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(1864-1913)**

PERSONA GRATA

Lazar detested the prison warden whom the inmates had nicknamed Mug. He detested him for everything: for his rude, fleshy visage on which hair refused to grow, for his little cruel eyes, which seemed to look straight past one but in fact saw everything, and for his sadistic practices. The rare moments their eyes met imprinted themselves on Lazar's mind as a portent of evil. Lazar was therefore particularly uneasy when he noticed that of late Mug had somehow intentionally been focusing his little eyes on him, which seemed to paw his whole body, hands and feet and his sturdy sloping shoulders. That caused Lazar to withdraw into his shell, button up his prison gown and suppress his anger, and for a long time after this he could still sense the fixed stare in the wrinkles of his face. It came to the point where Mug, crossing the prison yard, would suddenly stop, go up to Lazar, give him a piercing look and move his lips as if he wanted to say something, but remain silent. Measuring him up and down, he would shift his gaze into the distance and, without saying a word, go on his way. The inmates saw this scene, stopped their work, and from under their gray cloth caps glinted the bleary whites of their eyes, inquisitive and derisive.

Once Mug found his tongue:

"Well, brother Lazar, looks like you're having a bad time with us, doesn't it?"

Lazar tucked up the flaps of his gown and tensed as if to fend off an assault. "Why pick on me?" said his whole figure, which instantly seemed to contract and harden. But Mug gave him no chance to speak his mind. Touching his arm above the elbow with two fingers and looking somewhere above his head, he uttered mysteriously:

"Take it easy, brother... things might change for the better..."

Then he marched across the prison yard, his shoulders cautiously bearing his rigid box of a head.

Lazar gave him a side-glance, showing the sallow whites of his eyes and watched him walk away with a wry and malevolent look.

The day after this incident Lazar was called to the office. His interview lasted for a long time, about an hour, and meanwhile the gray gowns in the prison yard exchanged conjectures, cynical remarks and knowing winks.

At last Lazar appeared. He was surrounded on all sides, plied with questions, and pierced with inquisitive stares. He fenced off their enquiries with a lot of banal, insignificant replies, but his

eyes harbored something sealed up within him. That was obvious enough. He had brought something with him, some seed that had taken root deep inside.

Outwardly everything was much the same as before, but even here there was a change, because in the hubbub of the prison crowd Lazar would suddenly calm down and retreat into himself. At times of rest he would sit at a distance from the others, prop his yellow face on his yellow hand, narrow his eyes and lapse into reverie. Deep in his heart something moved. Something of long ago, forgotten and unpleasant, covered by the burden of recent events and impressions. He dug into his mind, picking up scattered details, put them together and tried to mould them into a single whole. Just like it had been. Back in the days when things were still fresh in his memory, he thought to hear the cries of the people he had butchered, see the hands of children raised toward him to ward off death and the five corpses in the obscure tavern, who were already unable to stop the robbery, but now his mind was concentrated on quite a different point — on himself. Did he intend to kill? Was it really terrible? Perhaps only when they started to yell to draw someone's attention. How did he cut down his first victim? Was it easier to murder the rest? Did he finish them off right away, or did he torture them first? Did he look into their eyes and faces? His lazy memories, heavy and muddled, stirred sluggishly in his brain. Although he strained to the utmost and urged them on, he failed to recall everything clearly and to form a mental image of his deeds and feelings. Time and again he returned to one and the same detail, but when his tired memory, refusing to respond, revolved in one place like a key in a damaged lock, his thoughts branched off into another direction altogether. How would things be? Difficult or easy? Awful or tolerable? Suddenly he recalled how he had strung up a cat when he was still a little boy. A wretched cat with a ragged tail and ears, harassed by the dogs...

His recollections were cut short — the slop pail had to be carried out, and he set to work silently, indifferently, but there still was something concealed in his eyes.

The pole pressed on his shoulder, the large pail swung from side to side, making the gray contents lap in feeble waves; someone's back and waxy yellow neck stuck out ahead of him, and suddenly the ragged famished cat resurfaced in his mind, writhing on the string, contorting its tail and paws, its bloodshot eyes popping out of their sockets. What will happen next? Will it go on writhing for a long time yet? How soon will it shut its eyes and drop its limp paws? His mind convulsed in spasms of curiosity just like that cat on the string.

But how would things be now?

He was getting tired. Thoughts tore across his brain like a plow breaking dry ground, and tormented him. To find relief, he was bad-tempered and rude, kicking up rows without any pretext, stunning himself and others with the foul curses he sent ringing through the air. He rejoiced at discerning malice in himself, which he tried to fan, rouse and exacerbate.

"Hey you, the whole lot of you!" he shouted in a squeaky womanish voice. "Riffraff! Scum! You all should be hanged on the same branch if one could be found strong enough to hold your rotten weight!"

The gray gowns found these antics highly amusing, and laughter spread across their faces like dampness across the walls.

But this only enraged Lazar all the more and he shouted even louder, making movements like a hangman pulling at the feet of the hanged to hasten his death. At such times he wanted to slash, hang and stab not only those who made fun of him in hate, but also those over there beyond the prison walls. That's no big deal! Two twists of the bird's neck and it's curtains... Yet at the same time the nagging thought kept buzzing away like a gnat in his ear: how would things be?

Calming down a bit, he set back to work, carrying water and wood, sweeping the yard as if

nothing had happened. His face took on an introspective look, his lips tightly pressed under his clipped moustache, concealing his secret knowledge. As he moved about he would at times mumble something to himself in a businesslike manner, bending his fingers and calculating:

"One makes twenty-five... for two it's fifty, ten means three hundred minus fifty... and clothes besides..."

Something rustled in his imagination, something jingled so pleasantly that the prison and the gray gowns suddenly disappeared, the hanged cat vanished from his mind's eye, and the death rattle ceased.

He only recalled snatches of the conversation — "Will you cope with it?"... "Rest assured..." — and the round beardless visage of Mug, which now did not seem so loathsome after all.

Lazar's life took a sharp turn one night when he was secretly removed from the prison and put on a train. Instead of the prison gown he wore a yellow shirt, a peak-cap and high-legged boots. It felt a bit strange to see his feet in boots instead of the prison clogs, and the shirt was so light and unusual to the touch that Lazar did not rejoice in the change. But the gendarme sitting opposite him conversed in such an easy-going and well-disposed fashion that Lazar began to get used to it all. He forgot he was still a prisoner. And indeed he could easily have been taken for a coachman or some janitor of a rich household, sitting leisurely in a train, pleasantly conversing with a portly gendarme in blue uniform and a saber at his side. Well, why not?... No one would know. The gendarme became more and more talkative and candid. At first he told Lazar that they had it "hard" at work, and then he switched over to those who made it "hard." Lazar agreed to everything. When the gendarme brought out a bottle of vodka and they emptied it, both of them started to shout and to curse, clasping each other's hands and vowing God knows what. His head hummed slightly, and it was so nice and comforting to think that this important gendarme in uniform and with a saber at his side was squeezing his hand and speaking with him as an equal. They traveled all night and the whole of the next day and arrived at their destination late in the evening. After a long cab ride Lazar found himself once again in a prison. Despite the late hour the warden received him. Judging from the way he was looked over, glanced at and whispered about, Lazar concluded that here he was to be no ordinary convict. The brief reception ended, a lock clicked open, and Lazar entered a cell. Someone hastily hung up a lamp and by its light Lazar saw a high cell with one window, rather clean, with a neatly made bed, a table covered with a cloth, and in the corner an icon — the Savior with his hand raised in blessing.

"Well, sleep now," said the warden curtly in a wavering voice tinged with fright. "If you need anything, call Ivan or Kalenyk."

Everyone left, the lock clicked twice, and Lazar remained standing between the clean bed, cloth-covered table and the Savior in the opposite corner. He sat down on the bed, touched the quilt and pillow — everything was fine and soft as he had never had before. Near the table stood a stool, new and gleaming, and in the corner there was a bowl and water — everything a gentleman could require. Were it not for the high grated window, and the close-stool Lazar could have thought he was spending the night in some gentleman's home. He scanned the ceiling, lamp and icon, rested his shoulders against the speckled pillow, raised his booted legs onto the bed, and without turning off the light or undressing was asleep in a minute.

In the morning Kalenyk brought a teakettle along with a bun tucked under his arm. He put it on the table, turned to the bed and folded his arms at his belly. Lazar saw a sort, kindly-looking man on whom everything—his mustache, hair and old uniform — dangled limply as if it had been soaking in water for a long time and taken out of it just now. His soggy eyes rested on Lazar, and then wandered across his shoulders, hands and feet, and a smirk of satisfaction crept

under his tobacco-stained nose. Lazar guessed that this man must have a stubborn wheezing and rasping cough.

And sure enough, Kalenyk coughed in a rasping voice, shook his head in a gesture of friendliness, and sniffed in noisily.

"Oh yeah, a strong fellow you are!" he said quietly with a light sputtering laugh. "Come and have tea. To lie in bed with boots on, though, is against the rules. Well, but that's something for others... you're allowed everything..."

"How do you know I'm allowed?" Lazar asked inquisitively and even got down from the bed.

"I know... 'cause it's an order, that's all..." he said, emitting another light ripple of laughter.

"Because you're a man of the Crown," he added at length with an important air, "in the state's employ, so to speak..."

"You don't say? Well then, what about vodka?"

"You're allowed."

"And can I play cards?"

"As much as you like... With me that is... and with that other one, Ivan... that's in the rules..."

But as it proved not everything was allowed. He was not to open the window, or go further than the threshold. Those were the orders. From the free man which Lazar had felt himself to be during the journey he became a prisoner again. Here, it seemed, it was even worse than where he had come from. In the first prison he at least walked in the yard, saw people, and though the work was hard at times, there was nothing unusual about it. And again that nagging question, which he had been almost forgetting, hit his mind: how would things be?

Lazar washed himself, because the tea was getting cold and the bun looked appetizing. He had not finished the tea when the door opened and something rumbled. A tall lean servant hauled a soft armchair, faded and tattered at the back, through the door. He pushed it across the threshold with a crash and pulled it into a corner, shoving it against the wall. Kalenyk came in after him, clenching a slightly fly-blown portrait of the Czar and moving his mouth as if he were chewing something.

"Give me a hand, Ivan."

Ivan ran up, put the portrait to the wall, while Kalenyk, after chewing a while, took a cud of bread out of his mouth, stuck it to the wall and pressed the portrait against it. It was now even cozier in the cell. By all accounts Lazar was being taken good care of.

The dinner he was then served was good, substantial, with vodka, followed by a game of cards. Ivan kept losing all the time, which made him mad; Kalenyk was lucky; he had a good hand game after game, and after every happy win his laughter tinkled through the cell, though he was cheating and had to be watched closely.

The days passed. Lazar slept as much as he wanted, ate to his heart's content and played cards, drank his fill of vodka and, lounging in the soft armchair became quite cantankerous. For he was the boss here, and all his wishes had to be carried out. At first when he was alone his old worries continued to trouble him: when would it happen and how would things be? Any minute he expected to be summoned and led away to begin a new job, a new life. Time passed, but no one came for Lazar, life did not change, and he even got the impression that they had forgotten about him.

But once he was roused in the night. Still drowsy from sleep he did not realize that it was not Kalenyk but an unknown gendarme shaking him by the shoulder. Cursing, he refused to get up, while the light of the lamp irritated his eyes. In the end he tumbled out of his bed, taking time getting his boots and yellow shirt on. The gendarme's spurs jingled softly as he silently handed

him a coat to put over the shirt, and they left. Dawn was barely breaking and the air was chilly. When they had passed the prison wall and Lazar saw the horses, he guessed what was up and his heart missed a beat.

For a long time they drove through deserted streets, between silent houses with sleepy windows. Then they turned into a field. It grew lighter, and the rye fields, cold and fresh, glimmered in blue. The gendarme yawned and made the sign of the cross over his mouth.

"Yea-ah!" he drawled lazily. "A fine crop of rye that will be!"

The air became more transparent. Far on the horizon a little forest showed black, and nestling in the valley, below the forest, lay a dense fog as white as cotton.

At last they arrived. From afar Lazar made out a pillar. He got out of the britchka, climbed up onto the scaffold, and stared blankly at the rope that was gnarled and a bit twisted.

"Well, get ready!" said the gendarme.

Lazar got down from the scaffold, touched the noose, pushed it slightly, and with the same blank look watched it swing. He seemed to be in a dream. Everything in him was asleep: his malice, brain, blood.

"Roll up your sleeve," said the gendarme curtly.

Lazar listlessly unfastened his cuffs without knowing why he had to do so. The coat hindered him. He took it off and threw it behind his back; then slowly and warily he started rolling his sleeve up above the elbow, eyeing his hand that was black and gnarled with veins just like the rope.

The gendarme drew near him and touched his bared wrist with his fingertips. Presently he took out a watch.

"They'll be coming soon..." he said and lit a cigarette.

Some minutes passed in silence.

The morning wind slightly swayed the rope and eddied round his tanned hands. In the blue damp field a landrail craked, and smoke curled from the gendarme's cigarette.

That same instant he heard the clatter of rifles on one side and people appeared. In the front was a tall priest, the skirts of his surplice flapping as he walked, behind him came the warden and some other people, and farther away were the black figures of soldiers with something white in between. That white blot looked so odd in the black crowd that it involuntarily drew Lazar's eyes. The first thing he saw was hair as fair as flax. A white kerchief had slipped down from it onto the shoulder and wisps of hair gleamed like gold. The hair belonged to a little fragile girl, who was walking along so nimbly and even happily that Lazar turned his eyes from her in search of the one for whose sake these people had come together and put up the gallows.

He looked into every face, but none seemed to be the victim.

"Could it be this child?" he asked himself, feeling inward stirrings of dissatisfaction at having been duped. Presently the escort came close and made the girl stand under the scaffold. Why didn't she weep? Why didn't she shout? She did nothing of the kind, but simply stood there in silence, looking straight ahead, her golden wisps of hair shining around her forehead. At the word from the warden the priest stepped up and extended the crucifix to her. She pushed it aside in refusal and cried something in a resolute and clear voice, much like the call of a gull. The gentlemen and gendarmes stood by with pale and guilty faces, while she turned round and ran up the scaffold of her own will. Lazar stood there and looked in a daze on the scene as if he had forgotten what he was supposed to do. He did feel neither any malice nor interest.

"Tie her hands, you blockhead!"

This jolted him back to reality: he bore down upon her, rudely and clumsily. She did not

resist, but crossed her wrists, waiting silently for them to be tied, while he, sweating profusely, got the rope into a tangle in his frantic efforts to tie a knot.

"Where's the shroud, you yokel?"

Oh God, he had forgotten all about it.

At long last it was brought — a long white sack.

He was exerting himself and hurrying all he could. His hands trembled, as they brushed against the girl's hair and then slid down her warm, soft neck. The touch burned him and made his whole body convulse. But still Lazar seemed to be in a daze. Something remained dormant in him, he did not know what. Bleary-eyed and only semiconscious, he threw the noose over her neck, adjusted it and then knocked the board from under her feet. The rope twanged like a string, while the white shape jumped and twirled. It grew long, large, covering the skyline, the people, and the entire world like a white wall. Then it suddenly shrank and flashed white against the rising sun. Only then did Lazar see the field and hear the silence, an unusual, deadly silence that cut him to the quick. In that vacant silence the white shape twitched, the landrail cracked dryly, and the doctor's watch glistened in the sun.

The warden approached Lazar. He raised his hand to pat him on the shoulder, but that instant jerked it back without touching him. Pale, he uttered curtly in a strangely choked voice:

"Good boy!..."

He turned his back on him and twirled his mustache. The rifles clattered, people started to shift about, and it was all over...

That day Lazar simply could not drink his fill. Ivan and Kalenyk grew tired running to and fro bringing him vodka, but he kept on drinking and talking all the time lest it grow silent in the cell, and hard as he tried he could not recall what she had cried then before her death. He heard the voice, but the words were lost in the haze that had settled over his brain. By evening he was dead drunk and tried to pick a fight, but Ivan and Kalenyk ran away, so Lazar collapsed on the bed and fell asleep.

Nightmares came to haunt him in his drunken sleep, but gradually the haze lifted and he heard distinctly the words she had so proudly flung into their faces, although he did not understand them or try to grasp their meaning. He clearly saw her thin wisps of hair like golden threads, little childlike hands, and the gentle neck, warm to the touch, which he could still feel in his fingers and which made his flesh creep. Now he saw all her movements, the look in her eyes, her pale face, the wrinkle on the forehead, the hem of her skirt flapping as she walked, all the minutest details, her body, soft and little like a fluffy yellow chick. He saw how she quivered under the white sack, bowing her head and neck, while the long sharp toes of her boots stuck out like a swallowtail. And he dreamed that he was inspecting his hands to see whether anything had stuck to them.

After that Lazar was roused frequently in the dead of night. He would get up and go to work listlessly, passionless, disinterestedly. The question "how would things be?" was of no relevance to him now. He did not feel the malice he had tried to rouse in himself back in the other prison. Besides, there was even something pleasant about his job, for he got a chance to see the fields, the rye growing green, the clouds drifting in the sky, the winds stirring the air, and the sun rising.

He had to deal with different people. Some went to their death boldly, proudly, speaking beautiful words straight from the heart. Others, pale as corpses, barely dragged themselves along, fainted and had to be pulled to their feet. Still others ranted and raved and put up resistance. These he dragged by the neck, twisting their hands and wrestling with for a long time till he was drenched with sweat. Men and women, old and young, small and slender like children,

gentlemen and common folk like him. Sometimes he did well and the work went smoothly. At other times the noose would slide up the neck and wrench the head aside. Then the white bundle would jerk and writhe and take a long time to die. To cut the agony short, Lazar would hang on to the legs, stretching the body till it cracked in the joints — and death followed. Once the rope snapped and the execution had to be started anew. Another time the rope proved to be too long and after he had knocked the board out from under the feet, the body jerked like mad and snapped off, leaving the severed head in the white shroud, which dangled from the rope like a kite, spilling blood all over the canvas. Then he was berated by the warden and had to wash the white sack himself.

Each "client" who met Lazar in their last hour left him something to remember: a look, a strange tone of voice, color of hair, form of neck, motions and words. All these things stuck to him and led their mysterious lives within him. They were the only vital details left of the dead, which his mind had retained. And strangely enough all this surfaced in his memory only in his dreams and never while he was awake. Mostly he spent his days in boredom, slouching about gloomily, angry, given to outbursts of wanton bad temper. He would make Kalenyk and Ivan run about on errands, and threw his boots at them whenever they were not quick enough in fulfilling his whims. He cursed and drank. The liquor befuddled his mind, breeding chimeras, wild impulses and fury. He hollered at everyone, banged on the door, and was unbearable in general.

One morning as usual Ivan brought him boiled water for tea, but Lazar would not take it: "Bring the samovar!" Ivan argued and explained, but Lazar grabbed the teakettle and hurled it at Ivan, breaking some plates and scalding Ivan in the process. The senior officer came and started to shout, but Lazar's rage would not subside and he kept pouncing the table with his fists and bellowing wildly: "Bring the samovar!" The senior officer disappeared, and the samovar was brought. Sensing his power, Lazar became ever more demanding. Besides vodka, he wanted beer — and every day he had beer. On his demand he was served expensive meals; the whole cell was covered with carpets, and grumblingly and reluctantly as his guards responded to his whims, they still carried them out. This power went to Lazar's head.

"Scum!" he hollered at them. "Now do what I say, 'cause I'm the boss around here!..."

The obedience of his guards and superiors spurred his desire to torment. It seemed that his befuddled brain was incessantly occupied with devising something new, molesting and humiliating.

He would call Kalenyk and order him tersely and gruffly:

"Cough!"

Kalenyk would smile in awkward silence.

"Cough!"

Kalenyk shuffled uneasily, twisted his mouth in anger, but started to cough softly.

"Make it louder, you yokel, do you hear?"

"Cough-cough!" Kalenyk rasped.

But soon that artificial cough would turn into a real one and fill the cell in an unceasing howl punctuated by wheezing and wailing.

Some minutes later Lazar would summon him again.

"Kalenyk, cough!"

In his drunken mind he imagined himself to be a count or some big shot visiting the prison on an inspection tour to set matters right and redress the wrongs suffered by the prisoners. The first thing he would do was stage a "parade" for Ivan and Kalenyk. Lounging in his armchair, he threw out his booted legs, his arms akimbo on his yellow shirt, his gray face with brick-red

splotches wrinkled into an angry scowl, and his yellow mustache jutting out comically, making him look like a dog.

"What's your name? Ivan, you say? You lie. Your name is Crook, I know. You won't fool me, I can see right through you, you rascal. Why do you torture people? You think, you pig, that just because someone's a prisoner he isn't a human being any more. Maybe he's better than you, 'cause he's paying with torment for his sins, while you're being paid for them. Now, mind you, if I just get wind of anything, I'll have you... I'll have you... in twenty-four hours..."

"Now, the next one. What's the name? Kalenyk? Oh, the hell with it, let it be Kalenyk. Well, report... Attention!... Stand to attention, man! Do you know who you're talking to, eh? Do you pilfer? And what about the wormy borshch you feed the prisoners with? And what about mugging them? The prisoners wear shirts as black as soot! You filthy rat... The place is one big mess! I'll show you! Get the warden!..."

When the warden was not summoned, Lazar would pick a fight. The guards went off to complain against him, after some time the warden would come, a bit timidly as if he were suppressing something in himself. He was not cross with Lazar; with a sour, guilty smile on his face, he persuaded Lazar, pleaded with him and made him feel ashamed.

Lazar realized that they cringed, that he was needed, that everything was permitted him like an important personality.

And he went on devising new whims.

At times he would be seized by fear. He was afraid of everything, everything seemed to be one big conspiracy against him, stealing up to him to waylay and attack him.

For some reason he imagined Ivan's eyes spying on him. They would sneak up stealthily, alight on his neck or back, seeking a place to crawl into his body. Lazar would fall silent, tense and then suddenly wheel round, but the eyes would slip away in time, laughing in Ivan's face and recounting what they had espied.

At such moments Lazar would fly into a rage and holler at Ivan:

"Don't you look at me! Take your eyes off me, do you hear or I'll tear them out of your face!..."

But the eyes returned, crawling over his face, neck, chest and, with a soft tickle, they would bore into him. This annoyed Lazar and made him tired. Generally things were bad with him and he was sick of everything, of the walls, the vodka, of Ivan and Kalenyk. In the first prison, life seemed to have been easier. It was easier to carry the slop pail, sweep the prison yard, haul water. There he had sunshine, movement, people. Lazar did not think about his new work by day, but at nights he would feel the sensation of a soft neck or warm tresses beneath his fingers. From out of the dark, eyes came flocking around him — brown, gray, blue eyes, all of them desperately screaming of life and death. The beautiful words they uttered burst into bloom like flowers, while the curses languished like dust-covered thistles. Everything surfaced in his mind, everything that had been left him in remembrance, all the memorabilia of death that had stuck to him and led their separate and mysterious life in his mind. And this bred in him apathy and fatigue.

But his work kept tearing him away from his dreams, and he was made to go for new memorabilia, although the old ones had not been forgotten and gave him no peace. Lazar would grumble, laboriously lift his crapulent body, and dress. After that there followed yet another day of boredom, drunken stupor, and bad temper.

Many days and nights passed in this fashion.

The nights, though, were better.

One night he was visited by the man who had left him his big eyes to remember. He sat down on the bed at his feet, and a conversation started between them.

He: What did you kill me for?

Lazar: How should I know? I was ordered to.

He: That's a lie. How can anyone be ordered to kill when he himself doesn't want it? Tell me the truth: you killed for money?

Lazar: But I had already knifed five people before that.

He: Don't try and get out of it. Why did you kill them?

Lazar: They were screaming... I got scared... I was afraid people would come and seize me.

He: Well, what happened then?

Lazar: I don't know myself how I did it... I didn't want to... I hadn't intended to...

He: You see, you didn't want to. Out of fear you took the consequences of sin, for which you accepted punishment and penitence. You were defending yourself. Well, but what about now? What do you kill people for now? For vodka? For money? What have they done to you?

Lazar: Don't look at me like that! Take your eyes off me ...do you hear me!

He: No, I'll go on looking at you. I'll stick my eyes to your breast and I'll twist and turn them till they bore into your heart. For you're better than those who seduced you and made you kill... You're ignorant, you're blind, perhaps it was misery that made you take to evil, but they read books, they have plenty...

Lazar: Do you think it's easy for me? I'm worn out... in body and soul. And something keeps eating my heart away. Now don't you look at me that way... take your eyes off me... you hear what I say: take your eyes off me!

But he would not take them off: the eyes detached themselves from his face, horrible big eyes screaming of life and death, and they floated through the air to land on Lazar's chest. He felt them turning and turning round in on place, penetrating his breast deeper and deeper.

Lazar awoke with a heavy head. He was weary and the world seemed a miserable place to live in. The cell was so crammed, damp and stuffy, and his body grew drab and limp. He did not even want any vodka, but still he kept on drinking. That day the vodka was bitter, it had a nasty smell and did not go to his head at all. That made Lazar go off in a fit of yelling and bullying, he vented his malice on Ivan and tormented Kalenyk. He wanted the cell to burst with shouts, clamor, commotion, to hear the walls split, the windows rattle and everything crash. He smashed the plates to smithereens, pounded away at the door and banged the table with his fists. But he could not dispel the silence. It stared at him with a grin from the high ceiling and from all corners. It got the better of him.

Lazar fell silent, lay down on the bed, and closed his eyes, wondering if the man of the previous night would return. But he did not come. Lazar got up from the bed, trudged wearily around the cell, bumped into the walls, leaned against the cold plaster, fell to thinking about something and twisting his face, said aloud: "Scum!" Then again he trudged back and forth, reeling off his thoughts like cobwebs, and hissed at someone through his teeth:

"Scum!"

He clenched his fists.

At night he had a visitor again, though not the one he had expected, but his first victim, the fair-haired girl. She sat down at his feet and asked straight out:

"What did you kill for?"

Lazar did not know. He had nothing to tell her, but wanted to hear her voice, wanted her to explain everything to him. If that's what he wanted, all right! Then, in a voice that still rang in

his ears, she told him that she had left behind an old mother who was now crying her heart out, that she did not want to die, but he killed her only because he was being paid for it. For money. Did he really need that money? Did it bring him peace, happiness, joy, health? Was it worth taking a human life to have a prison cell, vodka and a sin on his conscience in reward? Was he now better off than before? She went on talking, while her hair glimmered over her forehead.

Lazar wanted her to tell him something else which he knew, but which he dared not say himself, and the girl, pale as a wisp of cloud, seemed to have guessed his wish:

"And still you are better than those who made you kill, because it is not the ax that chops, but those who wield it..."

Something moved in Lazar's heart. Was it joy or compassion? For her? For himself?

Now he only wanted to know what she had cried then before death.

But the girl smiled softly and said reproachfully:

"You should have listened."

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Lazar's peculiar behavior made Ivan and Kalenyk conclude that he had been drinking a bit too much lately. He grew sullen, quiet and engrossed in thought. Pacing up and down the cell he would suddenly extend his hand and for no obvious reason inspect his palms and fingers and then hide them in his pocket. Then he would pace the cell again, look round to see whether he was being spied on, then take out his hand, examine it attentively and hide it. What was he looking for?

This new habit of his was particularly noticeable when he played cards. At times, in the middle of a game, he would throw the cards on the table where they were plainly visible to all, and hid his hands under the table. Whenever he thought Ivan and Kalenyk might be casting a look at his hands, he stopped playing, pulled his hands into his sleeves or hid them behind his back, and chased them out of the cell in a fury.

Now Lazar ate little. Kalenyk told Ivan that Lazar was afraid of bread. Once he had spied him reaching for a piece and instantly jerking back his hand. "But it's holy," he said out loud. Ha-ha! 'cause it's holy, how do you like that! Ha-ha! they laughed.

For some days now the gendarme had not come for Lazar. But every time he went to bed he thought of him and expected him to come. Who sent the gendarme? The warden? No, he was just like Lazar, no more than an ax in someone else's hands. Who sent him then? What were these people like? Was there one or many? He wanted to see these people, who were worse than him. They who were even ashamed of the sun, because they finished their work before it rose. But where could he find them—who would show them to him? How would he recognize them?... His feeble mind struggled like a fly bating against a window, and collapsed in exhaustion.

But deep inside him something was rising like leavened dough in a mould. His thoughts suffocated him, his lungs gasped for air. He would climb the table and open the window, although this was forbidden. From behind the bars dampness and quiet drifted into the cell, while his eyes greedily took in everything they could. Out there it was free and serene. There were tall black trees, and in between was the blue of the sky, deep as the waters of an azure lake, and in it the stars were swimming like goldfish. A heavy dark cloud shifted drowsily over the earth, shuddering with the occasional mild flash of lightning. Further away on the damp ground red windows glowed and everywhere stillness reigned.

But Lazar knew no calm, because Kalenyk would at once appear to close the window lest

someone outside should see him.

So that's how it was! They were hiding him, ashamed even of him being seen. Now, who were those people?

* * *

"Lazar, get up!"

These words cut through his dream, crawling like caterpillars over his body. He wanted to brush them away, but his strength failed him and the caterpillars, ugly, hairy brutes, kept on crawling over him and tickling his shoulder.

"Lazar, get up!"

Lazar opened his eyes — bent over him was the face of the gendarme.

Lazar got up, swinging his legs down from the bed

He sat for a while, blinking at the light, and then lay down again.

"Well!"

"I won't go."

Ha-ha! He won't go! That's funny indeed! The gendarme rocked with laughter, and his saber rattled.

"Come on, Lazar, stop playing the fool. It's time to go!"

But Lazar did not think of playing the fool at all. Gloomily and obstinately he said again:

"I won't go."

The determination in Ins voice made the gendarme angry.

How do you like that, he won't go! When everything's ready. What's he playing at? Who the hell does he think he is? Some big shot is he, an officer? Why waste words on a filthy hangman! Get up when you're told!

And Lazar got up, but so quickly that he gendarme jumped aside, seeing an altogether new Lazar with a face contorted in anger, two wolfish eyes, a bared hairy chest and clenched fists. And all this, wheezing and blazing with fire, bore down upon him.

"So you're better than me, are you? You don't do the hanging yourself, do you, you bastard?"

His huge body swayed on his bare feet and threw up fury as from the pits of hell.

"Show me your hands? Think they're clean, eh? So I'm only a hangman, ain't I? Then why do you cringe to a hangman, you bastards!"

Before the gendarme could come to his senses Lazar grabbed hold of the armchair and brought it down with such a crash that made it split apart on all four sides.

"Now take this... and that!..."

"He's drunk!" cried the gendarme. "Tie him up immediately."

That was not so easy to do. Huge and strong, Lazar lunged from side to side like an enraged bear with a pitchfork stuck in his body, smashing everything he could lay his hands on and pulling down the carpets from the walls, ripping, tearing and trampling them under his feet.

"Now take this... and that!..."

It seemed that not just the people but all the objects in his cell roused his fury.

As the guards grappled with him the air filled with dust and the walls echoed with terrible crashes and groans.

They pounced on him, but he struggled and resisted, until eventually they bound him hand and foot and beat him.

The warden came, railing and pleading. How could he behave so? He was being so well-

treated. What other prisoner enjoyed such privileges? He shouldn't have swilled so much vodka; it's all because of it...

Lazar lay in the dust amid the debris, helpless in his fetters. He breathed heavily, exhausted by the fight, but inside him stirred a malevolent joy, because today there would be no hanging, and those unknown people who had the authority to kill were dependant on him, the executioner.

* * *

Later on Lazar submitted. He grew quiet and no longer argued when he was roused from sleep at night. He went about his job listlessly like a bored craftsman, but in his eyes there reappeared that look of something concealed within him.

He was mostly silent now, abandoned his willful ways, and was quiet and obedient. Kalenyk and Ivan could not praise him enough.

They even spied less on him, reckoning that since the hangman had been given a good lesson he got a better idea of the power of the authorities, because now he spoke more frequently about his superiors. Well, take the warden or the gendarme; for example, they don't do whatever they want, because there is someone standing above them. Oh yes. And above these stand their superiors. And higher up there is someone who says: let it be this way— and everybody does what he says.

That "he," distant and obscure, whom neither Ivan nor Kalenyk would have much idea about, interested Lazar the most. Now "he" would say: kill — and gallows would go up, people would be brought to them, the gendarme would fetch Lazar, and Lazar would put the noose on the neck. "He" was like a spider, fat and with bulging eyes, lurking on a cobweb and tracking down any buzzing fly. The threads of thought, which had once been so entangled in the dim and crowded head of the hangman, were now being unraveled and wound into a neat tight ball. The evil seemed to be lurking in one place, from which it had spread out its tentacles on all sides. If only the evil were to be challenged, seized and crushed, its tentacles would droop limply, and the gendarme would stop rousing Lazar at nights.

Now Lazar became quite obsessed with this "he." Who was "he"? What was "he" like? Where could "he" be found? Lazar imagined him to look just like the warden Mug, with a crude hairless visage and little cruel eyes. Lazar would go right up to his snout and say: "So you're the evil, are you?" — and whack! bang! he would hit him in the face. "You're the grief, you're the injustice, are you?" — and again whack! bang!... "So it's you who are spilling blood all around!"

Then he would hang him. But not like the others, oh no — he would hang him without the shroud so that his face could be seen and all the agony in it, so that he would writhe and writhe endlessly and his shoulders twitch and his face grow black and his greedy eyes pop out of their sockets.

He knew how to do it: he had been taught.

And for the first time after all his fatigue and indifference, after his aversion to his trade — for the first time did he feel the joy of murdering.

He felt hatred in his heart and the luxury of anguish.

Translated by Anatole Bilenko