a red kerchief trailed out of his torn pocket like a trickle of blood.

Too busy plundering and drinking to see what's happening to us, damn them, thought Safron, with a venomous look at the prone figure.

At the door of the priest's house he was stopped by a sentry, armed to the teeth.

"The batko's not at home, he's away on a trip." The sentry examined the unexpected visitor with sharp, unfriendly eyes.

"Not here?" Varchuk thought a moment. "Then I'll speak to his chief of staff, Dobrovolsky."

"He's busy."

"All right, I can wait."

"Wait if you like. But get back to that end of the street. Civilians not allowed here. We've strict rules!"

"Some rules! Swill yourselves stupid and vomit over all the roadside weeds!"

"You mind your tongue! Or I'll have your guts out before you know it!" The sentry snatched his gun from his shoulder.

"Go and scare your woman out of bed with that! I handled those bloody things long before you were whelped.... The batko'll twist your neck like a chicken's if you bother me! Hey, easy now, you son-of-a-bitch!" Varchuk riveted the sentry with his popping black eyes.

At this moment a gay voice called out, "Hello, Safron Andreyevich! What wind's brought you here?"

The sentry wilted and retreated to the back of the porch.

"Omelyan? Omelyan Krupyak?" cried Varchuk, amazed and delighted, eagerly graping the bandit's dry, bony hand.

It was a somewhat short agile man in red corduroy trousers who stood before Safron. His sharp white teeth flashed in a friendly smile, but his close-set, slanting grey eyes held a fickle, secretive spark.

"Good evening, Safron Andreyevich. So you've come to us? For good, maybe? An excellent idea, excellent! Want to fight the commune, is it? Can't just sit still at home? Getting too much for you? Decided to join us?" His words poured out like a mountain stream.

"I'd be glad to, but my years—"

"Oh years, years, what have you done to me!" Krupyak struck a theatrical pose and laughed. "I suppose you've brought news for the batko?"

"Something of that sort," Varchuk answered evasively. "But they say he's not here?"

"No. He's gone to Maidan. He was at school there once. And he's got a new flame somewhere near Zgar too. He's daddy to more girl than one," Krupyak laughed heartily at his own joke.

"A fine time to be fooling with wenches," snorted Safron. "Things are so bad, Omelyan, they're enough to kill a man. And if you don't help us now, don't expect anything from us either. They want to strip us bare as a barked tree."

"Been cutting off your land?" Krupyak said, and his face expressed sympathy.

"They have, the bastards," Varchuk choked with the venom in the words he squeezed out. "They could as well cut

me in two and leave me on the road. How I slaved to get that land! It was just a short step to prosperity, and now some trash has got all my property. If they'd cut out my heart it would have hurt less. But it's land they take, my land!"

"But not for long," said the bandit confidently. "Big reinforcements are coming from the west. They say Pilsudski's not against a fat morsel. And tomorrow or the next day our forces will attack from over the Dniester and the Bug. Of course, that's just a bait for a real fight. And then there'll be a storm that'll sweep the Bolsheviks away like dust."

"God grant it, God grant it." Safron raised his hand in a habitual gesture to cross himself, but catching the other man's mocking look he dropped it and said pleadingly: "Help me, Omelyan, I'll be grateful to the end of my days.... I can't go home like this, with nothing settled, it's killing me. Could not we finish off all that Kombed gang of ours with one blow? They're worse than the soldiers, they know everything; there's not a thing you can hide from them, they'll find it if it's under the ground. Today's the best time—the troops are away from the village, gone for a round-up somewhere, there's only the wagon-drivers left."

Krupyak looked at Safron in amazement and his thin fingers played with the plaited yellow strap of his revolver. He had never seen this wily kulak so miserably helpless. The purple half-moons under his eyes were sunken and the long nose on his wedge-shaped face seemed to droop to his very mouth.

"Only the drivers, you say?" Krupyak turned serious and thoughtful.

"Not another soul!" Varchuk raised his eyes in desperate hope. "The Kombed chairman, the worst of the lot, has gone out to plough at night. We can settle him without any fuss.... Shall we tell Dobrovolsky?"

"Not on your life," Krupyak frowned, and Safron stood in frozen alarm. Lowering his voice, Krupyak explained, "I don't quite trust him, you see. I'm afraid he may slink off to the Reds one of these days. He's a tricky devil. And then there's this amnesty.... No, he's not reliable."

Probably making it all up, to be chief of staff himself, thought Varchuk, who knew Omelyan's ambitious nature. But—what if it was true? He glanced apprehensively at the window of the priest's house—had Dobrovolsky seen him? Safron's chin shook nervously.

"Scared?" Omelyan jeered with an unpleasant laugh. "Keep your pants on, he's busy—with the bottle. And while

he's at it, we'll raid that village of yours. They're devils, those lads of mine. Will they find something worthwhile?"

"What d'you think? Some of those Kombed men have got fine horses now."

"Horses—we've plenty of our own! Took them from a stud farm! They're so fast, your ears hurt," Krupyak bragged. He was never still for a moment, his whole body kept twisting and jerking. "Well, let's go, no time to waste." His slanting eyes hardened.

"That's the way," cried Varchuk, and untroubled by Omelyan's mockery he crossed himself fervently and spat over his shoulder. The pain in his heart was somewhat allayed, and he believed his wish was to come true.

He could clearly picture a dead Miroshnichenko floating in the green water of the Bug, he saw the committee members shot or sabred, their cottages burning. And all his land lay before him again—his, undivided, all his five strips like five fingers on a hand. Instead of the way it was now—with a finger lopped off, and not just one finger either, the very veins were cut.

With an agile leap Krupyak was in the britchka.

"Drive to the pond, that's where those devils of mine are!"

Intoxicated with triumph and a flow of evil strength, Varchuk sent the horses through the village at such a pace that trees and houses seemed to leap awkwardly past, and tears stung his eyes.

His land was coming back to him again, it was close, it seemed to emerge, to float and spread out before the britchka.

Krupyak rudely shattered this sweet, thrilling vision.

"By the way, did anybody see you leave?"

"Can you keep anything secret in a village?" Safron started and shrugged his bony shoulders.

"And what if they get after you when our raid's over—what'll you say? Got something ready?"

"I'll say I went to the doctor. My ward Marta is sick, fortunately. She's got malaria, real bad, worn her down to a shadow."

"And will you look in at the doctor's?"

"Of course. I'm taking him a bit of pork fat. Everything'll be water-tight."

"You're cautious, I know that." Krupyak displayed a double row of sparkling white teeth, then turned serious again. "The doctor's a good idea, but all the same don't go back to the village after our raid."

"Where'll I spend the night?"

Krupyak thought a moment, his hand raised to his cocked hat.

"You've good horses, go to Vinnitsa, and straight to the regional Party committee."

"What on earth for?" Varchuk wondered. "I haven't had anything to do with such big Soviet officials yet, thank God,"

"Go to the land department and find Yarema Gurkalo, he's a friend of mine. Give him my compliments and a bagful of food, those Bolshevik rations won't fill anyone's belly. And ask Yarema to restore your land to you, as a man with a model farm."

"But, Omelyan, does the law allow that?" cried Safron in amazed delight.

"The Bolsheviks don't touch efficient farmers with model farms. And you've had an award, haven't you?"

"A silver medal. Thank you, thank you for advising me. What a head you've got, Omelyan! A born statesman you are!"

Omelyan only sighed. He too had a very high opinion of his own capabilities, but luck had been against him, even under Petlyura he had never risen to be an important batko—one time it was wounds, another time a tongue too sharp—every kind of ill chance had kept him in the shade while snots of twenty-five became ambassadors or ministers. True, Petlyura had more than enough of these ministers for the whole of Europe, but all the same it was an honour—at least they were in the papers.

In the whirlpool of war Krupyak had rubbed shoulders with all kinds of people, he had known the hardships of fighting and the shame of capture, he had seen the tsar and Rasputin, he had met Petlyura and Vyshivany, he had lived in the mansion of a German margrave and in chimneyless Guzul cottages, but never yet had he met a man satisfied with his lot. And he himself was not satisfied either.

In a big yard without a gate Varchuk reined in his horses, and in the same instant he was deafened by a woman's lamentations, the screaming of children and the angry shouts of a squat, broad-shouldered bandit.

"You can't take it, I won't let you, I wore my fingers to the bone spinning and weaving it! The children have nothing to wear!" A tall gaunt woman in unbleached blouse and skirt was clinging frantically to a piece of homespun which the bandit was tugging at savagely.

"Let go, you bitch!"

"I won't not if you kill me! Children—go and fetch folks! Help, help!"

"Call for help, will you! I'll help you!" The bandit gave a vicious tug at the material which fell and rolled, a gay blue strip, along the green grass.

The woman fell prone on it, and her flaxen-haired, crying children flocked to her at once.

The bandit circled round them, sideways, like a raven, then suddenly straightened.

"Ugh—you mangy bitch!"

His bared sabre flashed in a streak through the air and the woman, covering her eyes in terror, huddled to the ground.

But the bandit did not look at her. With a feline spring he made for the shed beside which stood a small, bony cow with moist sad eyes.

The woman screamed, a dreadful scream, and wringing her hands, rushed to intercept him. But it was too late.

There was the thin whistle of steel, blood spurted from the cow's neck, and poured out on the grass. The cow thrust its horns into the ground, swayed, and collapsed awkwardly on to its side.

"There you are, you ugly witch!" The bandit looked at the woman, and wiped his sabre on the grass.

The woman clutched her head with a groan and sank to her knees.

"A good, clean stroke," Krupyak observed. "Had plenty of practice on men."

"Who is he?"

"One of ours, of course. Used to be an officer under Skoropadsky. But his drinking has cost him his men and his rank too."

The bandit began rolling up the homespun in a businesslike way. Nobody tried to stop him now; the woman was still immobile, sunk on her knees, her children round her. She looked no bigger than they in the September dusk that fell over the motionless, despairing group.

XXIV

Timofi Goritsvit and Svirid Miroshnichenko set their nets a little way from the shoal where ripples of golden sand shone through the water.

The waves sighed against the heavy flat-bottomed boat. The golden veins traced on the water by the oars became fainter and finer as evening settled over the banks. In the last

greenish glow of light the men's faces looked younger, less hard.

They tied up the boat and climbed a footpath to the fields.

A horseman in a Budyonny cap flew up a granite spur that jutted out over the Bug, sparkling in the sun's last rays, reined in his horse so that it reared and stood motionless on the edge.

"Good evening, folks," he said in Byelorussian. "Come out to your land?"

The wind fluttered the wavy flaxen strand on his brow and his lively young eyes of a flashing blue peered at the men and swept the wide expanse.

"Yes—our land," Timofi answered, squinting up at the youth, and his heart turned over with the words as though he grasped for the first time their full meaning.

What's happening to me, he thought, listening to his own voice, his eyes fixed on the gay, confident face of the young Red Armyman.

He knew what it was. The very word "land" now had a different ring. His poor old dessiatine wedged in between kulak fields, its warm clods spilling over on to them like honeycomb from a wooden frame, was nothing like his present allocation. Now his land would no longer be an ill-treated orphan, a day labourer; like the sun it had emerged from the mists and lay fair before his eyes. And that young armyman—he too, evidently, was glad Timofi had been given land, and rejoiced like Timofi to know that somewhere in Byelorussia his own Kombed, following Lenin's law, was alloting land to the poor peasants in just the same way.

"Have you been given land at home, too?" asked Timofi, coming closer.

"Mother wrote we've got four dessiatines. Just by the river."

"By the river? Like ours?" said Goritsvit, pleased by the coincidence.

"She wrote me, 'I'm getting old, but life is worth living now,' that's what she wrote," and the man laughed with a flash of white teeth.

"Is it good land, your way?"

"Grows potatoes.... Life is worth living now, she said. We're free people now."

"That's true. And old people can feel the truth.... Is it black soil?"

"Sand and bogland."

"That's bad. You won't grow wheat, then." Goritsvit

sighed. "You mix peat with that sand, peat and plenty of it. It's got power in it, even though it's but old grass."

"I can do that now; they've given us a horse. You can't carry much on your back."

"That's true," Timofi agreed. "Going home soon?"

"Not until we've done with our foes. And that means soon."

He rose in his stirrups, scanned the countryside once more, and turned back to the road. His plaintive song floated over the fields.

Oh, streamlet, little streamlet,
Why is your water low,
Why is your water low
With stones to stop its flow?

"With stones to stop its flow," Timofi mused. Pulling the horse from a lonely patch of over-ripe millet, he walked to the tip of the spur and gazed across the river.

On the far side stretched a broad green expanse cut by a pattern of streams and sparkling little lakes. The village of Ivchanka—wretched-looking, exposed to every wind—stood out against the crimson sunset. For untold ages its people had toiled on the landlord Kolchak's boundless fields. War and want had left their grim imprint on the village: the half-ruined huts were sinking into the ground, the ribs of their rafters showed through rotting roofs—those human dwellings seemed to be dying before your eyes, fading like the last sun ray in that end window. Here and there, however, there was a lighter patch of new timber; the landlord's woods were evidently being drawn upon to make labourer's homes.

"Giving your eyes a feast?" said Miroshnichenko, as though sensing Timofi's thought. "A village for an artist's hand, as Shevchenko wrote."

"An artist's been at work on those hovels all right—they're worse than ours."

"That they are," sighed Miroshnichenko. "But they'll get on to their feet sooner than we shall, you see if they don't."

"Why d'you think so?"

"Because they're a close-knit community. That village has a grand history. In 1905, the Ivchanka peasants were the first to rise against the landlord. And where do most of our partisans come from now? Ivchanka again. When they really get down to work—they'll make the sparks fly! I shan't forget the 9th of November 1917 in a hurry. We'd only just

heard about the Revolution. Well, some Bolsheviks came to Ivchanka in the evening. The square was crowded with people, mostly old folks and children. There were only one or two crippled men, back from the war. But their resolution said, 'Although only grandfathers, women and cripples are here, the enemies of the Revolution shall not tread our soil. We shall take scythes, pitchforks and brooms and sweep them from the earth. Till the last drop of blood is shed we shall stand for the Soviets of workers', peasants' and soldiers' deputies.' And they do stand—firm! Ah, Timofi, what wonderful people they are! Last year when we were fighting Petlyura...."

But Miroshnichenko was not to finish the story. Ivan Bondar emerged heavily from the bushes along the bank.

"Svirid, you're wanted," he said in worried tones. "Someone's come from town. You're needed at once."

"What for, d'you know?" asked Miroshnichenko picking up his rifle.

"No. I suppose it's bandits again. No rest or peace from them. If it isn't Shepel it's Galchevsky, if it isn't Galchevsky it's another of the devil's brood. How much longer are we going to be plagued with them?"

Timofi's melancholy eyes narrowed and he smiled softly.

"... 'Until we've done with our foes,'" he repeated the Byelorussian's words.

Miroshnichenko laughed and clapped Goritsvit on the back.

"That's right enough!... Who's come?" he said, turning to Bondar again.

"Antanas Donelaitis. So it must be something serious."

"Antanas? Yes, he wouldn't come unless it was urgent."

"That's what I say."

Antanas Donelaitis was at the head of the district land department. He had escaped from Lithuania and made his way to Petrograd with other Communists when the Lithuanian Soviet Republic was crushed by the Entente and the Kaiser's troops in 1919. Though badly wounded, he flatly refused to stay in hospital, so he was sent to the south in charge of a column of Baltic seamen collecting food supplies. Again he was wounded, he went into the Chernigov forests, he fought Petlyura, made a raid with Shchors right to Vinnitsa and was wounded once more.

He was bedridden for quite a long time—badly healed wounds opened again, injured bones ached. But as soon as he got a little strength back he hobbled with his stick to the

regional Party committee. There he pushed the stick behind a tall fence and made his way to the secretary, trying not to limp. But the pill he was offered was bitter.

"We're not sending you against the bandits. You're still a sick man."

"What am I supposed to do, then—welfare work?" he asked acidly. His irony missed fire though—his question was answered with all seriousness. "Well, that might be quite a good idea."

All his arguments and pleas, his anger and even tricks got him nowhere. They wouldn't send him, and that was the end of it. At last he got himself appointed head of the land department.

At that time the remnants of Petlyura's and Shepel's men were on the prowl in the countryside, and Antanas spent day after day on horseback. His short, alert figure was a familiar sight all along the Bug and people liked his fiery, merry speeches.

Nobody ever guessed how homesick the young Communist was for his own Lithuania where he had left his parents and sweetheart, where he had first shed his blood. Superintending the division of land somewhere by the Bug, he dreamed of the day when he would do the same by the Niemen.

"Where did you get that?" asked Miroshnichenko, suddenly noticing that Bondar had a sawed-off gun.

"Red Armymen killed a bandit on the edge of the woods. I begged it off them." Bondar's thick lips stretched in a wise, bright smile.

"Aren't you afraid to carry it without a permit?"

"There's no permit needed to defend our Soviet power," Bondar answered firmly and seriously. "But we'd better be going."

"Good-bye, Timofi. I'll try to be back by dawn. If I'm held up I'll send Dmitro with a message. A pity—I was looking forward to my first ploughing on my own new land." Regret softened the firm lines of his resolute face. "Well, come on, Ivan."

The two men set off. Both of them sturdy and broad-shouldered, they looked like brothers.

The path led along the black, rain-swollen stubble right to the village. They took a short cut through the vegetable plots to the school where they at once saw Antanas on a restless young stallion that now and then bared angry teeth. Antanas was talking with animation to members of the Kombed and

some Red Armymen who had placed a German three-inch gun in the middle of the street.

"Hullo, Miroshnichenko! Congratulations!" Donelaitis jumped down from his horse and limped up to Miroshnichenko. "You're a great inventor," he went on with a gesture towards the gun.

"Will it work?" Miroshnichenko looked hopefully into the Lithuanian's green eyes.

"It certainly will. I've examined the whole thing." Donelaitis' pale thin face with its sprinkling of freckles was lighted up by a smile as broad and open as a child's.

"I'm glad," Miroshnichenko sighed with relief. "It's a gun, anyway."

"A gun—what's that? The main thing's—brains! The brains of a working man are worth more than any gun."

In 1918, when the Germans retreated, they had abandoned this gun, damaged, on the road. Miroshnichenko had made up his mind to use it against the bandits. In the wheelwright's shop it had been put on a wooden carriage, then the blacksmith went to work on the broken breech mechanism which lacked a vital part. Miroshnichenko had him rivet a long iron shaft to the breech. The idea was simple—a blow on the shaft explodes the detonator and the shell flies at the target. His invention both pleased and frightened him. What if it wouldn't work?

But now Donelaitis said it would.

By dusk the committee members and armymen were in a forest glade. Antanas had learned that the remnants of Salenko's band had left the Barsk Woods to join up with Galchevsky, and now hurried to cut them off. When they emerged into the fields they were met by the damp fragrance of freshly turned-up soil.

"Our people have been ploughing today," Miroshnichenko told Donelaitis, trying to hide his excitement—he was still thinking of the gun. The darkness thickened and clouds drew together on the horizon, extinguishing the last reddish glow. Suddenly the lower fringe of these clouds stirred, tore away and came flying towards the village.

"Get ready!" Antanas shouted to the gunners.

The horses described a circle and the blunt muzzle faced west, towards the ominous, lowering gloom. The men spread out on the ploughland.

Bandits came galloping from under the clouds. There was a rising thunder of hoofs along the road and two wings of dust rose into the air.

Miroshnichenko stood by the gun. He swung his whole body back, then struck. A long sheet of flame roared from the muzzle. The ground shuddered. A ragged column of earth laced with fire rose before the bandits, swelled out and then gradually dispersed.

"That's the stuff to give 'em!" shouted Antanas, rushing to the gun.

A fine spiral of smoke rose from the breech, but was strangled by a new shell.

"That's the stuff!" Miroshnichenko struck again, and again the ground shuddered.

The bandits leaped from their horses like a flock of crows alighting on the field, but a fountain of earth gushed in their midst, and they flew from it in all directions. Then flashes sparked here and there over the ground. The sawed-off guns made a bigger flash that looked more dangerous than the tiny ones from rifles, but actually the reverse was the case. Ivan Bondar knew that well and aimed carefully at the tiny flashes, his great body pressed into the soil.

He had given his own sawed-off gun to Stepan Kushnir, who lay in a furrow close by cursing heartily after every shot, for the gun had a tremendous kick that nearly lifted him up.

"Played a fine trick on me, you did," growled Kushnir at last.

"I don't deny it," Bondar agreed. "But you see yourself it's all for a good cause."

"I see that all right. Think I'd stand this brute if I didn't? There'll be fewer of those swine, at least."

Bondar said nothing. A long, clumsy figure was rising quite close. The bandit shouted, but his wild, high yell changed suddenly to a hoarse gurgle.

"Stuff your mouth with our earth," grunted Ivan as he reloaded.

"One counter-revolutionary the less."

"If we could shut them all up with lead in one night!"

"We'll shut them up. But not in a night. Everything in its own good time, as Miroshnichenko says. Ugh, what a kick this brute has. My shoulder is one screaming pain," and Kushnir grimaced. "Looks as though they've crawled off.... Ivan, aren't you frightened—at all?"

"Haven't heard my teeth chattering yet."

"I am scared, a bit," Kushnir confessed and his voice sank to a whisper. "Not just for my skin, don't think that. It's got tough long ago. I never thought much about death before. But now that all the fourteen foreign powers have slunk back

into their dens, I'd hate to be killed by some bandit's bullet. I want to work on my own land. And when I see it torn up by all those ravening bastards it hurts like it was my own heart being torn to pieces."

"Yes, there's no power that can take the land from us now," said Bondar.

"That's my mind, too. And it makes me want to live, I can't say how much! As if I'd only just been born. You're older, Ivan Timofeyevich, I suppose you don't feel it the same way."

"No, I feel it too," said Bondar with restraint, then after thinking a moment he added, "That's why I'm here with a rifle instead of crawling into a hole like a badger.... Look, they're falling back."

"They're retreating! That was a smart idea of Miroshnichenko's, with the gun."

"Quiet! Who's that galloping from the woods?" said Bondar, alert.

Again hoofs thundered along the road, and shouts of rejoicing came from the bandits.

"Looks like there's help coming to those devils," said Bondar uneasily, listening to the dull echo from the ground.

"That's what is happening."

Dammit. Had the reinforcements come just one hour later, nothing would have been left of the enemy.

Donelaitis rapped out an order and the Red Armymen moved over the field. The artillerymen dragged the gun back, Miroshnichenko said something to them, and shells began exploding along the road at short intervals, feeling out the moving stream of horsemen. Whooping and whistling, the bandits dismounted and dashed forward to encircle Donelaitis' men.

"Hold tight, Stepan!" Bondar yelled and, bending low, ran to meet the advancing black flood.

Kushnir followed Ivan Bondar, firing as he ran.

Bullets filled the fine night with their piercing, mournful whine. Spurting venom, they harrowed the newly upturned soil and snipped off the tops of ridges between the furrows.... So this is the first sowing of our fields, flashed through Miroshnichenko's mind.

A small group of bandits ran to the gun. Donelaitis and Miroshnichenko rushed to stop them. But at that moment a machine-gun gave a short, angry burst from a gully, spluttered, then as though impatient with itself, resumed its snarling fire.

"The workers' column!" shouted Miroshnichenko happily, and fired again and again at the dark enemy figures fleeing over the ploughed fields.

"Why do you think so?" asked Donelaitis, listening intently to the firing.

"I know Fialkovsky's hand. You hear how he fires? In short businesslike bursts, with a worker's efficiency."

"Good! Savchenko won't let them get away now. What a man!"

"He's coming this way."

Sure enough, the Kombed members were soon joined by the workers' column from the sugar refinery.

"Well, how's it going? Giving them hell?" asked the tall Savchenko, coming up, revolver in hand. Even in the darkness his wavy white hair seemed to gleam and his eyes to sparkle with a gay, youthful light.

After the 1905 Revolution Pavel Savchenko, a jolly lad with a head of wavy hair, had been sent from the Kamenets-Podolsk fortress to Siberia. He came back a reserved, rather stern man, his forehead seamed with lines, his hair touched with grey—a competent, well-read Bolshevik with no little experience in Party underground work. He found none of his family left. His widowed mother had died. His brothers and sisters had gone to work on estates or in factories. The manager of the sugar refinery, remembering what a good worker Savchenko had been, allowed himself to be talked into giving him a job.

In 1917 Savchenko and the revolutionary workers drove off the armed guard set by Prince Kokhan, who owned the refinery, and placed it under the control of the trade union.

"We seem to have been just in time!" Savchenko, now commander of the workers' column, leaned over the dew-wet gun-carriage.

"Just in the nick," Miroshnichenko answered gaily. "I was beginning to think—well, anyway, we were in a tough spot. We'd have been done for if you hadn't come along."

"Chosen a bad place to manoeuvre in. Let's turn the gunfire on the forest, Svirid, we must cut them off before they get their wits back."

Savchenko ran over to Fialkovsky. The experienced machine-gunner's hands vibrated on the gun as though shivering with cold as the belt, winding like a snake, fed the breech with cartridges.

"Hey! Fialkovsky's gun's too hot! Comrade Ilyin, bring water!"

"Right away!"

"D'you hear the ring in all our folks' voices?" said Bondar, smiling into his short moustache.

"Something to be glad about—the workers coming." Kushnir fired, aiming at a flash, then added dreamily and most unexpectedly, "Just look round about—look at the earth wakening with the dawn...."

XXV

When darkness fell Krupyak's column emerged unhurriedly from the Lityn woods. The riders moved like dense clots of darkness, stirrups and bits jingling musically. Behind them came Safron Varchuk in his britchka. He had been to see the doctor and was now bringing some quinine powders home for Marta. He was already cursing himself for the ill-considered haste of his actions. Why did he have to go and rush into the thing so blindly? If he had not begged Krupyak for help, if instead he had talked to him calmly, he might now be on his way to the regional Party committee to get his land back, instead of riding with bandits. Whatever new laws there might be, they would be better than robbery and murder. Sichkar liked this sort of thing, but Varchuk would have kept clear if they hadn't struck at his tenderest spot.

Safron racked his brains to find some means of slipping away from the moving mass. What if one of the villagers saw him? Then all the land he would get would be a dead man's share.... The graveyard with its low mounds rose before his eyes, he heard the singing in the chapel, saw the flickering candles. He spat three times over his left shoulder to drive away the evil vision, but then looked again at the spot where he had seen it. And suddenly he realised there actually were two points of light in the field. Who could have lighted campfires—wayfarers stopping for the night, or some beggars who could not wait till morning to lay their hands on other people's land?

A lean, one-eyed bandit ranged up beside the britchka.

"You from Novobugovka?" he asked Varchuk.

"More or less," Varchuk replied evasively.

"Have they all got horses as good as these?"

"The Kombed have better ones. Go and get them!"

"How about swopping ours?"

"A swopper's bound to come a-cropper."

"A pity you're related to our batko," the one-eyed man chortled and moved away.

The column turned on to the highroad, and Safron's thoughts still surged uselessly; he could think of no clever trick that would get him away from the bandits. He was tired with thinking. In all his life he had never felt so tired, and there ahead loomed the crucifix by the roadside. This was where Sichkar would be waiting.

Safron and Krupyak drew up to the side of the road and reined in their horses.

"Ivan—are you there?" Varchuk called softly.

A dark figure rose from the ditch separating the lime-trees from the fields; even in the darkness it was easy to recognise Sichkar's characteristically stooping form, his back more rounded than usual, humped by the bag of food slung over his shoulders.

"Thank you for helping us, thank you very much." Sichkar's tone was full of respect as he carefully took Krupyak's thin fingers in his great hand.

Krupyak drew hard on his cigarette and in the glow saw the round blotches on Sichkar's red cheeks and the eerie red spark reflected in his eyes from the cigarette.

The hard malice in those eyes amazed him. Only war could put such cruelty into a man's eyes, he thought, and removed the cigarette from his mouth; he had seen enough.

Sichkar noticed Krupyak's confusion and smiled, well pleased. He liked to see eyes fall before his piercing stare—it showed, he thought, that the other man was weaker.

"How's things, Ivan, nothing new?" asked Varchuk, who still hoped for a stroke of luck that might enable him to get away from the bandits.

"Yes, there is something," Sichkar came up closer. "Miroshnichenko isn't spending the night in the fields, he's back in the village."

"And Goritsvit?"

"He stopped by the river."

Safron feared he might have to lead the bandits to Miroshnichenko and his thoughts worked with feverish speed.

"This is bad luck," he said quickly to Krupyak. "I'll take a few of your men off to fix Goritsvit, and Ivan'll go to Miroshnichenko."

"All right," said Krupyak.

He rode over to the bandits, named one to lead the column going to the village, snapped out an order and with a swing of his whip divided the men into two groups. They rode off in different directions.

The cottages in the village gleamed white. The bandits lashed their horses and Sichkar, clinging to a stirrup, flew at top speed along the dusty road. The foodsack hampered him, and his pounding heart reminded him that youth was left well behind.

That blasted sack cut into the flesh under his arms, the weight of bread and pork fat wrung sweat from his body, it trickled down his back, stomach and hips. Stars and cottages whirled before his eyes in a mad dance. But here was Miroshnichenko's house. Sichkar let go the stirrup and leaned drunkenly over the gate. It creaked under his weight, swung and creaked again. It was a long, long time since its owner had mended it. The bandits encircled the house, someone drove a rifle-butt through the window and splinters of glass fell with a plaintive tinkle.

"Hey! Out with you, commune!"

"Come out or we'll burn you alive!"

A light appeared, then came the crying of children.

Sichkar left the gate and made for the sound. The bread in his sack bumped with his steps, rubbing his sweating back. Zinka must have packed it badly.

Bandits were moving about inside, amid the dancing flames and shadows of torches. A flickering red light lay on two little figures in homespun shifts, motionless, frozen with terror.

"Where's your father?" snarled the lean bandit, pointing his gun at them. His one remaining eye protruded and caught the fiery reflection of the torches. "You hear me? Where's your father?"

"I—I don't know.... He went out to the fields in the evening," stammered Nastechka, choking, shivering with cold and fright, feeling under her feet the sloe-berries the bandits had spilt.

Sichkar entered the room, straightened his sack and took his revolver from his pocket. He gave the children a look loaded with malice—they were Miroshnichenko's blood. If they grew up they'd be like him, if they were dead their father's strength would be weakened. Dead children can break any man's spirit.

Hiding his hand with the gun behind him, he went up to the bandit, crushing the berries underfoot, and examined the children with eyes that knew no pity. The light flickered blood-red on their white shifts, and terror was written large on their white faces. Suddenly Nastechka recognised him and a spark of hope lighted her big eyes.

"Oh, Uncle Ivan, please—please—save us!" she cried. She covered her face with her hands and tears trickled through her fingers.

"Tell them where your father is and nobody'll touch you, tell them, my child." Sichkar came closer.

"But I don't know! Cross my heart, I don't!" The little girl looked up at Sichkar with truthful eyes.

He knew she was not deceiving, and pointed his gun at her.

Levko, terrified, flung his arms round her, put himself in front of her to shield her. "Please don't kill my sister!" he implored Sichkar, whom he had never seen before. "Please! I'll watch your geese for nothing if only you won't...."

The word "geese" brought Sichkar a fleeting memory of a childhood song—"Fly away goose, fly away swan, take me flying with you...." He noticed a yellow sunflower petal caught in Levko's hair and remembered his own reply to Zayatchuk, "The fathers' heads need to come off but the children—let them live."

Had they been dumb, he would have let them live; perhaps they would have looked after geese, perhaps they would have gone to school....

Two quick shots, and the children fell. A round loaf slipped from Sichkar's badly packed sack and rolled across the floor to the bodies, where children's blood was already mixed with the juice of the crushed berries. Still holding his gun, Sichkar snatched up the bread and pushed it as far down as possible into his sack.

The thin bandit, to whom murder was just part of the day's work, looked at him in surprise.

"Will it ruin you to lose a loaf?"

"It's not just a loaf any more, it's a clue," Sichkar answered and slipped out of the house like a snake.

XXVI

The moon came up late, and the ragged clouds lightened, curdled, came to life and fled to the west. The river gleamed faintly between its banks. The horses dozed, heads hanging, but Timofi could not sleep.

Deep in his thoughts and his hopes, he paced slowly over the soil, treading as he had never trod before. Although silent with others, he now spoke freely in the solitude, the Goritsvit way, discussing everything with his wife and son. He felt as though they were close to him, he need but call and they would hear him and come.

Now Timofi's words were tender and warm as wheat

waving gently under the July sun. And a new light lay upon the constant hopes and cares which live side by side in the heart of a poor peasant who has never in his life eaten to repletion. His thoughts were filled with poetry, like all dreams of a better life.

We shall plough you up, and sow you. Not grain, but our hearts we shall put into you, so that you may bring forth our happiness, so that there may be no more misery, no more beggars in the world, so that you do not send your toilers to the ends of the earth for coppers, for a bitter crust of labourers' bread.... With all his being Timofi took to himself the land which had been given to him according to Lenin's law.

He remembered something he had heard from Miroshnichenko. The peasants of one Russian village came to Lenin, bringing him a great loaf as a gift. And Lenin took it and thanked the people....

Again he let his thoughts dwell on the warm grain that would grow on his fields; he almost felt it running through his fingers. He could have walked like that over the fields to the very end of the world, engaged in silent converse with the ears of grain, caressing their heads as though they were his children.

Suddenly he heard hoofbeats nearby, then rifle shots followed by a muffled machine-gun answer.

A wounded horse moaned in a voice almost human; it seemed to rise from the ground before him as it flew past the cart, head tossing high, then swung sharply round to the east. A youthful voice hurled a high-pitched, broken "oh" into the sky and was silent.

Timofi started to run back to the cart, but halfway there he remembered Miroshnichenko had taken the rifle and stopped to think.

He was startled by the vicious zip of bullets close to his ear. Falling flat on the damp ground he crawled cautiously towards the firing.

Now Timofi could see the fight proceeding close by and also its inevitable outcome. Four Red Armymen could not hold out long against the thirty bandits who had dismounted and were closing in on the devoted handful in a semi-circle.

The machine-gun stopped. For a moment Timofi thought it was the end, but then he saw by the gunner's movements that he was only changing the barrel. Tense, Timofi watched the bandits rise as dark shadows and run forward.... If only he gets the belt on in time — every cell of his body prayed for it.

Another short spurt would mean the end. Timofi shut his eyes.

An excited young voice said something to the machine-gunner who ground out through his teeth with angry calm, "Right away, Comrade Commander. We'll scare their pants off them."

Spitting, choking, the machine-gun spat white flame. The line of bandits fell prone with shouts and curses. Covered by the machine-gun, the Red Armymen ran swiftly back—the ends of the bandit chain extended to the Bug.

"Comrade Commander," Timofi rose and stood at attention before a medium-sized man in a tall Kuban hat with a revolver in his left hand. "Follow me down to the river, I'll take you across in a boat."

"Who are you?" Stern, searching eyes examined him. In the dim light the commander's face looked blue-white, almost transparent.

"Me?" Timofi did not quite know what to answer. Did they take him for a bandit? "I'm a poor peasant. I'm for Soviet power."

"I'm through." The machine-gunner cursed. "Not one bullet more." He picked up the gun and cursed again, with weary bitterness, as the hot barrel scorched his hands.

A dark trickle of blood was falling from the commander's right hand. A bullet must have gone right through it, and the blood dripped from the pain-stiffened fingers as though all of them had been hit.

"Hell!"

"What's the matter, Ivanenko?"

"Just got stung in the shoulder," said a man lying in a furrow, still firing furiously.

"Can you run?"

"Yes."

Under murderous fire they raced to the river. Bullets snapped viciously through the bushes fringing the bank, but their strength became less and so did the sense of danger as the men came closer to the water.

The moon peeped out through a gap in the clouds and its trailing gleams showed boats floating on the river; a sighing wave knocked them gently against stumps of willows—perhaps those very willows from which they had been carved, then again they hopped like caged birds, now striking the bank, now straining from it with a rattle of chains.

The blood was dripping fast from the commander's hand on to the yellow sand by the river, making a scattered trail to

the boat. The drops of warm human blood may have been just so many reddish acorn cups stuck into the sand by children playing on the bank on an autumn day.

Timofi could see no sign of pain in the commander's pale, calm face, the typical face of a Russian worker, or in his dark eyes with their amber gleam, nor was there any indication of weakness or weariness from loss of blood. The wounded man was fully master of himself, a concentration of willpower.

"Hold your hand up, Comrade Commander, it's your life that's flowing out," said Timofi in his usual harsh manner, and pulled with all his strength at the thin, rusty chain. His fingers whitened, numbed, but gradually one of the links opened up, and Timofi smiled. No need now to waste precious time with the lock.

They were almost in the middle of the river when dark figures appeared on the bank. Rifles flashed and tiny fountains sprang up round the boat like blue-winged dragon-flies.

All the men breathed more easily when they stepped out on the opposite bank.

"Thank you. In the name of the Red Army, thank you." With his left hand the commander shook Timofi's hand firmly.

"Thank *you*. For everything. Let me bandage your wound. My shirt's clean." With a quick movement Timofi ripped open the front of his best shirt. Tiny buttons scattered on the ground.

Smiling, the commander took a small package from his pocket, told the machine-gunner to bandage Ivanenko's shoulder and raised his hand. Blood trickled from his fingers into his sleeve.

"No need. What's your name?"

"Goritsvit. Timofi Goritsvit."

"And mine's Markov. What can I do for you in return?"

"I don't want anything. Been a soldier myself. The Revolution was made for—"

He wanted to say more, but he always found talking difficult, and now, with thick blood still dripping and dripping on to the faded grass of autumn, it was impossible. So he ended in an even, practical tone, "Go to Ivchanka; if those bandits try anything there, the villagers themselves will drive them off."

"Good-bye, then."

Markov kissed Timofi with bloodless lips, compressed in pain, and started down the field path leading to the cottages,

his wounded hand held to his breast. And Timofi still seemed to see the drops of blood dripping on the ground.

Fine lads, Timofi thought with a father's pride and affection. And the Red Armymen too were thinking of him, speaking warm words of the stranger.

What he had just done—and it might not have ended so well, for death was everywhere—raised Timofi in his own eyes and brought joy to his heart. But then he began to worry. The bandits might take the horses, he thought, alarmed.... He listened intently.

Voices raised in dispute carried clearly over the water. Suddenly his ear caught the voice of Safron Varchuk.

Perhaps he was mistaken?

Dark figures slowly climbed the slope, then the rattle of hoofs died away in the distance.

Varchuk, however, had recognised him first. He saw Timofi jump down the bank and lead the Red Armymen to the boat. And the recognition had thrown Varchuk into such a panic that sweat poured down his sloping forehead.

What if Goritsvit had noticed him?

He had actually grovelled before Krupyak, who was maddened by failure, in an effort to persuade him to divide the men in two groups, sending the larger one to the village and leaving a few men hidden in the shrubbery.

Dawn was approaching.

Varchuk's eyes, round with apprehension, searched the river, while his mind was busy with the same two vexing questions—had Timofi seen him, and would he come back? Like most believers he turned to God in times of stress, so now too he sent up an awkwardly worded prayer asking Him to make Timofi return.

Oars creaked somewhere on the river. Safron at once forgot his prayers and God too.

A boat nosed its way out of the darkness. The oarsman, tall and powerful, rowed standing. The boat drove softly into the sand, Timofi jumped on to the bank and a shot rang out.

For an instant Safron felt it was his own heart exploding. He tore at his breast, his eyes fixed on Goritsvit.

He's swaying, thought Varchuk in wild joy, and his hands slipped down, only to clutch at his heart again convulsively—for with uncanny agility Timofi had flung himself into the river. After some time his head showed for a moment above the surface, disappeared, appeared again.

The bandits leaped out of their ambush and the water round Timofi seethed with miniature fountains. Safron,

frantic with fear and rage, rushed about among the bandits pointing, "There he is, look—there! Just come up!"

"Oh, shut up, you—" a tall, clumsy fellow swore at him. "Think we can't see?"

Varchuk withdrew into sulky silence, but still pointed whenever Timofi's head showed above the surface.

The cold water seemed to scald Timofi. His whole body was tensed in effort. With rapid jerks he tore off his jacket and boots under water, came up for a full breath and swam. His strong arms divided the resistant water like oars. He heard nothing of the bullets hissing round him, his ears seemed to be stopped with hot glue and ached terribly.

It's all right, Timofi, a bullet with your name on it has not been made yet, he told himself, as he had done at the front. By the word "bullet" he meant not so much a piece of lead, as death itself, for wounds he had had in plenty. His St. George crosses in the chest at home had dark blood on their orange and black ribbons, soldier's honest blood shed in battle. No, it never even occurred to him that he might be killed now. They might wound him. Nothing new in that. But he'd get over to the other side.

The water hissed around him. He crossed a strong undercurrent, his powerful arms conquering its pull, every muscle feeling the resistance of the icy water. Never mind, Timofi, he told himself, your bullet's not been made yet! And in his concentrated effort he did not see that the water was already reddened with his blood.

Then something strange, something dreadful happened. His strong body suddenly bent and twisted, tortured bones and muscles rigid as though frozen. Fighting the pain, Timofi tore free of the stranglehold. His arms, shoulders and head obeyed his will, but his stone heavy legs pulled him down.

Timofi understood.

For the last time he raised his head above the water looking sorrowfully at the broad banks in the mist of dawn. He felt only sad. He had no fear, but his whole being, already half dead, was filled with a great regret for something that would never come now. He did not realise that his regret was for the years he would never know, the years which had for so long lived in his fairest hopes, in his dreams.... He had come so close to the realisation of his dreams, and now he had to go forever.... Perhaps Dokia, Dmitro—a warmth came into his eyes. In that one moment all his life passed in review before him. He saw his childhood, the rainy nights on the Galician front, his friends who had been killed—and the land.

"Landlords' land? Not landlords' land, our own. Used to be landlords' land, now it's ours, given us by Lenin's law."

He saw himself walking with Miroshnichenko and Dmitro along the highroad, with the wheat rising on both sides. And in the distance the dear face of Lenin smiled at him. "Peasants brought him a great loaf...." Why, it was they themselves who had brought bread to their leader. Miroshnichenko had mixed everything up....

And in the last seconds of his life, his whole being yearned for that future, untasted although so near—after all, his whole life had been lived for the future. Timofi did not feel the icy water bind his weary, swollen sinews or the swift current carry him to the broad reach.

"Done for," said the tall, clumsy bandit, slung his gun over his shoulder and climbed the path up the slope.

"A stubborn devil," said another, lighting a cigarette. "Look how far he swam in that cold water!"

Safron wanted to ask them to wait, in case Timofi came up again, but did not risk it. He stood there motionless, watching the river, his face stiff with tension.

The bandits topped the rise, hoofs beat a tattoo, the dawn flung a crimson scarf along the horizon, the waves gradually released the empty boat from the grip of the sand and with a sigh it floated down after the man who had rowed it; still Varchuk stood among the bushes on the bank.

"Jesus Christ, in Thy mercy help me a sinner in my hour of need. If only...." His mind ranged over all his most immediate cares and his dark, unshining eyes set in swollen purple half-moons were misty with the moisture of dawn.

The sound of singing now mingled with Safron's monotonous muttering, singing coming from the river. At first it did not disturb his prayers, but suddenly he started—the tune changed and he heard a lively profane ditty. There was mischief and something like shyness in the singer's voice, but when the ditty ended came a burst of laughter, and two voices, closer now, took up a fresh song bawling it in high delight.

Bored in Heaven and cold as well,
God picked up a poker,
Went to warm himself in Hell,
Took a job as stoker.

Godless heathen! Varchuk almost jumped from his hiding place in his righteous indignation, but stopped himself in time and peered at the river.

A boat floated into view at the very spot where Timofi's head had appeared the last time. A creel lay in the bottom, and two boys were rowing—Gritsko Shevchik and Varivon Ocheret.

"A grand song, Gritsko! A pity I can't sing it at home—my old man would tear my hair out, roots and scalp and all," laughed Varivon, looked about him and whispered, "Look, somebody's nets. What about giving them a shake?"

"Are you crazy?" Gritsko answered, alarmed at the very idea.

"Why not! We'll just try one. There's nobody about. Not a single soul." Varivon picked up a stick and pulled the net closer. "Gosh, it's heavy. Must be full of fish. Help me, Gritsko!"

One more hard pull—and both froze with horror. They saw the face of Timofi Goritsvit, peaceful with half-closed eyes. The first rays of the rising sun sparkled on the grains of sand caught in the lines raying out from his eyes and mouth.

XXVII

The news felled Dokia. Without a word, without a groan she collapsed on her knees in the middle of the yard, hands clutching at her breast. She tried to rise but fell again, and her heavy hair got loose and covered her. Then with an effort she crawled to the gate, scraping her knees raw, and clung with both hands to the post.

A cart creaked monotonously as it came down the street. Dokia pulled herself up and rushed blindly out.

A black covering lay over the cart, the hue of disaster itself. Still unable to believe it, Dokia drew the covering back, and the ground swayed beneath her feet. Before her lay the calm, waxen face of her husband. There was no sign of struggle or suffering, only a faint shade of regret, as though even now he was troubled by something he had not accomplished. The face swam before her eyes, it seemed to come close, closer, as though Timofi were merging with her.

"Bandits wounded him.... Fell in the water.... Cramp...." Words came to her as though through a dense wall of rain, but who spoke, who tried to comfort her she did not know.

Her body arched backwards in her agony but her eyes saw nothing of the sky, only the black covering.

She swayed and collapsed over the side of the cart. She beat her head on her husband's wet clothes, her thick hair fell over the cart like a pall.

"Timofi.... Timofi, get up!" she whispered, ordering rather than begging, as she touched his cold hand with its knotted blue veins. Suddenly she saw that his shirt had only one glass button left, solitary, like a tear.

"Timofi—get up!"

"Mother ... don't cry like that.... Mother!"

With difficulty she moved her hands from her face, and for a moment could not tell whether it was Dmitro or Timofi himself before her.

"Mother...."

Tears rose in the youth's reddened eyes, he bit his lip to keep back his own sobs. The effort aged and distorted his face, drew lines across his forehead, and made Dmitro more like his father than ever.

"Timofi—Dmitro, son, am I crying? It's my—my heart draining away."

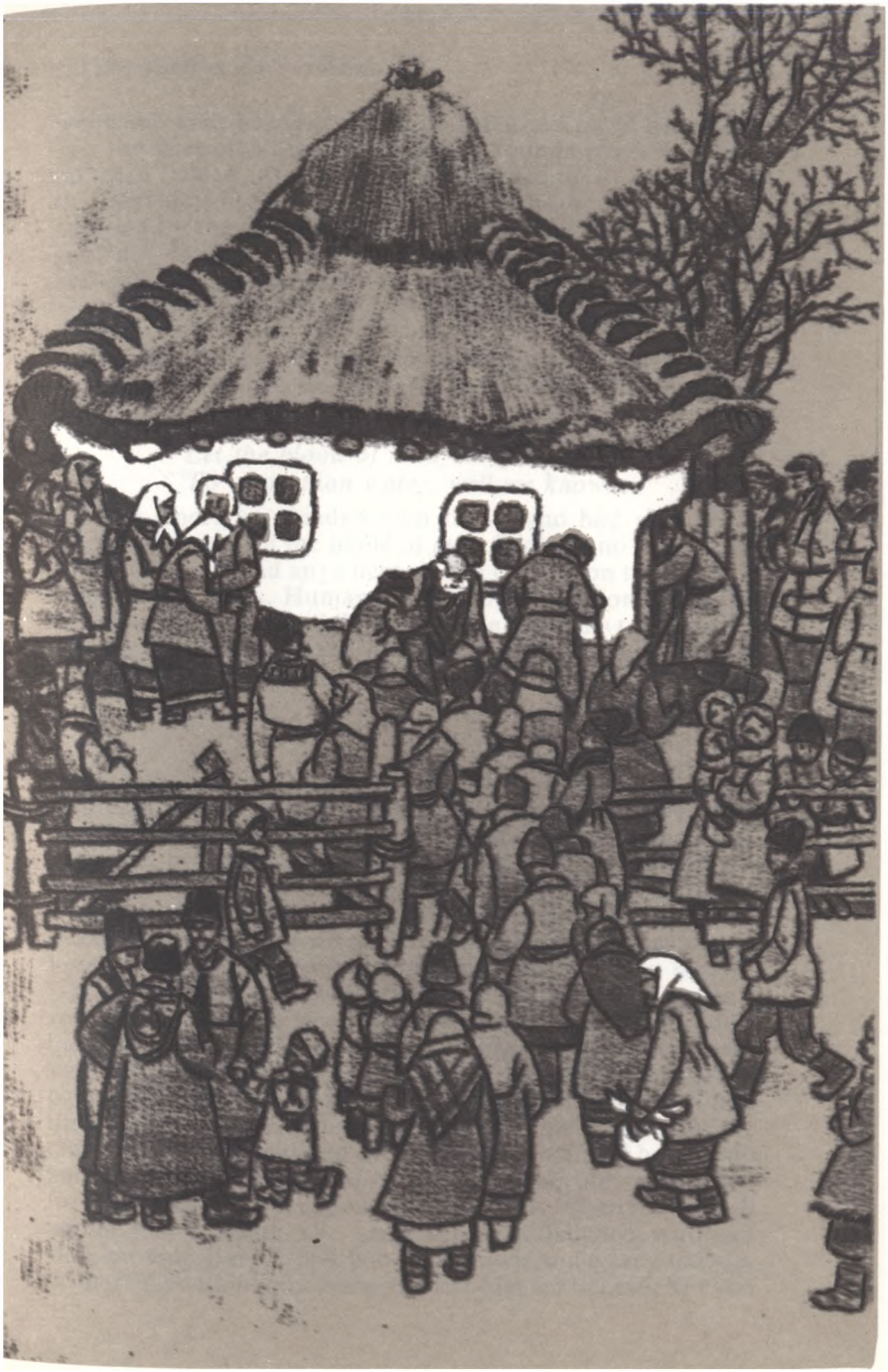
Tears streaming down her face, Dokia took a step towards her son. He had brought with him the scent of fields and autumn leaves, as Timofi had the evening before. And with that came the full understanding that her husband was no more.

Miroshnichenko approached—grim, frowning, looking years older. He stooped silently over Timofi, heavy with his own grief and that of others, then made his way home as though in a hideous dream.

The metallic sadness of a tolling bell throbbed over the village. Men removed their hats as they passed the cottage and women shook their heads and sighed. Even enemies did not rejoice today, even upon them the blood of children lay heavy.

Miroshnichenko's house and yard were filled with people, and still more and more came, from distant woods and hamlets—dusty, stern, in heavy peasant coats and stiff homespun, with wordless peasant grief, carrying the blessed bread in their hands. With cracked lips—some muttering words of prayer in condolence, others cursing the murderers—they kissed their Svirid, the good, just man, and laid the bread on the bench because the coffin stood on the table. Kind friends had laid brother and sister in the same coffin—let them be together in the next world too, to run over its green meadows and through its woods, seeking there the spring they had not found on earth.

All day and all night Miroshnichenko sat beside his children, his head hanging heavily on his breast which had so often been bared to death. People saw him catch his breath



when the pain became too much for a mortal to bear, they saw the lines etch themselves deeply round eyes from which no tears flowed, as though they had dried up. It was only as the next day broke that he rose, left the house and stood swaying by the fence looking eastward; and there at last the sun, not death, brought difficult tears to his eyes. He did not dry them and they fell, unheeded, on the dew-wet weeds which his children's feet had trodden only two days before.

Beyond Karpets' cottage the sadness of centuries floated from the strings of a kobza and a lonely voice that wrung the heart sang:

Let the blood of man not flow,
'Tis more than water, well we know....

Blind Andriyko pleaded with those who had sight to be human, not to shed the blood of men. Blood is no plain water which can be found anywhere: in the clouds, on the grass, in lakes, in the wells. Human blood is only here, on earth, it is the life of fathers and children, it is the maiden's tender blush and the brightness in the eyes of a youth, it is courage in battle and the sweet smile of a child.

XXVIII

Miroshnichenko went to his foster-mother, Katerina Chumak, whose face was burned dark as the soil itself. Six sons of her own and four foster children she had carried in her arms, brought them up in the cradle and in the boat by the river that they might learn to love people and the land and the water, the fish in the river and the bird in the sky, the soil of the fields and the tree on the bank. She herself was woven of love, song and toil. Uncomplaining, she did the hardest work, first women's work and after Karpo's death men's work as well. On the good fields she could reap a stack and a half, she would cut two hundred sheaves of curly peas working at night so that no one should see her; she brought in oats and barley as capably as the best reaper; she was a fine thresher, ground the grain on a hand-mill, made shirts for the children and embroidered them too, and thatched house and barn. When the work was very heavy she only wiped her forehead and kept her thoughts to herself. When it was well within her strength she sang songs or laughed with her slow-moving Karpo. She had a quick wit and a racy tongue, in sparring with her husband she left him far behind; he even

threatened to beat her for it at times, but actually he never laid a finger on her.

Katerina met her foster-son at the edge of the vegetable plot where the warm light of evening lay on the thickly-growing hemp, sunflowers and garden flowers, and the river breathed its evening freshness. Her whole life long Katerina Chumak had known the river as friend and enemy, sometimes tender and sweet like a sleepy infant, sometimes as wild and savage as a beast. Now one of her hands held a sickle, its teeth dark with green juice and soil, and the other was pressed to the breast that had suckled Svirid. Standing beside him she seemed a child herself, only her expressive, golden-brown eyes held the burden laid on her at the end of one century and the beginning of the next. The most difficult of those days had ploughed the many furrows round those eyes, but had failed to kill their shining courage, their wisdom, their laughter and the directness that delighted the straightforward and confounded the wily.

"Mother—I've come. And again in my greatest trouble."

"You are suffering for others, my son. Somebody must suffer for them, so that they shall be better." The mother rested her sickle on her shoulder and went up to her biggest son.

He took her dry hand which disappeared entirely in his great palm. And standing before this small woman, seeing the sadness in her wise eyes, he once more felt himself a child. A little boat rocked beside the willows, and this too held a fragment of his distant childhood when Katerina took him to wonderful, mysterious places, from which they returned with fish, purple willow or hay. And when the stars glimmered and blurred before his eyes into golden butterflies, she sang him lullabies about the crane, the sea-gull, the stork or the nightingale, for she loved all birds.

They looked at one another, then turned their eyes to the river, which flowed gently beneath swarms of dancing midges. Birds described curving lines over the water, they seemed to scoop up the rosy light with their wings and carry it to their nests, on which blue dusk was already descending.

"Have you a little time, my child?" Katerina asked softly.

"Yes, Mother."

"Perhaps we can go to the other side? I've cut some rushes there."

"Let's go then, Mother."

They took their places in the boat, but now it was the son, not the mother, who rowed. A last forgotten ray of sunshine

lay upon the rosy water, the first stars gleamed in the sky and grey clouds like thickets of hornbeam rose up beyond the shocks on the meadow. The water rippled under the oars, and he seemed to hear in it the voices of his children. His heart ached for them, and his mother's for him as well.

"Look, Svirid, there's your island," and she pointed to a round patch of green rising from the rose and blue water.

Yes, that had been his first land, that miniature field with its few willows. Katerina, with no land of her own, had had to till the fields of others, and for each of her children she had sought out a tiny island on the Bug; the children had loved those small islets, and so had their mother, yearning for real land. And now she had this land, it had been measured out by her son whose love for the soil had, it may be, begun with this tiny island.

On the low farther bank Katerina sat down on a bundle of rushes, and he lay on the grass.

"You'll catch cold, Svirid."

"Mother, if you only knew...."

"I know, my son. You died two deaths and I died four...." She raised him from the ground and made him sit beside her, on the crackling bundle. "My poor dear son!"

Checking her tears, she told him of the first days and months of his life, the first time he called her mother, the first time he kissed her. And now as he kissed her grey hair and roughened hand he felt himself a child again. And with her quiet voice she separated his pain from anger and quenched the fire of his hatred, for he was suffering not for himself alone, but for his people too, and since they were still unhappy he had to give them more of his love and understanding.

When night fell and river and sky merged into a single star-filled expanse, mother and son returned home. Now she rowed and he lay silently on the bundles of rushes. Fishes jumped about them, birds flew overhead in deeper blurs of darkness, and the ripple of water and the whirr of wings lulled him to sleep. And in his dreams he was a child again with his mother singing to him of the stork who walked over his island.

The next day Miroshnichenko said good-bye to his mother and set off for the Kombed. But on the way he turned towards his cottage which he had not even locked up the previous evening. And the closer he came to it, the more heavily weighed his heart; again everything rose before his

eyes, he heard his children's voices and saw them before him.

As he came to the gate, he did indeed hear a child's laughter. He stopped, unable to move or breathe. Was he losing his mind? But then the laughter came again, and the melodious voice of a woman, a voice he did not know. With fear in his heart he opened the door and entered. A slender, golden-haired woman sat on the bench, gazing down at the flaxen-headed baby that crowed and chuckled on her knees. As Miroshnichenko came in she rose and a timid smile flickered over her sweet, sorrowful face. She went forward to meet him, holding the child close.

"Forgive me for coming to you like this, Svirid Yakovlevich," she said. "But there's no one else in the world who can help me in my trouble. And people have told me about you...." Tears trembled on her eyelashes like morning dew.

The child turned to look at the stranger. Miroshnichenko held out his arms hesitantly and the baby stretched towards him, wrinkling his nose in a funny smile. The mother wound his flannel blanket tighter and handed him to Miroshnichenko—she could not know that in doing so she stabbed him in the heart.

Miroshnichenko paced up and down the room while the woman told him through her tears how her husband had been taken to the Cheka. She told him everything about Danilo whom Miroshnichenko remembered well, told him how they had decided not to conceal anything, not a single thing, to make a clean breast of it all and be done with it. They had so hoped that the new authorities would be lenient with him, forgive him.... Miroshnichenko felt certain they had been sincere, they could not have ill intentions.

"I don't know whether I can really help you," he said at last, after listening attentively to all she had to say. "But I'll go to the gubernia committee today, and talk to a man there, a very good Communist—he too wanted to be a teacher once, by the way. I hope he may help you."

"Oh—thank you, Svirid Yakovlevich." The woman clasped her hands to her breast.

Pyotr had been wriggling contentedly, rubbing his eyes with his fists, and now began to fall asleep. Miroshnichenko looked sadly at the little face, walked softly up and down, and then, under his breath, began to sing a song about the birds of his own childhood.

XXIX

The wind furrowed the river, howling and whipping up greenish foam. A curly-edged cloud over Ivchanka beyond the river suddenly poured out a torrent of rain from its grey and lilac heart.

"Nice rain they're getting over there," Semyon Poberezhny squinted merrily at it from under his overhanging brows, handling his oars with the ease of daily custom.

"Not bad. If only the warm weather holds," said Ivan Rudenko, glancing at the darkening sky.

Miroshnichenko took no part in the talk, he sat hunched over, staring at the floor of the boat covered with duckweed and fish scales. His eyes, whose sight had dimmed in the last few days, found distances intolerable, the horizon seemed to advance frowningly on him as it does at dusk. And his thoughts returned again and again to the place where his children lay beneath the cherry-trees. He had already covered the grave with turf and planted the daisies that he had brought with the dahlias from the manor garden. For all his work he had taken only flowers, which had caused no little surprise among the villagers.

If there's no rain, I'll have to water them, thought Miroshnichenko.

Ivan Rudenko looked compassionately at his friend staring so stonily at the floor of the boat. Rudenko had got a few days off from his work at the executive committee in order to stay with Miroshnichenko. And even his wife, who still lived in one of the outlying villages, did not grumble, only said with gentle reproach, "What with your work and your friends, you're getting a stranger to your family and the land."

"That's not true," he answered. "How much longer must I beg you to come and join me?"

His wife, however, would not agree. "I can't go to a strange place. This is my home, my own soil. I can't live on bought stuff. A job's like the wind, you never know where it'll take you. The best job of all is the land." The upshot was that for some time now she had lived like a widow and he like an old bachelor.

The nose of the boat slid up the sand with a hiss and Rudenko jumped out, holding the wooden holster of his mauser. Miroshnichenko followed, stepping into a foam-crowned ripple of water.

"Shall I wait for you?" asked Poberezhny.

"No, don't bother if you've anything you want to do."

"I've only one thing to look after—the fishing. My new land's sown, thank the Lord. I go to the field, stretch out my hands and the air seems to rise warmer than in other places." The fisherman, usually so silent, had found his tongue.

"No—really warmer?" Rudenko laughed slyly, and the shallow pockmarks stirred on his face; they did not mar his looks, only brought the blood closer to the skin so that summer and winter, in joy and sorrow, Rudenko's face was rosy.

"Your own land's like your own child—always better than any other." Poberezhny's brows, heavy as though pasted on, flew up. "When I'd no field before my eyes or beneath my feet, I'd nothing to be gay about. You can't depend on this for a living." He raised his oar and water trickled from it into his sleeve. "Still, all my life I've kept the wolf from the door with my oars, and even bought a horse, too. Come for supper, I'll give you some grand fish soup."

Poberezhny pushed off and the boat danced on the water like a seal.

"He's a good man, that fisherman of yours, Svirid," said Rudenko, making another attempt to distract his friend's thoughts.

"Honest to the core, and stubborn as flint. When the Austrians retreated from Ivchanka he didn't want them coming through his village. So he hid himself on the bank and started rattling a spoon on an empty bucket. And he did such a good job of it, the Austrians couldn't tell the difference between his drumming and a machine-gun."

"You don't say!" smiled Rudenko, glad to have succeeded in getting his friend to talk.

"Yes, it's the truth. That's why the Austrians took a roundabout route and avoided our village. That man takes understanding. You'll not find a quieter man than Semyon Poberezhny anywhere in these parts. And it's quite true that he's fought off poverty all his life with his oars. And then, all of a sudden, out he goes all alone against the enemy—and with a bucket, of all things! And nobody would have ever known about it if Ulyana hadn't told—she was in the fields and nearly died of fright, thought the Austrians would shoot Semyon and her too."

"If Kulnitsky'd done that, Moscow'd have known of it long ago, not to mention Odessa. He'd have been a general by now!" Rudenko smiled, then frowned. "Never goes outside the district, has got nothing but his fine leather coat

to brag about, does nothing but make fine speeches and bawl folks out, and plays the great revolutionary."

"Why don't you get rid of him?"

"Ever tried to catch an eel with your bare hands?"

"Hardly."

"Kulnitsky's that eel. Clever, tough, quick. He'll pick up another man's idea and before you know where you are he's either airing it all over the district as his own or else adjusting himself to it, whichever suits him best. He's the kind that'll crawl in one ear and out of the other."

"Well, if it's only in and out again, that's not so bad. But what if he crawls into hearts and doesn't crawl out?" Miroshnichenko looked hard at his friend with his inflamed eyes.

Rudenko stopped short, struck by these words. But then he reflected—perhaps they were exaggerating Kulnitsky's faults? The failings of others always seem worse than one's own.

"He's more likely to stick in one's gizzard. It's a long way to hearts, he can't reach that far—too small."

"A needle's not so big either, but if it gets into your blood—a man doesn't even know he's carrying death inside him. You think a bit about Kulnitsky, Ivan, and watch him too. Maybe I'm too hard on him, but he does get under my skin. Maybe he's just a careerist, and that's all."

"But you know what Lenin said about careerists? No ideals and no honour.... I'll keep an eye on Kulnitsky, a pity I don't see much of him.... Well, now let's look for the place where that band got Goritsvit."

Separating, they walked up and down the bank looking for traces. They rounded a granite rock that rose like a muscular fist. Between its fingers a sumac bush, locally known as paradise bush, flaunted its crimson banner. Rudenko stopped to admire it.

"Born of a miracle, and holds on by a miracle."

They went a little further and found the tracks of many feet and also a number of cartridge cases among the bushes.

"It's from here the bandits fired at the poor fellow." Miroshnichenko sighed.

They walked up and down beside the water, then climbed to the fields. There, on the rich black soil, they found plenty of hoof marks. Rudenko's attention was attracted by two wheel ruts.

"Either that's the ataman's britchka, or someone guided the bandits here."

"Varchuk was off somewhere on his britchka that day, people said he was going to the doctor. But which one?" Miroshnichenko's eyes narrowed.

"And did he come back from his doctor, or is he still there?" Rudenko wondered.

"I don't think he's back."

"The horse had a shoe loose on its near forefoot." Ivan Rudenko pointed to a clear print. "We'll make a mould of it, anyway." He traced a ring round the print with the toe of his boot and went on. He found the britchka tracks increasingly interesting; there was a recurring irregularity in the right rut. "Looks as if the rim was crooked on the right back wheel."

Miroshnichenko squatted down over the track and confirmed that it really did point to an iron rim being not quite in place.

"There's only a dozen britchkas in the village. We'll take a look at all of them. Maybe we'll be able to smoke out that snakes' nest."

XXX

Safron Varchuk lashed his weary horses, squeezing all he could out of them. He beat them now with the long whip, now with its handle which was sticky with sweat. Someone had stolen his good whip near Vinnitsa and Safron had had to pay five hundred rubles, no less, for a bit of flabby rubbish. Soon enough he broke the dry handle over the horses' backs; he stole into a graveyard, cut off a pliant cherry branch, fastened the lash to it, sprang up on to the driving seat and let the supple twig dance over the horses' backs.

Never had he treated his blacks so cruelly. But he had to find that damned Yarema Gurkalo who had gone off to some village or other. Varchuk had struck his trail among the Mizyakov farms and followed it into the Bug River district, looking about him as he drove with dark, lustreless eyes. Here too people were remeasuring the land; they were sowing late grain by hand on their new fields, may the frost grip it!

He ran Gurkalo to earth at a big outlying farmstead with orchards on three sides and a pond on the fourth. And it was with no little surprise that he found the high official not inside the house, before a table covered with important documents, but in an oaken shed beside a still. On the high official's knees lay a wooden holster, and on the holster stood a bowl with some food and a thick glass of liquor.

The shed was filled with smoke, and two indistinct forms

moved in it like demons in hell, attending to the still and the important guest. The peasants' manner was servile, the official's condescending. Gurkalo did not vouchsafe a glance at the new arrival, he merely pointed to a log on which Safron seated himself in silence. Through the haze hands came to him holding a glass, a piece of bread and ham, and all silently raised their glasses. This silence gave Safron the creeps—there was something really infernal in it. The smoke brought tears to his eyes and one tear fell into his glass.

"Never mix liquor with water, man, you'll spoil it," said Gurkalo didactically, and a fawning giggle came from the smoke.

"It's not water you drink with it these days, it's blood—half and half," Safron answered unflinchingly, and Gurkalo turned a long, interested look on him.

"Getting too hot for you, eh?" His brown eyes, dulled with the drink, searched and probed Safron.

And Safron understood that these strangers were of his own mind, that his words pleased them, and he continued confidently.

"I should say so! Pick up one live coal and you'll toss it from hand to hand, but this way, there's a whole shovelful deep inside you, where you can't get at it."

"How true!" came a voice from the haze.

"Fill his glass, let him put out his fire." Gurkalo's determined face with the shaggy brows and crooked, impudently tilted nose became jovial. The skin on his cheeks was coarse, but towards the temples it was thinner and pale blue veins showed through. He stood up, and Safron was struck by his figure: it was like a haystack turned upside down, the broad shoulders and the rest of him tapering down to a point, the effect accentuated by his loose field jacket and tight-fitting breeches.

Gurkalo went out of the shed into the spacious yard, and Safron followed.

"Yarema Ivanovich," Safron said, lowering his voice, "I've a very big request."

"No requests today, please, my dear fellow. If you want to drink with me—good, I'm glad to have you, but business must wait till tomorrow." He wiped his purple cheeks with a handkerchief and bared his big yellow fangs in a grin.

So Safron had to drink almost the whole day long. The wood under the still had long ceased to blaze; the men who had been busy at the still had given up and were snoring on the floor, but Gurkalo still tried to outdrink Safron. It was

luck for Safron that a smoked ham hung overhead. The gleaming white surface of bone became longer as piece after piece of the pink and juicy, garlic-seasoned meat was sliced off. With food like that to help him along, Safron could have outdrunk the devil himself. This won the favour of the high official; he smiled benevolently.

"That's what I call a drinking partner, and not one of those," with a scornful nod he indicated the snoring men who lay with sharp elbows thrust out as though defending themselves even in their sleep. "What's brought you here?" he went on.

"I'm to give you Omelyan Krupyak's best regards and a parcel," Safron answered readily, noting the swelling veins on the high official's temples.

"From Omelyan?" Gurkalo's eyes lost their glaze and turned very sober. He glanced at the men and at the door. "When did you see him?"

"The day before yesterday."

"Where was he?" Gurkalo asked quickly.

"Lityn way."

"Have you known him long?"

"Since 'nineteen. When our people retreated, I picked him up in the woods, wounded, and looked after him at my farm."

"Where was his wound?"

"In the hip."

Varchuk's replies evidently satisfied Gurkalo. He rose, and suggested a stroll in the orchard. The sun was setting, and its last light quivered on the thick trees that emitted a fragrance of warm fruit and hollow trunks. Fish leaped in the pond and cows stood up to their knees in water, pink drops falling from their lips. Varchuk looked at all this and almost clutched at his heart, it reminded him so terribly of his own farmhouse and pond. But he had no fish, the women poisoned them with the hemp they soaked. If all went well, he would certainly breed carp and forbid his women to soak their hemp in the pond. Here, beside the water, to the quacking of ducks, Safron told everything to Yarema Gurkalo, who listened in silence, thoughtfully sucking his cigarette.

"Well.... I think I can help you a bit in your trouble. I can't give you all your land back—wouldn't do to have you too rich under the new regime—but ten dessiatines, I think we can manage that."

"Even that's something, it's better than nothing. I'll remember you in my prayers as long as I live."

"Much good that will do me," Gurkalo shrugged off Varchuk's prayers. "Only remember, it may take a little time. If the head of the land department isn't back you'll be in luck, if he is you'll have to wait till he goes away again. There's no getting round that man."

"Maybe we'd better set off for town right away, then?"

"It's too late now. We'll go tomorrow. We'd better finish what's left of the drink now."

At dawn, Varchuk drove Gurkalo to Vinnitsa. The high official was amazing—he looked as smart and fresh as ever, with no signs of a hangover. He had taken only a mug of kvass in the morning; then, after whispering something to his host, he had leaped lightly into the britchka. On the way he learned all he needed to know and was quite glad to find that Varchuk was from Novobugovka, where Miroshnichenko was in charge.

Fortunately for Varchuk, the head of the land department had not yet returned. Gurkalo chose a favourable moment, went to Kulnitsky with his most confident air and proceeded to seethe with righteous indignation.

"I simply don't know what to do with that anarchist Miroshnichenko! He's chopping off the branch we're sitting on."

Gurkalo had chosen Kulnitsky's most vulnerable point.

"He ought to be expelled from the Party," Kulnitsky brought his fist down hard on the table. "What's he been up to now?"

"D'you expect anything sensible of him? First he fought the state farm, now he's after a decent, efficient farmer. A man who's been given a silver medal, a man who's got a farm that could serve as a model for the whole district. If we do that sort of thing, we'll find ourselves sliding back to a primitive, aboriginal scratching of the soil. And what'll the republic have to eat then?" He went on to paint a fantastic picture of the model Varchuk farm.

At first Kulnitsky was reluctant to settle the question without the head of the land department, but finally, convinced by Gurkalo's clever arguments, he decided on a compromise.

"We'll write an order returning part of Varchuk's land. I think twenty dessiatines ought to be enough for his model farm."

"Quite right! Fully in keeping with the spirit of the Revolution." Gurkalo lauded his chief, and both were pleased with each other and themselves.

Varchuk went with Gurkalo to his place. Two feelings battled in him—niggardliness and a sense of fairness. Should he pay the high official or could he get out of it? He had to admit it, however, that it was a great thing to have a friend like this, and so he said with a stifled sigh, "I simply don't know how to repay you, Yarema Ivanovich, for your goodness. I know how much everything costs here in town. You pay through the nose for a rotten cucumber. Everything's dear under the new regime. So if you'd let me give you something for your —? Please don't be offended, I'm a plain man and maybe I don't put it the right way...."

"And I'm a plain man, I don't take too much but then I don't refuse what's due," answered Gurkalo, his shaggy brows twitching.

"Well, thank you, then," and Safron forced a smile, although he was really sorry the high official did not refuse the bribe. Pity he wasn't one of the proud sort: refusing what you slipped into his hand and thanking you into the bargain.

Safron unfastened his shirt, tore off the band sewn to the collar and several gold coins slipped out on to the palm of his hand.

"That's a clever idea," Gurkalo laughed.

"Trouble teaches wisdom," sighed Safron and laid the coins side by side on the table.

"Maybe we'll have a drink to celebrate?" said Gurkalo, glancing at the money.

"I've no time, no time, Yarema Ivanovich! And thank you again, thank you." With that Safron hurried away.

Soon his britchka was rattling over the war-neglected Vinnitsa road, while his mind feverishly turned over the question—what should he do with the horses? Suppose there were investigations in the village, suppose they started probing into things? Anything might happen! Hard as it was to part with good horses, Safron made up his mind to sell them.

The next day he sold horses and britchka without much bargaining to the peasant with whom he had drunk at the farmstead, and made his way on foot towards Kalicha, hoping to meet a fellow-villager on his way home from market and get a lift. And how he thanked God later that he had got rid of the blacks and the britchka! No sooner did he get home than who should appear but Miroshnichenko with a stranger. Safron, sighing and groaning, told them he had been robbed—maybe by those same bandits who had raided the village. Safron displayed the band torn off his collar—the

bandits had even found that hiding place and robbed him of his last money. He could see that he was not believed, but he continued to sigh and groan and ask for help in getting his horses back.

"Maybe we will find them," said Miroshnichenko in a tone that set Safron's heart beating furiously.

There was no doubt about it—he was suspected. And in the evening Kuzma Vasilenko confirmed this. He said that Miroshnichenko and the vice-chairman of the district executive committee had spent a long time on the river bank, examining the tracks.

"All right, let them look all they want!" But although Safron managed to pull his dry face into a smile, his alarm mounted. Nothing could be proved against him so far, thank God, and he must see that there should be nothing in the future.

Two days later Safron went and bought back his horses and britchka from the surprised peasant, paying more than he had been given. That night he drove to a high bank, unharnessed the horses and pushed the britchka down into the deep ravine. When the last sounds of breaking wood died away, he jumped on to the outrunner and took both horses to the river. He slid off when they were in the water, encouraging them with whistles to swim, turned them to the deepest part and pushed the muzzle of his revolver into the ear of the wheel horse. There was a muffled shot, the horse's knees buckled and it collapsed into the water. The outrunner flung up its head in alarm, its long mane sweeping Safron's head.

"Keep still, you fool!" Safron pulled on the bridle to bring down the horse's head. There was another shot and the two animals floated down like dark islands and disappeared. He looked regretfully after them, not leaving the water's edge till they had gone. Then he crossed himself and with the same three fingers wiped tears from his eyes.

XXXI

Reaped buckwheat lay on the dew-wet fields.

A fragment of mist at the very edge of Veremi's land quivered, flushed in the first rays of the sun, and vanished as though it had descended to fill the rosy buckwheat with its succulent colour. Scintillating threads of sunshine flashed through the tree tops of the serrated outline of dark blue oak woods.

Denis Barabolya rolled along the field path, sniffing the

fragrance of the air, his narrowed eyes taking in the fields, the clear horizon, the sun. The September quietness lulled his suspicious vigilance, and even the malice clotted within him was softened by the sweet dreaminess of restrained passion. For days and nights it had burned in him, heating his blood. Was it possible that that slip of a girl with the strange eyebrows had stirred in him emotions dulled by frequent skin-deep infatuations?

There had been a time, long ago, when he dreamed of true love, sang about it, sought it in the girls he saw and waited for the great festival of his heart. But while still a student he fell into the hands of an experienced, expensive prostitute and she stripped love of all its sacredness for him.

Now his dissipated heart was suddenly touched by a new feeling. What was it—pity for the poor orphan or that emotion which the books called love? But why pity? "Thus spake Zarathustra, 'Goest thou to woman? Forget not the whip.'"

He smiled at the thought, it clashed so with the countryside and with his mood.

The sky gleamed with mother-of-pearl tints through the fringe of trees bordering the woods; heavy white clouds floated over it like ships in full sail. It was another world, far, far away from the one which surrounded Barabolya. For a moment he forgot he was a secret agent, forgot Nietzsche and the dark shadows of Devonshire, and floated back on one of these celestial vessels to his quiet, untroubled childhood. But soon a human figure appeared on the horizon beyond the trees, and in an instant Barabolya's face assumed its usual foolish expression, and his mind became alert. The figure turned into the distant fields and Barabolya, following it through narrowed eyes, rolled into the woods and almost put his foot on a cluster of mushrooms. He glanced round once more, then picked the cool mushrooms. A woodpecker was busy overhead; its hard tapping sounded loud in the silence.

Not far from a glade where beehives dozed in the sun, he saw Mariana's slender figure. She had her back to him, and as he watched she stooped down to pull some herb; the movement drew up her skirt, and at the sight of her slender legs rising from her bast shoes Barabolya felt hot all over. The girl straightened up, blew the soil from the herb and slipped it into her blouse.

Barabolya smiled, waited until she had moved a few steps away and then called as people call to one another in the woods, "A-oo, Mariana!"

The girl started and her shoulders sagged in fright as she looked round; seeing Barabolya, she dropped her eyes shyly, turned away and quickly removed the herbs which she had just slipped inside her blouse.

Shy as a wild thing, thought Barabolya. He pretended to notice nothing, went up to Mariana and gave her the mushrooms.

"Here you are, little mistress, found these on the way." He realised that his use of the word "mistress" had stung the poor labourer like a taunt.... She'd like well enough to be mistress somewhere, he thought. Only a dog can find joy in serving others.

She walked in silence to a small, reed-thatched hut beneath the dark umbrella of a wild pear-tree.

"Well, this *is* nice."

He edged his way inside, and lay down on a bundle of straw barely covered with rags. Mariana squatted down on her heels and smiled, amazed to find that her guest did not disdain her poverty.

"Maybe you could fry the mushrooms?" Barabolya nodded at the smoke rising from the embers of a fire.

"I've nothing to fry them with," the girl answered sadly, without raising her eyes, filled to the brim with fear since childhood.

"Doesn't the master give you any fat?"

"Yes—at Christmas and Easter time."

"You poor little thing," he said sympathetically and she flushed to the point of tears. "We'll bake them, then. Do you like baked mushrooms?"

"Yes."

"And me?" he asked in a jesting tone and looked at Mariana.

Her eyebrows quivered, she drew herself together and said nothing.

"Which do you like best—mushrooms or me?"

"You oughtn't to laugh at a poor girl." She cast a pained look of reproach at him, rose and went out to the beehives.

Barabolya jumped up, followed her and stood before her, blocking her way.

"Mariana—little Mariana, you're angry with me. Don't be angry, sweetheart."

She raised eyes dull with pain.

"Don't call me that, or I'll cry," she implored in a barely audible voice.

"Why?"

"It was only mother—who ever called me sweetheart—a long, long time ago."

Tears welled over and she covered her face with her slim, sunburned hands. The tips of her thin fingers were red and ugly with hangnails.

Barabolya tried to comfort her, he stroked her arms and shoulders and as though by accident touched her breast. It scorched him with fire. What was it that drew him so strongly to this fragile body, reared on water and on grief? He led Mariana tenderly into the hut, made her sit down and even whisked the flies from her legs. That seemed to touch her more than all his words.

"How kind you are, Denis Ivanovich!" She turned wide, trustful eyes on him.

And the murderer could not meet that innocent gaze. He dropped his head.

With a single, light movement Mariana jumped up and slipped outside to put more wood on the fire.

"I'll make kulesh soup. Will you have some?" she asked simply and smiled.

"With you, sweetheart, I'll eat anvthing."

"Don't call me that," she begged again, took a small pot hanging from a tree and ran off for water.

As soon as the soup began to hiss and bubble on the fire she threw a handful of colza into a wooden mortar, pounded it and tipped it into the pot. "That's our flavouring. I'm sorry, I haven't anything better." Again her trustful glance was turned on Barabolya.

"The plainest soup eaten with you will taste like an Easter feast," he answered, watching her hands busy over the fire.

They ate the simple peasant food from the same battered bowl. He kept putting his spoon on the girl's holding it down, and was rewarded by her clear, childish laughter. After dinner Mariana showed him the woods. They found the den of an old badger which raided Veremi's vegetable plot in the autumn. They rested beside a spring, they ate wild apples and even climbed a late cherry-tree where they found a few small, withered cherries. With every hour her childish affection for him grew; the fear gradually vanished from her eyes, she smiled happily at the sun, the trees and the earth, but she was still shy of smiling directly at him.

When the veil of dusk fell among the trees so that they seemed to become denser, Barabolya, much as he wanted to stay, felt it wiser to return home. He was afraid that some rash gesture might tear apart the delicate web of confidence

he had woven, for this timid girl was not nearly so stupid as Veremi had made out.

Mariana walked with him to the fields and there, in the soft light of day merging into evening, she seemed still more desirable. Barabolya suddenly drew her to him.

"Mariana—would you marry me? I'm much older than you are, but...."

He thought she would be frightened, would protest, but she only turned a long look on him and answered softly:

"Why do you want me? I can be your labourer, but not your wife.... For I've got nothing, nothing at all."

"And I've got nothing, Mariana, either. I'm just as poor as you are," he lied eagerly, pushing away the thought of his parents' farm and land.

"Is that true?" the girl cried gladly, then flushed and dropped her eyes in embarrassment.

"It is true, Mariana.... And poor folks ought to hold together. You'll be given land, I'll be given land too, and we'll manage to get along somehow. The new government is on our side," he added, invoking the government he had sworn to fight as long as he lived.

He saw the effect the very word "land" had upon the girl, he saw how she quivered, how her eyes, filled with sadness and hope, turned to the fields lying beneath the light mist of evening, how her unconquered spirit yearned for them.

Her gaze shook Barabolya; in the eyes of this farm girl he seemed to read his own sentence.

XXXII

The powers of human endurance are boundless.

Life can bereave a man of his family, it may kill love and rob him of happiness, but still he remains a man. If, however, it is hope that is taken from him—that mirage that lures and deceives the heart—then he becomes a living corpse.

It was thus with Danilo Pidoprigora. Many days had passed since he found himself in the inner prison of the Cheka, and after the first few interrogations by the investigating officer he ceased, to all intents and purposes, to live; he moved, he acted mechanically, as in a dream—or to be more accurate, it was only in his dreams that he did live. They brought back to him the clean happiness of childhood, the spring moisture of meadows bright yellow with buttercups, they gave him the golden-haired vision of his wife and allowed him to caress the little body of his boy whom the

cockerels wakened in the night. And he wept in his sleep for all this lost happiness. Then he was awakened rudely by Gerus, a bony ex-shopkeeper with a bird-like profile who had been put into the same cell a week before.

"Wake up, you ante-lectual!" Gerus' narrow eyes and dry lips laughed as his bony fingers shook the last dreams from Danilo.

Gerus was an old hand—the revolutionary tribunal had sentenced him once, but with the help of friends he had managed to escape scot-free. This time he was in for high-stake gambling. Cheka men had taken three thousand gold rubles and seven thousand Austrian crowns from him; Gerus' defence was that he was simply a hopeless gambler, corrupted by the old regime.

"The Bolsheviks love penitence, so I give them all they want, I've beaten my breast black and blue. You do the same," he advised Pidoprigora, with a wary eye on the sliding shutter.

There was one thing, however, that troubled Gerus. He had got himself into the Vinnitsa wholesale purchasing society, and the society had foolishly refused to accept Soviet money from the co-operative members. This had a political tinge, and here Gerus had no use for penitence; he tried in every possible way to prove that it had been none of his doing. In general he was optimistically inclined and relied on his many friends to save him; it was his creed that everything on earth might vanish—tsars, kings and presidents, science and the church—but trade would remain because it was the root of everything. And he gaily sang spicy little ditties.

About Pidoprigora's case he had a definite opinion. If Danilo really and honestly repented, they would let him go all right. The Bolsheviks let much bigger people off—even old-time generals were working for them. Why, wasn't it a fact that Kotovsky himself had a former Petlyura henchman commanding one of his regiments! And he'd even been decorated. Gerus would willingly and gladly have changed places with Danilo.

Danilo, however, did not believe a word of it and waited dully for the worst. It was a dark thunder-cloud that hung over his head. He was accused of having come to the Soviet Ukraine as a secret agent of the Head Ataman. He swore that it was not true, swore it by the life of his only child, but the investigating officer only frowned and said: "Think again and tell me the truth about yourself and about Palilyulka."

"But I've never even seen him!"

"Perhaps your memory is at fault?" asked the very level voice of the investigator.

"It's not, I swear it! Barabolya only intended to take us to Palilyulka."

"Smoke?"

"Thanks." Danilo mechanically took coarse tobacco from the investigator's embroidered pouch. He no longer expected manhandling as he had in the first days, but he expected no mercy either. He had been framed with evil thoroughness.

"It'll be much better if you tell the whole truth," the investigator continued, lighting his cigarette.

"Where is it, that truth? If I say what you want, it'll be a lie and you'll shoot me for it; and if I refuse to lie you'll shoot me for that, too. So why d'you want to shoot me for a lie?"

"All I want is the truth." Thoughtful eyes surveyed him through glasses; their expression was like that of a teacher. Was it possible that teachers too worked in the Cheka?

Again the guards led Danilo down the long, narrow corridor to his cell, where he collapsed on his pallet longing for one thing only—sleep. His brothers and his wife brought him food and clothing, and once Galya, in addition to bread, had sent him two fried chickens, probably the cockerels that had wakened little Pyotr. The sight of them stabbed Danilo. He gave the cockerels to Gerus, who quickly disposed of both, chewing greedily and sucking the marrow from the bones. Then he got out a cigarette, knocked on the cell door and got a light from the guard outside through the shutter, praising the prison administration as he did so.

"They haven't got much to smoke themselves, yet they give us nine cigarettes every day. In the old days you got beaten up in prison if there was so much as a smell of tobacco." Gerus made a point of currying favour with all he met, even the guards—after all, they might say something higher up about his frame of mind.

Nothing, however, could distract Danilo's thoughts. Days woven of pain, monotonous and hopeless days dragged by, hour by hour erasing from his spirit all that remained from the time of freedom. He brooded on all his past mistakes. He had ruined Galya's life, his return had made things worse than ever for her—previously she had simply been the wife of a man who had joined Petlyura, but now there was a worse disgrace. The wife of a spy, and her baby the son of a spy! Could there be a blacker stain on her youth, on Pyotr's childhood? They might live to curse the husband and father.

Exhausted with self-torment, his mind dulled as the days passed. Sometimes madness seemed near.

One evening he was suddenly taken for interrogation to Sergei Pirogov, the chief of the special department.

The end! His eyes dimmed, his legs shook. Like a blind man he stumbled to the office, holding on to the wall of the narrow corridor. At the door he halted beside the guard—the bright light inside blinded him.

A middle-aged man sat at the table, his face was yellow with malaria and he shivered noticeably, huddling in a gaily-coloured Hungarian coat. A husky, thickset fellow in a Cossack coat and a tall fur hat with a blue top fidgeted on his chair placed beside Pirogov's. He looked keenly at Pidoprigora and the department chief watched them both.

There was a long minute of silence, then Pirogov turned to the stranger.

"Have you ever met this man?" he asked, indicating Pidoprigora with a movement of his head, although he really needed no reply.

"Never set eyes on him." The man removed the pipe from his whiskers and looked Pidoprigora up and down with contempt.

"And you?" The chief turned to Danilo and cupped his yellow, wax-like ear in his hand.

"Haven't had the pleasure, either," Danilo shrugged apathetically.

"I'm sorry I had to give you this trouble." The chief extended a narrow, transparent hand to the stranger. "Thank you for helping me."

"You're welcome," the other laughed and turned to the door with a sigh of relief.

At that moment the telephone rang; the chief frowned, went up to a large box and took down the receiver.

"Comrade Nechuiviter?" he said, and his face brightened. "Good evening...."

The name gave Danilo a shock. This must be his old acquaintance, the man from whom he had taken Galya—walking about in freedom, under the sun and the stars. Galya still wore his silk kerchief although she did not know whether the man who had first awakened her girlish heart was alive or dead. Danilo wondered whether he really was going mad, or whether the telephone conversation was in sober truth about him.

"What do I think of your accused? The same as you.... In poor spirits."

Horrible thoughts crowded Danilo's fevered mind. Perhaps it was a hallucination? Perhaps he was imagining things? No, this was his own fate that was being decided somewhere, decided foully, not face to face, but along a telephone wire.... So he, Danilo, was Nechuiviter's accused, and it was Nechuiviter who was sentencing him, his wife and his child for the love he had stolen. What crime will a man not commit for love? Literature was full of it. But perhaps this was just sick fancy of a diseased mind, tortured by utter loss of hope? Where could Nechuiviter have come from? And if it really was he, how had he learned about Danilo?

Thoughts whirled blindly.

Pirogov hung up the receiver and re-arranged the coat over his shoulders.

"Tell me—were you talking about me to Nechuiviter? About me?"

"Yes, you. So you guessed, did you? But why are you so excited, calm down," said the chief, surprised.

"My life—depends on—Nechuiviter—?"

"To a certain extent, yes."

"Then I beg you...." Danilo wanted to say more but did not: what was the use? It would not help him to get out of prison anyway. He drew his hand across his eyes, sighed heavily and went limp.

"Do you know Comrade Nechuiviter?"

"Yes, and I wish I didn't."

"But why?" Pirogov asked, surprised.

"Why?" Danilo exploded. "This world is too small to hold both of us. Once upon a time I did him a great injury: I took away the girl he loved.... It was long ago, I was young then.... She's my wife, the mother of my only child. I know Nechuiviter couldn't ever forget that. And he's punishing me.... I suppose I'd do the same in his place. Don't believe what he says! Don't believe him, please...." Danilo slumped into a chair, exhausted, and clutched his head.

The department chief stared in silent amazement.

"Like a bad novel." He rose and the coat fell to the ground, but he did not trouble to pick it up.

"Yes, a bad novel," Danilo mumbled, trying to rise. All his pride, his human dignity had slipped off him like a torn garment, and his voice had become a pleading wail. "Don't listen to Nechuiviter, don't.... He is prejudiced because he had no luck with the girl...."

The chief's face suddenly hardened and his waxen ears turned pink.

"Quiet!"

Aha, thought Danilo dully, at last he's showing his true self.

"Stupid, malicious people have stuffed your head with the idea that Communists never think about anything but red terror. Here you've questioned the honour of a decent man, you judged him by your own standards. But do you know that it's thanks to Nechuiviter that you are leaving prison sooner than you might have expected? Does that penetrate?" With his finger he tapped his forehead. "Comrade Nechuiviter has taken an interest in several cases, and particularly in yours. You and your petty, mean jealousy!... You ought to be ashamed—if you haven't lost all sense of shame. Nechuiviter is a Communist, he holds the interests of the people and our cause much higher than any personal feelings."

Danilo looked at Pirogov with half-crazed eyes and burst into silent tears. Knocking against the walls of the corridor, he almost ran back to his cell; in his joy he actually kissed the distinctly repulsive, bird-like face of Gerus and then started singing so loudly that the guard appeared at the shutter. But even the guard couldn't dampen his spirits.

That night, however, Danilo had a nightmare; he dreamed that Nechuiviter had changed his mind and decided to condemn him. Again Danilo cried in his sleep, but this time Gerus did not waken him.

"Let him suffer in his dreams at least, before he's released," the convict mumbled enviously, looking at the tossing Danilo, at his fresh, pouting lips which the next day would kiss his wife and son.

In the morning Danilo left the prison and at once made his way to the regional Party committee to see Nechuiviter. But the man he sought was not there, he had gone after a robber band.

"When can I see him?"

The secretary, a young girl with a boyish bob, raised her eyes to the disappointed visitor.

"You'll see him another time. Comrade Nechuiviter receives anyone who comes to see him."

XXXIII

For a time at least, Mariyka Bondar felt the pride of possession and was satisfied. It was true that Timofi, might the earth rest lightly as down upon him, had not given her a

portion for her unborn child—Miroshnichenko had forgotten to tell him—but even so, none of her ancestors had ever had as much land as she had now. She had heard there were countries where land-hunger was unknown, but in Podolye even a barren field was worth more than a man's life, and brothers would go for each other's throats if a boundary mark got knocked over by the plough. But Heaven be praised, there had been a big landlord in their parts—a famous general too!—so there was plenty of estate land to give the poor peasants.

The first few days after the allocation Mariyka forgot the house and everything on earth, she spent her time rushing about the fields as though afraid they might disappear. But all her ploughed furrows, their boundaries marked by fresh, well fixed pegs, lay safe between the muddy roads of autumn; on fine days sparkling gossamer floated over them, while in wet weather they breathed mist or rustled with rain.

When at last she became used to the thought that this was really her land, and not a dream, Mariyka started going to all the fairs in the neighbourhood to look at the short-horned oxen and the scraggy horses that were no longer fit for the army. She listened eagerly to the prices and engaged in intricate calculations, although she had not a single coin to bless herself with.

At home she carried herself with dignity, planted her bare roughened feet with the arrogance of a queen, and bore the meatless soup or millet-and-lentil porridge from the stove to the table as though it were some priceless gift. Ivan said nothing, only exchanged significant glances with his daughter Yugina, and both would splutter, almost choking over their food. But even this did not disturb Mariyka's serenity, she did not hit her daughter over the head with the spoon or snap at Ivan, she only sighed and tapped her forehead with her finger—time for old and young to have more sense.

Soon, however, Mariyka's serenity was shattered. Rumour had it that Petlyura had broken through to the south from Letychev. On hearing this, Mariyka hurried round all the neighbours, collecting their most wildly differing tales, quarrelled with Ivan in passing, cuffed Yugina, and in the evening, took bowl and candles to church and with tears implored God to make Comrade Lenin victorious over all the cruel men who had no mercy on the poor peasants.

After her prayers and tears Mariyka left the church with lightened heart. A true believer, she could see by the expression of the saint in the icon that her prayer would not

be left unanswered. Moreover, it was suddenly revealed to her most convincingly that the peasants' tears touched the Lord Jesus more than any other, for after all, did He not hold in His hands the earth, over which the peasants toiled? Yes, He should be kindest of all to the peasants.

This discovery filled the imaginative Mariyka with joy, she turned homewards feeling herself blessed. But still at the farthest edge of her dreams hovered the image of a horse munching good green grass or pulling a plough across her fields.

Outside the churchyard Mariyka was overtaken by Father Nikolai. She bowed her head for his blessing and kissed his puffy, doughy hand that smelled of tobacco, incense and money that had lain for many many years under the ground—for the people brought him paper money of evry possible kind these days.

The village held varying opinions about the good Father, as about everyone else. Under the Hetman he had been against the Germans, now the Reds had come he was against the Bolsheviks. Although the good Father's beard was grey, he had an eye for pretty young women; also, on big church holidays, he was always carried home drunk as a lord. But on the other hand he conducted the services with fervour, he had a fine ringing voice and did not demand too much for church rites—it was his good lady, squat as a beehive, who had the grasping hand.

The good Father stroked his cross, as his habit was, and sighed.

"Are you in trouble, Mariyka? Why did you weep so bitterly in God's house?" He raised his arm in its flowing black sleeve and stroked his white beard. "Is Ivan sick, perhaps? He spends such long hours at meetings, but then maybe he is paid well for it?"

"Not a bent copper," said Mariyka, "but isn't it better to go to meetings than play cards in the tavern till the third cock-crow? Maybe he'll learn some sense from the other men."

"Maybe he will," Father Nikolai agreed reluctantly. "But why were you weeping?"

Mariyka hesitated, wondering whether she had better not mention a prayer of that kind. But she could not dissemble at such a time, and told the good Father what she had prayed for. He stared at her aghast, as if she were the devil incarnate with a pair of horns peeping from under her modest kerchief. He raised his arms in denunciation and the sleeves of his robe slipped down and dangled from his elbows.

"You stupid creature! Fool! Blasphemer! God wants prayers like that as much as a cart wants a fifth wheel. If you don't know your prayers, don't try to make them up! Did you pray for Trotsky too?"

The guile of this question was lost on Mariyka, she answered humbly that she had not prayed for Trotsky because he wasn't the most important one. But no matter how Father Nikolai rated her, she still doubted whether he was right.

After calling Mariyka a blasphemer a few more times and spoiling her wonderful mood, the priest bore his billowing robe away into the darkness.

With Petlyura's break-through to the south of Letychev, Mariyka for the first time in her life began to take an interest in war news, and spared no effort to find out if anyone could tell her whether the blasted Petlyura was advancing or retreating and when an end would be put to Wrangel, the fiend. And with the most amazing and contradictory rumours travelling along all the roads, with at least one political and military wiseacre in every house, it was not surprising that Mariyka was run off her feet.

One day she would fly wildly to Miroshnichenko crying out that the Soviet government was not doing anything to allay the peasants' fears, and the next she would slip demurely into a kulak's yard to whisper some secret she had heard from Ivan, or offer to hackle tow for half the usual rate, currying favour in case of need with those who had always had their knife in that man of hers—a man stiff and stubborn as a post, who never seemed to realise that it would make anyone fed up with him.

"Why d'you have to hang about the Kombed and the Communists all the time?" she would shout at her husband, when it became known without a shadow of doubt that the tsar's own brother had brought British and French ships and landed both in Petrograd and Moscow, or that the Germans had crossed the Rumanian border, seized the German colonies, and were marching on Kiev where all the church bells were ringing to welcome them.

"What do the papers say, Ivan?" she would snap impatiently, eyeing the mysterious print, if it was rumoured that the world revolution was getting the better of the Germans and the British.

Unfortunately, however, good news of the Revolution came rarely, and tales of Wrangel, the tsar's family, various generals, Germans, Japanese, British, French, Rumanians

and their myrmidons who either threatened or brandished arms were much more common. And so worry came to stay in Mariyka's eyes.

Worrying is all very well, but a person has to think of practical things, such as where best go straight and where take a devious path. In those sleepless nights and bleak autumn days, Mariyka thought and schemed. At last, after pricing everything — black soil, clay loam and sand loam, she decided to sell two half-dessiatines which had formerly been kulak land, retaining only the land from the estate. When she spoke of this to Ivan, however, he tapped her forehead with a bony finger.

"Has the last screw gone? Or is your head only good for cracking nuts?"

Now — what was the use of talking to a man who could never see farther than his nose and had not a glimmer of peasant shrewdness? So Mariyka decided to act on her own, saying nothing to her husband. Was it her fault that other women had husbands who were some use while she was cursed with a dunderhead? Just at this time, the Podolye regional food committee got twenty-three trainloads of salt for consumption, and the Kombed sent Ivan and Kushnir to Vinnitsa for the Novobugovka share. It would have been hard to find a more simple pair — not a grain would they hide for themselves in pocket or boot-shaft.

When Saturday came and Stepan Kushnir drove up in style to their gate behind two grey horses, Mariyka quickly cut through a freshly-baked loaf, clapped a piece of butter between the two halves and carefully put it into the knapsack, which already contained cucumbers, onions and apples. Then she handed her husband a pinch of salf in a rag, making sure Stepan saw.

"I don't ask much of you, husband, but at least bring back as much salt from the common stocks as this little bit you've taken from home."

Ivan laughed and turned his strong, well-built body to Stepan.

"That, brother, is a broad hint."

"Others think of themselves, and you let it all slip past you." Mariyka's voice rose. "Stiff as a post in a fence, won't even stoop for the honey at your feet."

"Oh, I know that honey of yours," laughed Ivan.

He could read his wife's thoughts quite easily, but he never ceased to marvel at the eloquence of this one-track-minded woman. He kissed his wife and daughter good-bye,

went outside and clambered on to the cart with the sacks.

Mariyka would have liked to add something more about salt, that he should fill his pockets at least, but felt awkward about it before Kushnir, and when the horses started off she made the sign of the cross to bless her husband, and stood by the gate watching the cart disappear.

Now, with Ivan gone, Mariyka had time to think. She moved aimlessly about the yard, then went into the barn. On the left of the threshing-floor a board partition made two stalls. At one time the first had been filled with hay, in the second a small horse with violet eyes had stood. But then a poisonous autumn fly brought anthrax and the violet eyes dulled with pain. The horse had to be shot and its skin was sold for a song to Suprun Fesyuk, who would brave anything for a bargain, even infection.

With Ivan's head always in the clouds they were still without a horse; they had got none either from the estate or from the Galicians when typhus mowed them down as they fled along the muddy spring roads. Well, if her husband was a numbskull, she would have to see about livestock herself.

Like many women, Mariyka laid the blame on her husband for all their troubles, and regarded herself as the prop and stay of the family. Why, he had not even done any autumn ploughing yet! And again she looked with secret hope at the place where the little horse had once stood.

Returning to the cottage, Mariyka put on her best clothes, and preened for a long time before the mirror. She scolded herself for it, but nevertheless came to the conclusion that she was still a fine-looking woman. Her mocking husband would soon discover that her high forehead was made for better things than cracking nuts. Highly satisfied with herself, she stepped with dignity out of the cottage, latched the door and made her way through the village to the meadow where Semyon Poberezhny lived—a distant relative on her mother's side.

Poberezhny's large cottage smelt of water-weeds, fish and moist yarn—they were evidently soaking it before taking it to market. Semyon was sitting alone beside the window, mending a fishing net with a shuttle slender as a pikelet.

"Good evening, Uncle Semyon!" Mariyka said, and the fine lines round her aquiline nose gathered in a smile. "What, all alone? Where's Aunt?"

"Gone with Zakhar to empty the nets."

Poberezhny rose from his chiselled stool and the net, catching on his clothes, rose with him. The thoughtful face of

the elderly fisherman was clean-cut and fine—the face of a man who had brought in many a boatload of fish, a man who had saved more than one life, too.

"Aren't you afraid to let her go on the river?"

"She's used to the water. Loves it. And when I married her she wouldn't so much as look at fish."

"She looked at you, though," Mariyka laughed.

"Didn't look at me either. No time." Poberezhny spoke slowly, as though weighing each word. "I saw her once in church and sent the matchmakers right away."

"Didn't waste much time, did you?"

"Yes, it wasn't like today—people live together for about three years, and then get a divorce. A good whipping is what they want. But sit down, my dear. Come for fish, I suppose?"

"No. Do you get much nowadays?"

"What fish is there nowadays? Once it used to be real fishing. But the fish—they like peace and quietness too, and where'll you find it these times?"

"No peace for men or fish either," Mariyka agreed. "People say Petlyura stunned all the fish in Proskurov." Ever since Petlyura had become a threat to her new land, she was ready to ascribe all evil to him—both what she heard and what she imagined.

"Why does he want to come plaguing us again?" Poberezhny's heavy brows met over his eyes in a quick frown. "The war'd gone a bit away from here, and now he has to bring it back."

Silence fell in the cottage, a silence underlined rather than broken by the tireless chirping of a cricket under the hearth.

"Do you know why I've come to you now, Uncle Semyon?"

Mariyka burst out, conquering her last fears of Ivan, but without raising her eyes to the fisherman.

"I will if you tell me."

"I hear you're selling your black."

"Yes, that's right. I'm taking him to the fair tomorrow."

"Is he a good horse?"

"That he is. But now I've got more land, I want a pair, even if they aren't worth much."

"Maybe we could strike a bargain, then?"

"What d'you mean—you want to buy my black?"

"Yes, of course."

"But surely it's not a woman's business? Why hasn't Ivan come?"

"Well, you see, it's a bit awkward, Uncle Semyon." Mariyka lowered her voice. "The cash we've got, you could put in your eye, as the saying goes, so we decided to sell half a dessiatine and get ourselves a horse."

"Oh, I see!" Poberezhny thought a moment. "But all the same, why've you come about it, and not Ivan?"

"But how can he, when he's on the Kombed and all?" Mariyka cast prudence to the winds. "What he wants is for you to get him a horse on the quietlike, and the land—either take it yourself or sell it, as you think best."

"Poor fellow," said the fisherman sympathetically. "He's got land, but he can't scratch it up with his five fingers."

"And there's no end to all we need," Mariyka lamented. "A horse, and a plough, a cultivator too and a harrow—and you don't get far without a cart, either. It makes your head spin just to think of it all." With all this to worry her she had quite forgotten that she had lied to Semyon.

"Well, I'll be glad to help Ivan if I can. He's a good man." Poberezhny paced thoughtfully from corner to corner. "I could use his land, but I'm trying to save up for the horses. Which half-dessiatine do you want to sell?"

"The one we got from Sichkar. On the clearing."

"And what's your price?"

"A good horse."

"So be it then!" said the fisherman with a gesture of decision. "Take the black, and tomorrow we'll see about your land. There's a man I know, just back from Moldavia, came too late to get a portion. He'd be interested. Shake hands on it!"

Mariyka almost jumped for joy but restrained herself and kept her dignity.

"It's a deal, Uncle Semyon," she said steadily. "But you ought to stand me a drink to seal the bargain." She slammed her hand into the fisherman's.

"What's this—want me to drink with you without your husband?" laughed Poberezhny. Mariyka's eyes sparkled mischievously.

"Why not, if my husband's scared to come!" She already quite believed her own tale that Ivan had been afraid of coming to Poberezhny.

"No, no, my dear, it's not seemly to drink with a woman." Poberezhny shook his head. He took a small limewood tub from the cupboard, went into the storeroom and filled it with honey. "We'll seal the bargain with this," he said, handing it to Mariyka.

She stooped, thrust in her little finger and tasted the honey. A pleasant bitterness at once told her what flowers the bees had visited.

"Sunflower?"

"Sunflower, quite fresh. Will you take the horse now, or will Ivan come for it?"

"Him come!" Mariyka pursed her lips affectedly. "All he can do is sit at meetings, while his wife does the worrying."

They left the cottage and opened the small stable. Poberezhny disappeared in a stall, there was the jingle of a bit and in a minute he came out, leading the horse.

"Take him, Mariyka, and may he plough up gold for you." Semyon handed the bridle to the woman, stroked the horse's smooth back and sighed.

A sudden panic seized Mariyka. She seemed to see Ivan's mocking eyes, but there was no humour in them now, only anger.

Oh, bother him, she thought, shaking off the momentary weakness, thanked Poberezhny and walked away, leading the horse.

The next day Semyon sold the half-dessiatine, and Mariyka went out at night to plough with Yesip Kirinyuk, a very taciturn man of middle age. Mariyka was pleased to find such a man to share the work—Yesip did not even ask where she had got the horse or how much she paid, and never so much as mentioned Ivan. He had his own opinion about the use of words. If a person had anything to say, he would say it, and just talking for the sake of talking was stupid.

He laid a fire under a wild pear-tree, got a few potatoes from a field nearby, laid them on the embers to roast and settled down, listening to the snorting of the horses in the hollow. Mariyka lay down for a while on the cart, already regretting the impatience which had driven her out here for the long autumn night—she could well have started at dawn. She was scared too—what if Ivan returned during the night?

And he did, in fact, return that night, and was both surprised and angry to find only Yugina at home. Jealousy made him suspicious. He wakened the little girl and asked where her mother was.

"She went out with Uncle Yesip to plough." Yugina sleepily pushed the hair off her round face with her fists and blinked at the light.

"What's taken her off at night like this?"

"Her horse!" Yugina spluttered with laughter. It was terribly funny the way Mother has fussed over the horse.

"Horse?" Ivan could not believe his ears. "Where did she get a horse?"

"Mother swopped half a dessiatine for it," Yugina laughed and ran to the cupboard. "And she brought this honey back, too." She took out the limewood tub and handed it to her father.

Ivan looked at it with hatred and rushed out into the yard. The very thought was infuriating—that his own wife should make him such a laughing-stock! How that kulak gang would snicker. "Give a beggar land and the next day he'll squander it, barter it, sell it for drink—and be back where he was before." He brandished his fists and struck his own head with them.

He saw Kirinyuk and Mariyka from a long way off. They were sitting opposite one another before the golden bush of fire, beneath the thick tree. Ivan descended on them like thunder from a clear sky, snatched up Kirinuyk's lash and brought it down across Mariyka's shoulders as she tried to run.

"He's killing me! Help! Help!" she screamed, as she fled to the cart.

But her husband did not follow her.

"If you weren't in your last months, I'd give you such a drubbing you'd think all hell was loose. But I'll teach you a lesson that'll keep you from sticking your stupid head into serious matters again. I'll teach you how to make deals!"

He went to the hollow, found the black, led it to the fire and, to make sure, asked Kirinyuk, "Is this the one?"

Kirinyuk nodded.

"A good horse," said Ivan. "I'll take your lash, if you don't mind, Yesip."

"All right. But where are you going?"

"Taking the horse to town. I'll hand it in for the front."

"Oh, Heavens! Oh, dear God! Save me!" Mariyka wailed from the cart. "Ivan, I beg you—on my knees I beg you—!"

She came running from the darkness and threw herself on her knees, wringing her hands. The firelight flickered over them.

But Ivan had no eyes for his wife. Grasping the horse's mane, he swung on to its back, sat up, and rode across the fields to the road. The beat of hoofs echoed like a funeral bell in Mariyka's heart.

"Hm," was all that Kirinyuk had to say.

He waited till the last spark had died in the embers, then went to the hollow, brought out his horse, harnessed it and

with a jerk of the head indicated that Mariyka should get into the cart. They drove home like two shadows. Mariyka lacked the strength even to weep or abuse Ivan, so terrible was the destruction of her hopes. She staggered into the cottage, and lighted the lamp. There, in the middle of the table—like a bitter jeer—lay a pinch of salt in a rag. Her husband had brought exactly what she had asked for.

XXXIV

Standing before the joint Yaltushkov Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian People's Republic and the army leaders, the Commander-in-Chief, Simon Petlyura, in his usual theatrical style, sculptured rather than expounded his plan for capturing both banks of the Dnieper. With a gesture of his two hands he swept the front forward—a front reaching from the Dniester to Letychev, and a miracle took place. Petlyura's army advanced and the Reds ran; Petlyura entered Kiev, the bells of St. Sophia rang and the citizens met him with bread and salt on embroidered towels.

The plan of the offensive was simpler than that of the Germans and Haidamaks in 1918, which was, incidentally, repeated by Petlyura without the slightest alteration in 1919.

Rosy dreams clothed in ignorant twaddle brought an angry twist to the massive, resolute face of the Cossack general Yurko Tyutyunik; his lantern jaw thrust forward ominously. Looking at Petlyura, he saw not the compelling eyes of a leader, but the shifty, slanting gleam of a maniac drunk with his own empty words. Tyutyunik was nauseated by this unholy mixture of military ignorance and utterly unfounded assurance of victory. The Prime Minister Andri Levitsky and the other Ministers could see it, too. Tyutyunik hoped that Petlyura's spate of words would be dammed by the army commander Omelyanovich-Pavlenko, but the man only raised a hand to his little pointed beard in surprise and said nothing. That wily commander was as good as Petlyura at dodging responsibility.

Then Yurko Tyutyunik spoke, and he did not mince words. He made short work of Petlyura's plan which burst like a bubble risen from a bog, leaving nothing but a bad smell. Tyutyunik presented his own plan of attack, and proposed that a plan for retreat be also worked out just in case. In a war, all sorts of unforeseen things might happen. A heated argument sprang up around this suggestion; neither the

Ministers nor the Head Ataman wanted to hear anything about retreat — running away required no plan.

When the angry Tyutyunik had crammed on his tall black hat and left for his headquarters, and the Ministers, guarded by soldiers, had gone to their rooms in the brick house belonging to the manager of the Yaltushkov sugar refinery, somebody started a rumour that the Cossack general intended to arrest the "government of the Ukrainian People's Republic". The frightened Ministers huddled together in one room, awaiting their fate. But nobody came to arrest them, and in the morning Tyutyunik himself was considerably surprised to find the whole "Ukrainian government" in such cramped quarters. Somebody said they had been discussing the date for the offensive, but actually the thought uppermost in their minds had been how best to slip away to Kamenets-Podolsk in the lorry they had.

The general offensive along the whole front was fixed for the twelfth of November. But on the eleventh at dawn the bugles of the Fourteenth Soviet Army sounded near Staraya Murafa. The Eighth Cavalry Division dealt the first blow at Petlyura's army. It had orders to break through the front and cut off the cavalry stationed near Mogilyov-Podolsky.

The raid of the Eighth Division started well. Right at the beginning, the Shestakovka farmers whom Petlyura had forcibly mobilised a short time before flung down their weapons and surrendered. While the Eighth Division was capturing Ivashkovka, Luchinets and Kukavka, the Second Brigade made a breakthrough near Mogilyov and after a fierce fight with Frolov's cavalry drove into the town. Petlyura's southern group retreated, unable to hold out against the Fourteenth Army, and part of them crossed the Dniester to Rumania. For a few days Petlyura had better success in the north, where Yakovlev's division captured Lityn, and General Peremykin's division moved from Derazhna on Zhmerinka. But by the sixteenth of November both divisions were falling back, helped along by repeated blows from the Red Cossacks.

Petlyura's candle was indeed burning at both ends. He sent in his final reserves — his last ten thousand riflemen — with no hope that they would gain a victory, but simply to cover the transport of the Ministers' property and the treasury over the Zbruch. Petlyura and all his Ministers except Arkhipenko ran away from their own troops to that part of the Ukraine which they had given to Pilsudski. And this Polish Bonaparte was not ungrateful: he presented Petlyura with a capi-

tal—the little town of Tarnov. There all the Head Ataman's "state apparatus" crowded into the Hotel Bristol—the ministries, the ambassadors, the military headquarters and their offices, the printshop and the Head Ataman himself with his pet hangman Chebotaryov.

It was in the Hotel Bristol, where kitchen smells filled every room, that the Head Ataman, perhaps for the first time, realised how ephemeral his power was. Petlyura summoned all his officials and suite and at an inter-party conference announced with all the melodrama of a barnstormer an "act of unequalled historical importance": he, the Head Ataman, had signed his resignation.

He hoped that the conference would implore him to retain his powers. But the conference, demoralised by all that had happened, received the announcement in silence.

This shook Petlyura more than his defeats at the front. His eyes begged, pleaded for somebody, if only one among them, to cry out that the Ukraine could not exist without its Head Ataman. But the eyes he met were dead, the men no longer believed in him, and were silent. Outraged, he wanted to make a proud exit, but then self-pity and indignation at the ingratitude of his associates made him pour out another improvised hysterical speech after which he most unexpectedly tore up his resignation—probably deciding in the end that even a hotel kingdom was better than none.

On the twenty-first of November Petlyura's remaining soldiers and supply columns, covered by Tyutyunik's troops, fled across the bridge to the right bank of the Zbruch. Nobody was in command of the crossing. On the bridge utter confusion reigned. Carts collided and their wheels locked, riders and infantry fought their way through with flailing fists and curses, carts hurtled down into the water and the half-crazed men heeded not the neighing of their dying horses. Kotovsky was a spectre that deprived the remnants of Petlyura's army of all reason; only the strongest-minded smashed their weapons on the bank, so that they should not fall into the hands of the Poles, and abandoning the valuables they were convoying, made their way empty-handed to their allies of yesterday.

Kotovsky's brigade was near Volochisk and racing to the Zbruch when Lieutenant-Colonel Pogiba, still wearing his peasant coat, pushed his way through the remnants of the savage Black Shlyk and Yellow Shlyk divisions into the seething mass of bodies on the bridge. He barely escaped being pushed into the cold water by clutching frantically at

the nearest men, and then the human torrent finally carried him over to the farther bank. At last, it seemed, he could draw breath—but no, before he had time to turn round a broad, squat fellow with a blue nose and cat's whiskers rushed at him and made a grab at his wrist to pull off his wedding ring. Pogiba was unarmed but, undaunted, he delivered a short punch at the spot where whiskers and nose met; the man yelled and staggered back and Pogiba dashed away into the darkness, towards the sound of rattling arms and the babel of curses from the allies.

After a hungry and harassing time in Tarnopol, Pogiba and five thousand others found themselves in the dirty Vadovets camp, set up by the Austrians for Russian prisoners-of-war. And there Polish commandants proceeded by means of hunger, cold and brutality to break the spirit of soldiers who were ready to go into the jaws of hell itself if only they could get past the barbed wire of the half-ruined camp.

Pea soup with worms curled into rings floating on top and stinking horse-flesh caused an uproar in the camp, put down at once by the weapons of the allies. It was more difficult, however, to put down stomach troubles, itch and hideous ulcers. Thousands of men, paying for the sins of others, longed desperately for their Ukraine; the names of towns and villages sounded to them as sweet as an Easter hymn. Yesterday's warriors, in caps of twisted straw and sabots on their feet, drifted like shadows about the camp, cursing themselves and the Head Ataman—who never once risked coming to see them from his residence at the Hotel Bristol.

Lieutenant-Colonel Pogiba, having lost all hope of being rescued by Petlyura or someone from his distinguished entourage, watched with horror the dying convulsions of the Ataman's army, fearing one thing only—to sink to the point when life loses all value. While his few small valuables lasted, he bartered them for food and did his best not to be eaten alive by lice. But when he slipped his wedding ring, his last treasure, from a thin finger, he knew that everything was over for him, there was nothing more to strive for.

XXXV

Poplars rose from the silvery mists together with the early morning sun. Hoar-frost, tinged with pink, melted on the cracked bark, and the trees sent up a warm breath. The last

leaves hung from the branches like golden ear-rings, but the grass beneath was still white, crossed by the dark tracks of hares.

Danilo Pidoprigora, carrying his warmly-wrapped son, walked to the edge of the woods where the end white cottages of the village were scattered. There were fewer crosses by the wells and at crossroads now, typhus no longer raged in the villages and night raiders were rare. After Petlyura's final defeat the authorities had turned their full attention to the atamans and batkos who had not yet surrendered. Today, too, machine-guns rattled somewhere, and riderless horses galloped right up to the Beryozovka forests.

"Mum-mum-mum-mum! Mum-mum-mum!" shouted Pyotr and waved his arms. He had seen his mother among the trees.

"Missed your mummy, baby?" Galya took the boy from his father, and Pyotr immediately sought the breast although he was already weaned.

The woodland path breathed and rustled with fallen leaves, leading them on, as in a fairy-tale, to enchanted distances where shafts of sunlight filled with dancing motes lanced through the trees down to the spell-bound glade. Galya handed Pyotr over to his father and went farther among the trees. She carefully broke off a branch heavy with ripe rose hips, and gave a cry.

"Danilo—come here!"

He went to her and stopped in surprise beside a thick tree-stump. Between its jutting roots two snowdrops hung their small bell-like heads. Why had these heralds of spring suddenly decided to flower in autumn, why could they not wait for their misty March?

Galya was delighted with them, but her lingering faith in omens brought doubts—was it a good sign, this autumn flowering?

"Flowers are always a good sign," her husband reassured her. "It means that this autumn is the beginning of our spring."

The path brought them to a pond, and there Vasilinka came running to meet them from the small dam, her hair streaming behind her as she ran. It was only now Danilo noticed that his niece's mouth had a sad droop and her dark grey eyes, although sparkling with joy at this meeting, were not very gay in repose.... That comes from living in the woods, he thought as he handed Pyotr to the girl.

"Oh, my sweet baby! Oh, my wee one," she crooned over him, tearing her attention away from him long enough to say that her mother had gone to church and her father had just taken out some honeycombs and was cutting them up, because very soon Red Armymen, wounded in the fight against bandits, would be coming along the road and he wanted to have something to offer them even if it was only honey.

Inside the cottage Miron, wearing a clean linen shirt, stood before the table under the embroidered picture of the Virgin, solemnly cutting up honeycombs and laying the pieces in a big wooden bowl. Threads of honey gleamed on his beard and a single bee crawled drowsily over it. Danilo liked his brother's face much more now than he had some days before. It had changed. That was because the last shadow of fear had left it, now that Petlyura had run away abroad and was a good long distance from home.

After breakfast, they all went out to the old highway, where a light breeze raised miniature whirls of lime leaves. Here and there people stood waiting, holding bowls of food, well-browned buns, apples, bread and packages of tobacco. The women spoke in pitying tones of the coming wounded, while the men discussed the routing of the robbing bastards Verbka way. A crowd of children appeared from round a bend in the road, yelling for all the village to hear: "They're coming! Coming!"

Through the trees the first horsemen appeared, followed by high wagons and creaking peasant carts on which the wounded men were laid. Women sighed, looking at the sad procession. The crowd closed in on the carts.

"Take a little honey, son."

"Here's some white bread, it's nice and fresh...."

Simple country gifts were laid on the straw. A soldier with a bandaged arm took a piece of fragrant honeycomb from Galya with a smile.

"Thank you, beautiful, thank you. May you find a husband who's not the jealous sort."

Galya blushed and laughed. She gave honey to another man, and felt her husband tug at her sleeve. She glanced up at him, followed the direction of his staring eyes, and saw a familiar face. The dark hair fluttered over a high forehead, the tanned cheeks were pale and sunken, the straight nose was pinched and the eyes closed in pain. It was Grigori Nechuiviter. With a moan Galya ran to the cart and Grigori, as though hearing it, opened his eyes. But he saw nothing, neither his first love nor his successful rival. With shaking

hands Galya tore off the tender snowdrops from her jacket and laid them on his breast, like two drops of pure, motherly love for a real man. And Danilo put his arm round his wife as though fearing that she would leave him. "We did meet after all, Grigori," he whispered with grey lips.

The cart moved on, and as it went drops of blood fell slowly from it.

A handsome, swarthy, hook-nosed rider clothed in leather from head to foot, came pacing slowly, immersed in sombre thoughts. As the lovely, golden-haired woman bent over Nechuiviter a sarcastic smile flickered for an instant on his face, but vanished at once. That night he had lost the right to laugh at Nechuiviter, as he had laughed at him a few days before for his romanticism, for wasting his time on the case of some sotnik or other of Petlyura's. That night something dreadful had happened. When the bandits succeeded in cutting through the column and Kulnitsky saw the gleam of two sabres over Nechuiviter's head, he gasped and fled at top speed into the forest. From there he saw bandits and riderless horses fleeing, and he saw Nechuiviter's head sink on to his horse's neck. Then Kulnitsky rushed to help him. He arrived before the Red Armymen, but Nechuiviter turned away from him as from a monster, and collapsed in the men's arms.

Will he live? I'd rather die than suffer such pain, thought Kulnitsky, looking compassionately at Nechuiviter, at the same time catching himself working up this compassion to allay his dread of the future, an ignoble dread unworthy of him. Although it was not such a dreadful crime, after all, to have run into the woods for a few minutes. Who could say that he had not been fighting bandits there, just as Nechuiviter had among the bushes at the edge? Such an argument could be characterised as base, but not by such as he. And anyway, why all this self-castigation? Better plan the report on the defeat dealt the bandits and decide how much credit should go to Nechuiviter and how much to himself.... Although that, too, depended on whether Nechuiviter lived or not.

When the sad procession had left the village, Ivan Bondar came up to Miroshnichenko. Sorrow and an irrepressible smile fought for supremacy on his face.

"Hope they all get well," he said with a jerk of his head towards the carts. "And now, Svirid, I want you to come home with me."

"Why, what's happened?"

"I've got a son!"

Miroshnichenko flinched, but mastered his emotion at once. "May he grow up a joy to his parents and all good folks. When was he born?"

"Yesterday. Mariyka wants you to be the first to drink his health with us."

"The mother must be obeyed," Miroshnichenko agreed, feeling the pain gathering under his eyelids.

Yugina and the midwife were busy in the Bondar cottage; the midwife was just placing a piece of iron in the mother's bed so that all trouble from an evil eye should go into the metal instead of the infant.

Miroshnichenko smiled at this bit of black magic. The weak, haggard Mariyka caught his smile and waved a weak hand.

"Nothing to laugh at, even if you are a Communist," she snapped.

Ivan got out the vodka and filled two glasses, while Miroshnichenko bent over the wrinkled little face in the cradle.

"Well, what do you think of him?" asked Mariyka apprehensively.

"A beautiful baby! Just like his father, and his nose is as pretty as though it was carved," answered Miroshnichenko, and Mariyka let out a sigh of relief. She had been afraid the nostrils were too wide.

"Your good health, Mariyka, and the children's!" Miroshnichenko tipped up his glass, and felt in his pocket for a coin to cut the first tooth on; but his pocket was empty.

"Never mind, Svirid, you'll come to rock him," said Mariyka consolingly.

"And glad to," he agreed. "And I'll make your son a present of Levko's dessiatine of land."

"Oh no, Svirid, you mustn't do that," Mariyka protested, overwhelmed. "Why, it's real rich land!"

"Let the child's portion go to a child," Miroshnichenko answered, and went quickly out of the house, unable to keep his tears back any longer. His eyes seemed to have got weak since the death of Levko and Nastechka.

XXXVI

Silently they returned through the woods, as though coming from a funeral; silently they bore the heavy load of memory and experience. Only that morning their thoughts

had floated as lightly as the little clouds borne through the sky on the sun's rays, now they lay like ice on the heart. The drops of blood falling from the cart seared their minds and weighted their feet. It is always a dreadful moment when one realises that one's life has been bought with blood—of a mother, or a father worked to death, or an unknown friend who is braver, better than oneself. Many try not to think about it, as though it were none of their business, and from this evasion they lose dignity and stature in the eyes of others and in their own.

Danilo flayed himself as he held sleepy little Pyotr closer to him; he sent thoughts of sincere gratitude along that distant road on which the cart bearing Nechuiviter was probably still swaying and creaking. But Galya's thoughts plunged into past years as into the floodwaters of spring. Half-forgotten fragments of early youth, flashes of her first emotions floated up and sparkled in her mind like the frost on the birches that bordered the road. Again she breathed the air of those years when her heart was near belonging to Nechuiviter, she felt doubly guilty towards him and involuntarily pictured what her life would have been had Danilo not crossed her path. At this moment she would have been beating her head against the side of the cart, falling on her knees and praying heaven and earth to preserve the life of her husband. But probably there was somebody else now to weep over Grigori. If only he recovered! Today for the first time Danilo's attraction dimmed before Galya's eyes; and now she carried not one load of guilt, but two—but this no one would ever know. Dear God, why is the heart made so strangely?

The birches by the road scattered cold dew from their tiny sleeping buds and her heart wept invisible tears; still, a smile touched the mother's sad mouth when Pyotr awakened and cried in his father's arms. And she took the child and held him closely to her as a shield against all troubles.

But when Pyotr was settled for the night and Danilo had at last fallen into a restless sleep, she wept her heart out for Grigori and for her own youth which had drifted, it might well be, along the wrong path. When her husband stirred, however, she bit her lips and forced herself to silence, lying wakeful until a misty golden halo appeared around the stars. Then the baby woke up and cried; it was time to rise and begin another day filled with other cares and other thoughts.

She was already preparing breakfast when Danilo awoke; he smiled sleepily at her, and then he saw the dark shadows

beneath his wife's eyes. They told him more than any words, and filled him with a vague alarm. His heart sank, but he tried unselfishly to hide his troubled thoughts and be especially nice to Galya. He knew her better than she knew herself, he realised that at heart his wife was still a shy girl, and feared the moment when the change would come from youth to maturity. Only a very young man can believe his beloved will never change. Yet in her life, as in a man's, there can be moments of confusion, mistakes and secret infatuations, or maybe worse things still.

Danilo, therefore, was not surprised to see his wife come resolutely to him after lessons, a shadow of pain in her clear eyes.

"Danilo, one of us ought to go to see Grigori, either you or I. He may be all alone, with nobody even to give him a drink of water."

"I've been thinking about that, too. You go, Galya." He forced out the words.

At first she was pleased, then doubtful. "Perhaps it would be better if you went?"

"No, no, Galya, you're a woman, after all."

"It was my idea, and now I'm afraid, sort of." She looked trustfully at her husband.

"Nothing to be afraid of in doing a kind deed." There was a smile on his face, but a shadow in his heart.

The last drops of Galya's courage drained away as she stood before the iron gates of the hospital, and it took all her determination not to think of what might happen to Grigori.

Chipped stone steps led to a damp waiting-room smelling strongly of iodoform and carbolic. A thin, flat-chested nurse, busy rolling old, washed bandages, cast an indifferent glance at the visitor.

"Who do you want?"

"I want to see Grigori Nechuiviter."

"I'm sorry, you can't." The nurse gave her a pitying look.

"Why not?"

"He's a very sick man. He needs absolute quiet. Are you a relation?"

"I?... I'm—his wife." The words were out.

"His wife?"

The nurse was startled and flustered. The yellowish, much-washed bandage fell from her chapped hands, but without even stopping to pick it up she opened an inner door and disappeared. Soon an elderly woman, a doctor, appeared

in the waiting-room. She greeted Galya, smiling with tired but steady eyes.

"So young, and already a—wife?"

Galya sensed another word implied—widow.

"How is he?"

"There is hope. He's lost a lot of blood. But let us hope for the best. I'll let you see him for just one minute. And please don't break down and start crying. Remember, you're the wife of Nechuiviter himself," she added, making it plain that this name meant a great deal.

In the semi-darkness of the corridor she saw people, haggard with wounds and sickness, moving like shadows, and heard the blunt tapping of home-made crutches that supported mutilated young bodies.

The doctor opened the last door and Galya saw Grigori. She knew his face at once, the yellow sunken cheeks and sharpened nose, but she did not know his lean, flattened body nor his voice still muttering fragments of orders. Swallowing her tears, she went slowly to stand at the head of his bed. The paper bag of buns she had brought fell with a dull thud, but she did not stoop to pick it up. Her eyes were fixed on the face of her first love.

She did not know how long she stood by Grigori, stifling her sobs, before somebody touched her shoulder. She glanced round and saw a handsome, hook-nosed man clothed in leather from head to foot.

"Don't grieve so, don't take it so hard," he tried to comfort her, and his leather sleeve creaked as he stroked her shoulder.

He led her gently into the courtyard, insistently seeking her tear-filled eyes.

"If I can help you in any way, I'll always be glad to do all I can.... I'm Grigori's friend, Kulnitsky.... But I didn't know he had a wife."

"I'm not his wife," she sighed, and wiped her eyes with the corner of her kerchief.

"Not his wife?" he repeated in surprise. Now he took a good look at her and saw that she was pretty.

Galya, stammering, told him how Nechuiviter had helped to get her husband released.

There may be some love affair behind all this, dirty little thoughts began to work in his mind. He took another look at Galya and decided that a girl as pretty as that was worth a little trouble. Galya caught his glance, shivered and said she must go.

"Are you on foot?"

"Yes."

"Now that's real—friendship." He almost said "love", but stopped himself in time. "I'll give you a lift in my britchka."

"Oh, there's no need—thank you," cried Galya, alarmed, and set off quickly.

He watched her go, sorry that a good thing like that belonged to someone else. Then he turned to his britchka, captured from the bandits and still bearing the words "I'll catch the devil himself" in front, and "The devil himself can't catch me" on the back. They seemed to taunt him, reminding him of his momentary cowardice which could be forgotten if only Nechuiviter died.

XXXVII

The sun gleamed greasily through dirty-looking clouds. Sleet had fallen in the morning, and now it was churned into mud by worn-out, splitting boots and wooden shoes. Topping such footwear and such rags, the brightly coloured shlyks were a bitter mockery. All the bright nationalistic props that seemed so attractive but yesterday were now faded and stained; the men called their shlyks bags for curds and sang sardonic little songs about their own fate.

Abroad we went, willy-nilly,
Sold ourselves for stinking skilly....

But today there was a languid animation in the Vadovets camp, for envoys were to come from the "Ukrainian insurgents" who had not laid down their arms. Fantastic rumours stirred the men, already reduced to mere shadows, and filled them with hope that they might return to the Ukraine or at least hear the truth about it. For that truth had so far been swamped in lies. The rumours said that not only was the entire right-bank Dnieper area in the hands of the atamans, all except Kiev which would be taken just as soon as Petlyura arrived, but also that the Bolsheviks had admitted they ought never to have taken power and now were only wondering to whom they could relinquish it. Of course Petlyura was the proper person, for the Entente was going to recognise him as the ruler of the Ukraine any moment.

Pogiba, sick and morose, listened to this twaddle and his sixth sense told him it all came from the agents of the Head Ataman. Petlyura himself would not risk coming to the camp, he feared the anger of the tormented men, so he sent his

lackeys who laid themselves out to justify and laud their Bristol Hotel master. Pogiba did not trouble to go and meet the envoys, he knew from whom they came and had no hope of hearing anything of interest. For that matter, the men in the other bunks would tell him all about it afterwards.

When all had left the barracks, he wrapped himself closer in his peasant coat, longing only for one thing—to get warm and perhaps find a happier life in dreams. But his first dreams only brought added misery. He dreamed that the camp commandant, who had been a colonel under the tsar, was setting up additional barbed wire round the camp, and Petlyura and Vyshivany had come to help him. For some reason they had got the idea that the camp must be contained in a barbed wire net, and Pogiba with horror watched the sky itself being divided into even squares by the strands. In one of these squares a small wintry sun quivered like a trapped moth. But all of a sudden a wonderful smell of food came to him, and forgetting the sun he tore open a door. It admitted him into a room where a table groaned under its load of food and wine. Pogiba rushed to the table, but just at that moment he was awakened by a hubbub of voices. It was the prisoners and the envoys entering the barracks. Pogiba rose to sit hunched on his bed and almost cried out. For by the door he saw the rotund form of Barabolya and the fastidiously disgusted face of Yevsei Golovan, whose stomach was turned by what he had seen in the camp.

"God in Heaven, it's you, Lieutenant-Colonel!" cried Barabolya. He flung out his arms and with unfeigned joy ran to Pogiba, embraced him and wiped away an invisible tear with a woman's handkerchief.

"Stylisation," mocked Yevsei Golovan, looking at Barabolya's dry eyes, and greeted his old friend. "How do, how do, brother. I didn't expect to find you in this man-mincing machine."

"The flower of the nation in stinking camps!" cried Barabolya, fussing round Pogiba. "But we'll soon have you out of here. All of you!" he added, turning to the other inmates. "The Head Ataman is preparing a new campaign. And you will return under his banner to your quiet waters and clear dawns!"

"Idealism," snorted Golovan, and went off to find the camp commandant.

Soon afterwards two tall horses with bells jingling on their harness took Pogiba, Barabolya and Golovan to Kraków. Golovan unceremoniously seated the lieutenant-colonel be-

side the driver for he was afraid the gluttonous camp lice might transfer themselves to his own scented underwear, and this brusque action pleased Barabolya—let the fine lieutenant-colonel feel that he was now dependent upon them. And Pogiba did feel it.

In Kraków, Barabolya got him clothes and boots, took him to the bath-house and the barber, and after that with a giggle asked where he would like to sup—in a restaurant or at a place where fun could be had with the girls.

"The girls here are really hot," and he smacked his thick lips. "They'd arouse the dead."

"I'm worse than dead, then," answered Pogiba. "I can't be bothered with girls."

All at once a glimmer of life came into Pogiba's face and his eyes seemed to pierce the gloom accumulated in them during the months of suffering.

"By the way, Denis Ivanovich, you haven't forgotten your water-sprite?"

"Mariana?" The agent's well-fed face glistened with self-satisfaction.

"Mariana, the mysterious water-sprite."

"Everything in woman is a mystery, but it all has but one answer—pregnancy. Thus spake Zarathustra," Barabolya declaimed, and poured out a chain of his nasty "hee-hee's".

"I hope that hasn't happened to the water-sprite?" Pogiba's gaze dulled again.

"It's just what has happened," and Barabolya giggled again.

"Surely it isn't true?"

"I lie to women, but about them I tell only the truth." Barabolya was delighted with his own wit. "We'll soon go back to the Ukraine, and you'll see our water-sprite for yourself." He did not even ask whether Pogiba was willing to become a spy.

"Shall we go alone?"

"For the present—yes, but you'll be given a mandate by the Head Ataman. Only don't get the idea of going to Yurko Tyutyunik. At the congress of generals in Tarnov he was elected commander of the partisan rebel headquarters. But the Head Ataman doesn't trust him, and that enmity can do you harm."

"Very well," Pogiba concurred; he had more faith in Tyutyunik than in Petlyura, but it was all one to him now. The camp had left him no convictions at all. He knew that now he could serve anyone—Petlyura, or even Barabolya, who had given him food and clothing.

XXXVIII

The winter storage cellar was quiet and mysterious, smelling of honey and the herbs which bees love best. Old Goritsvit embraced a hive with both arms, brought his ear close and talked to the bees inside. Dmitro listened, interested and a little frightened, while Grandad talked to the bees as though they were people. He knew magic words which helped them to swarm earlier and gather larger quantities of fine honey. In the village they called Grandad a wizard, but that was all lies. Grandad went to church on Sundays and said the bees were the Virgin's tears and honey was God's dew that the mist carried from one place to another. And the winged workers toiled over all the flowers except wormwood and rye. Wormwood concealed its honey, while rye was sweeter than honey for the tiller of the soil.

Grandad ended his quiet conversation and turned to Dmitro.

"Give me a hand, child, let's put this hive out for a while in the yard."

"But won't it kill the bees? It's still cold."

"With a lazy bee-keeper they'll die in the warm too. More of them die at this time than in all the rest of the year. But if we give them a bath of sunshine, they'll get healthier."

Holding their breath, they carried the hive out into the yard. The snow sparkled blindingly in the sunshine, icicles hung from the edge of the roof, shedding blue drops, and a yellow bunting perched on a lilac bush chirruped merrily. The white clouds of spring floated through the sky, and the quivering shadows under the trees were blue and violet.

Grandad's yard was cleared of snow and strewn with dry rushes so that the bees, falling heavily on the ground, should not catch cold. It was strange to see the warm cloud pour out of the openings of the hives and rise in the air to bathe in the sunshine even though the snow lay all around.

Grandad's old face brightened, he smoothed down his beard and with narrowed eyes turned his kindly smile to the March sunshine. People stopped by the gate, looking in surprise at the hives, the bees and the old man. Dmitro heard whispers: "He's weaving spells!"

Ivan Sichkar, walking past, stopped by the gate. Old Goritsvit scowled and whispered furiously: "May your eye burst if it's evil."

Dmitro always felt a chill run down his spine when he came

face to face with Sichkar. And now, ready for battle with the kulak, he became taut as a string and tried to hide his trembling.

Sichkar looked at the bees and the old man in dismay.

"What's this, do your bees gather honey in the snow?"

"Sure. Some gather honey, others just put on more fat," Goritsvit said spitefully.

The passers-by laughed, but Sichkar pretended not to mind the jibe.

"That's what comes of tending bees all life long. You've quite a sting yourself now," he said.

"You're such a lump of fat, Ivan, you'd never feel a hornet's sting, let alone a bee's," the old man answered without turning round.

The bees flew about and returned to their homes. Grandad and Dmitro carefully carried them back to the cellar—let the hives stay there a couple of weeks more, then they could come out for good and stand in some sheltered spot. And old Goritsvit would go round them all with newly-baked bread, sprinkle them with holy water, using as a sprinkler the unthreshed wheat that had stood under the icons since Christmas, and again speak mystic words, that the bees should not fly from their hives but bring to them honey and wax.

"Well, child, we've done a good deed for the bees, now we can think of ourselves."

The old man stopped on the threshold as though wondering what to begin with. Making up his mind, he went to the shed and together with Dmitro examined the plough, the harrows and the wooden cultivator kept there. The cultivator had a broken leg, and Dmitro immediately set to work making a new one. Grandfather was always busy doing something, he knew all about everything, he was quick and thorough in all he did, and drop by drop he handed down to the boy all the knowledge he had gathered, like a bee gathers honey, in the course of his long useful life.

Dmitro liked working with his grandfather, gladly learned what he could teach him and ate with zest all the strangely flavoured food the old man prepared. Dmitro had grown during the winter, he was quieter and no longer called his father at night. He slept soundly and did not know that often, as dawn broke, his grandfather came and sat for a long time by his bed.

Day by day the son became more like the father. Grandad, who had never spared Timofi in the matter of work, allowed

his grandson to sleep right up to sunrise and was angry with Dokia when she fetched him home too soon.

"But Dad, if you're so fond of Dmitro, why won't you come and live with us?" the widow urged time and again. But that only made the old man angry.

"I can just see myself coming! Fill my sack and come tomorrow! And then soon's I say a word you don't like—you'll weep an apronful of tears! I know what women are, had one of my own and you're all tarred with the same brush. And I've a sharp tongue."

"Everyone knows that," smiled Dokia.

"Let them! There's another sort too: if you don't give them a nip, you'll never move them. Not thinking of getting married, are you?"

"The idea!" cried Dokia, flushing up to the point of tears.

"There, you see, what did I say?... You're a young woman yet."

"Even if I were seventeen, even if I were widowed on my wedding day, I would not look at another."

"Timofi knew what he was doing when he married you." Grandad shook his white beard and turned away so that Dokia should not see that his own eyes were not always dry.

Now the old man watched admiringly as Dmitro dovetailed a board—a good thing he had a bit of time now to enjoy watching.

"It'll be time for ploughing before we know it."

"Soon's the mist rises, time for the fields," the boy answered staidly, without stopping his work.

"Have you decided what you'll sow, and where?"

"Of course. Wheat and oats in Kadibka, peas and buckwheat on the main clearing. The soil's sandy, but buckwheat ought to come up."

A good farmer, thought the old man after a mental survey, but he only nodded. He did not believe in too much praise.

The forest became misty with dusk, the clouds darkened and seemed to rest on the tree tops. The music of falling drops ceased. After supper Dmitro said good-bye to his grandfather and turned his steps home—he had been away long enough. Ice crackled under his feet, the rough snow crunched, and the moon gleamed dully on pools covered with a thin frozen skin. The white cottages looked like plump geese waiting to spread their wings and fly to meet a new spring.

From a neighbouring street the merry voices of girls rang out in a teasing song.

At the door, near the well,
Pretty maids wove a spell,
Buried by the pathway
A pot of porridge flavoured well.
They buried it and marked the spot,
Smoothed it down with laughter gay,
And waited for their magic pot
To bring a handsome lad that way.

With the last words there came a burst of laughter and the girls fled—for a young fellow actually had appeared, and Podolye way boys and girls are not allowed to meet anywhere but inside the houses.

A handful of girls came running across the road, one of them noticed Dmitro, cried "Oh—a fellow!" and they all vanished squealing behind the fences.

Chattering magpies, thought Dmitro with a smile. He was pleased to have been taken for a grown youth.

Stepan Kushnir came smiling out of Olga Pidoprigora's house. He strode up to Dmitro and wrung the lad's hand.

"How do, Dmitro! My word, how you've grown—you're quite a young man now!"

"Oh, rot," mumbled Dmitro, highly embarrassed.

"And I've some great news!" Kushnir's face glowed. "I'm going to marry Olga. What's the sense of her pining alone?" He jerked his head towards the house. "Will you come to the wedding? This is an invitation. Will you come?"

"I'll come all right."

"I'm not marrying too young, you know, but there was no time for all that with the war on. And I'll find none better than Olga if I hunt the world," he added confidentially, as though Dmitro were a man of his own age. "A good thing the war's over, we can really live now. Your turn soon, lad! And remember, it's the best time in a man's life, when he's in love."

That brought all the blood in Dmitro's body to his face. Love—how much he had heard of it, in song and story. But what was it, really? He looked up at the gleaming stars and listened to the distant singing with eager expectation. And that song of spring seemed to come close to him, like the eyes of a girl shining on him from the darkness of the March night.

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