



Roman Ivanychuk
(1927 -)

THE HOUSE ON THE HILL

In all probability, the perennial murmur of the distant forest, mixed with the restless babbling of the river, never reached this hill which stuck out baldly on the edge of the village: it was always quiet here, like in a church locked up for the night. More than likely, the leafy crowns of the apple trees in Pantela's farmyard and the twigs covering the roofs of the buildings had never been pierced by sunrays: it was always dark here. Standing apart from the village, Pantela's farmyard was bounded on all sides by a dense orchard with an air of ill will and eeriness about it as if it were the site of many a witches' Sabbath. Only the sharply pointed well sweep broke through the leaves, looming like a gibbet against the skyline.

Behind the orchard was the death-haunted home of Pantela's ancestors, none of whom had found their eternal rest in the cemetery by the shingled church: they were of a different clan, of a different branch of the human race.

"I'm not keeping you here, Nastia. The world's big and wide," Pantela used to say to his daughter, but this was empty talk, because he knew that Nastia's roots had gone into this hill much deeper than his ever since she had walked out on Yurko.

The village sprawled along the river right up to the cliff under which the gypsies had once pitched their " tents. From there the river flowed on in loneliness, becoming more gracious and kinder. Every morning Nastia hurried along the riverbank all the way to Potichia where she worked in the forest warden's office. She walked past the strange village a stranger, and a stranger she returned to her silence-shrouded hill, which people avoided.

As a matter of course, Pantela did not need anyone in the village. His ancestors had, more or less, but he did not. People had submitted to the authority of his ancestors, but they did not want to bow down to him now, and to be their equal did not befit his origins. His great-grandfather had been a freebooter and looked down on the people from the hills; his grandfather, on the other hand, had hunted down the highwaymen with gunners, and he, too, had looked arrogantly down on the rabble from the height of his gendarme's status; his father had been the shepherd chief in the mountain meadows; Pantela had become a commoner, yet he could not humble his ancestral pride.

What did he need those people for anyway? He had everything he needed. To tell the truth, sometimes he took a fancy to something one of his fellow villagers had, but he didn't have to go asking and haggling over it to get it. He could wait — patiently and prudently — and it would come his way of its own accord. Say, the cherry tree of the retired teacher was something really unique: the cherries were creamy white and big as walnuts. What a price they'd fetch at a weekend market! But the old teacher left them for the sparrows. Once in early spring Pantela

stole up to the tree to get a twig to graft onto his cherry, but the graft did not take. The teacher died and his widow moved to town, and — since she couldn't take the tree with her, of course — the tree, along with a cubic meter of damp earth, migrated to Pantela's hill. Or take another instance when the rich peasants who lived off the sweat of their poor fellow villagers were evicted from these parts. Some of the villagers behaved then as if they were going to a give-away party: they took the goods, because they belonged to the rich, brought them home just for the same reason, and then had to return what they had taken. Pantela, however, did not run after other people's things, save perhaps for a trifle that had caught his eye and was now lying around his house: a French padlock on a hanging shackle, a dog collar, or an ax driven tightly into a block of wood. When the apples fell from the trees in autumn and rolled down the steep slope, Pantela minced after each one separately, even if he had to go all the way to the foot of the hill, and then he threw them into a sack. That's the only time people saw him, and the sight of him did not make them shrug their shoulders anymore, because they had grown accustomed to the recluse. The old man also appeared at the market in the township every Friday where he traded in all sorts of goods — from honey in wooden kegs to worn horseshoe nails straightened on an anvil.

What else could he do, if he didn't want to live with people? His great-grandfather had stripped the moneybags as if what he was taking from them were his own; his grandfather had taken from the people for the punishment he meted out; his father had gotten a share from those who worked under him; but Pantela had to make his own living — from apples to an occasional hasp he found.

The years raced by like spirited horses, the river babbled down through Potichia, and Nastia's youth was fading, but no matchmaker came up the hill, because as a matter of course, people did not visit Pantela.

But no, there was one visitor — Yurko. Oh, how he loved Nastia! But he insisted on having it his way: "I won't go and live among the dead." Nastia, too, was set in her ways: "None of my kin has ever left this place."

"Do as you like, Nastia. I'm not keeping you here," old Pantela used to say.

Indeed, what was keeping her? In the winter, only the winds roared on the hill, covering the orchard and buildings with snow; in the summer, the lights from the windows could not pierce the thicket of the green sepulcher; in her stall, the cow chewed her usual cud year after year, and the sheep rustled in the barn. Under the windows, the garden mint curled and was trampled underfoot, bespattering the stone ridge along the outer wall with green sap that looked like vomit.

Was this what was keeping her? But down the hill, it was just the same. Or was it perhaps her fear of having to live side by side with neighbors? God knows, but no one — dead or alive — had ever left this place.

"Go and marry, Nastia. Nowadays children fly out into the world like fir seeds. Mind you don't be sorry later because of me."

"But why doesn't anyone come here, Father?"

Pantela looked at his daughter — she was pretty but losing her bloom, and Yurko, who had already slept with her in the loft of the barn, was drowning his grief with another girl in the valley. "Run, run downhill, my dear, 'cause otherwise you might become a gray-haired old maid," Pantela told her. "I'm not to blame that our unsociable kin has been living here for ages."

Nastia could not leave the hill of her forebears for another world she hadn't known either in childhood or youth. The boys used to court her both here and in Potichia, but now they had

stopped coming.

"I won't leave, Father," she said.

"As you like."

Once as she walked uphill along the river from Potichia, she took a look at her hill, and the sight of the well sweep sticking above the dark cap of trees like a gibbet pierced her heart. An idea flashed through her mind: to chop everything down to the roots, build a two-story house, lure her would-be suitors with large blue windows, and cover the house with a flashing tin roof for the world to behold. Then they will come, they will.

Pantela did not object. He had hoarded enough money from taking the apples all the way to Kotlas every spring, and, besides, the local market had reaped some profit as well. He gave her everything he had. But there was something more to it than his acceptance of Nastia's idea. Pantela had often dreamed that he, too, would somehow raise himself above the people — estrangement alone did not gratify his ancestral pride. But how could he achieve this? He wasn't given the job of chief shepherd, because his father had earned ill fame. Wealth was out of fashion and it couldn't be used anywhere besides — a mountain meadow could not be bought now. So thank God his daughter had come up with this idea. And why not? A two-story house with a garret, and so many rooms there'd be one for each. But for whom — for each? Oh well, there'd be for whom then: for the son-in-law, for the grandchildren and great-grandchildren — and all of them living here, here! From the grandfather to the last childless member of the family!

The old apple trees fell under the ax, the green-sapped mint was trampled into the ground, the sheep and cow made room for Pantela and Nastia, who made the barn their temporary quarters. The old house was blown up into the sky in a column of dust, and along with it, the well sweep turned into a pile of useless rubbish.

The villagers looked on, in surprise this time, and shrugged their shoulders: what would Pantela need all that for? What for? Long past her prime, Nastia was catching a suitor for herself and building a cage for him! Hammers rapped away, saws buzzed, cutting into the trunks of sturdy fir trees, the foundation was laid of cement, and the beams supporting the wooden walls were of oak. Nastia quit her job at the forestry office, brought in the building materials and worked like an ox. In the end, all the cares made her old, and she wilted like a dry aspen.

The years raced by like spirited horses, the river babbled down through Potichia, Nastia's youth faded, and old Pantela now saw a flat-bosomed daughter: breasts wasted, feet threaded with knotty veins, face webbed with wrinkles. Could she bear children now even if anyone wanted her?

Up went one story, then another, then a garret with an openwork balcony, and large windows blinked down to the envy of the village — well, come on, matchmakers, hurry, all you nice suitors!

How come they're not appearing this time either?!

Simply as a matter of course, people didn't visit Pantela's hill.

An oldish stove-maker invited all the way from Kosiv built a tiled stove in Nastia's room. Though a widower, he was still peppy and built the stove with banter and song. Nastia handed him the tiles and didn't grudge him an extra drink into the bargain. Although she hurried him, unlike with the other builders, she did it gently, as he looked at her somewhat strangely whenever she bent toward him with the tiles.

"Why are you hurrying so, woman, or ... God forbid —" he stopped in mid-sentence. Nastia did not take offense, however; she glowed, the blush smoothed out her wrinkles, her deadened

youth roved in her eyes in bluish sparkles.

When everything was finished, the stove-maker washed his hands, looked into Nastia's eyes — oh God, with the effort she had put into this mansion, how many years could she have lived, how many nights could she have slept with her husband and borne him children — and shoved the wad of bills Nastia had given him toward the edge of the table.

"Those will be our profits now, missus. I intend marrying you!"

She started, blood shot into her face, what was left of her maiden's breasts stirred with excitement under her soiled blouse. She stifled a moan, her body went limp from unexpected happiness, and she sank onto a bench.

"Are you... are you telling the truth, Petro?"

"Why should I lie? Get your things ready right now if you want, give your thanks to pa, and — off we go."

"Where to?!" Nastia cried out, and a deathly pallor crept up her neck toward her face, eyes and forehead.

"What do you mean — where to? To my place. My son's grown up and doesn't live with me, I've got a warm home, and there we'll cradle our little ones quietly."

"And this? Who did I build this for?"

"Oh, let the old man enjoy himself; we'll be visiting him once in a while. For us there are too many rooms and corridors. What would we do here — chase dogs through the empty rooms, or what? Just going through them every day would be enough to drive you crazy. When would we get our work done then? My place is warmer, Nastia."

He hadn't finished yet and wanted to say something else, when Nastia uttered a ghastly shriek. She pushed her kerchief down to her neck, stuck her fingers into her hair and tore at it in her demented state, then she threw the wad of bills into the stove-maker's face and ran him out of the house.

At the shriek Pantela rushed into the room. With fright-filled eyes he watched his daughter shaking with laughter mixed with tears. Pantela tried to force himself to go up to her, but his legs would not respond to his will. He realized what had happened, and from horror, his heart stopped beating forever.

Nastia buried her father on the hill, with no priest or people attending the funeral. For as a matter of course, no one had ever been moved from here down to the valley and no one had ever come up the hill.

Then the whole village saw the lights burning in Nastia's room the whole night through, right to the crack of dawn, and those who passed the hill heard her singing wedding songs.

One night, the house on the sequestered hill burst into flames from all sides. People rushed up the hill for the first time, but they could not draw any water from the well, because there was no well sweep, and windlassing water was something the village had no knowledge of.

Only the cow was led out of the fire. But Nastia was nowhere to be found.

The years raced by like spirited horses, the river babbled down to Potichia, and a young orchard of tufted trees grew over the charred ruins on the hill.

A rumor reached the village (whether it was true or not, nobody could tell for sure) that someone was supposed to have seen Nastia in the suburbs of Kosiv — a living Nastia with a child in her arms.

Translated by Anatole Bilenko

