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(1940 -)

THE HOUSE

Kondra looked out of a dormer window at Patrihura's house which not so long ago had screened off not only the bright sun, but the entire great world, as it were, and hacked delightedly into his fist: Well, didn't I get my way, after all? Isn't it me who's now looking down on you from on high? Isn't the entire village open to my view again? Yes sir, he could see it laid out as clear as on the palm of his hand. Oh my, had the people wagged their tongues...

They had ladled out all sort of gossip — you just couldn't put a bridle on their tongues. But not every bit of tittle-tattle could be shrugged off that simply. If, say, Kondra were to be called Cyclops (his left eye was missing) straight to his face or Skinner (he dressed every kind of fur — not for nothing, of course), he'd stand it all, but when they started dragging his house through the mud, beg your pardon, that was something he couldn't take. He was used to different treatment.

His house had once been the best of them all. It stood on a high foundation wall and had a little cellar (why should he cut a patch off his personal plot to build an outdoor cellar, when there wasn't enough space for a hen to strut around?); a bathroom and pantry; the garret, the sempiternal refuge of owls and sparrows, he turned into four mansard rooms, their windows glittering insolently on all sides, while a glazed door opened onto a little balcony and the sun. To tell the truth, there was no need for so many rooms, since his children, a son and daughter, had long since taken apartments in the town, but Kondra adhered to one principle: whatever he put his hands to, it either had to gladden the eye or make others itch with envy. At times when he looked at his handsome house from downhill, he seemed to grow in stature: Who else has anything like that, I ask you, who?

"You surely took the starch out of them all, neighbor," his fellow villagers would tell him now and again, as they passed him by, glancing at his proud house. "It's not a house you have, but a real mansion."

On hearing such praise, he felt his soul bubble over with joy. If you have a head on your shoulders, it must have a well-oiled thinking machine, he reasoned, and contentedly stroked his reddish mustache wrinkled in a lingering smile.

After Kondra had built himself a garage (just in case his son, a sales manager, might win some kind of gas buggy in a lottery) and a summer kitchen, he lived in the summer kitchen throughout the season: it was a custom in the village — when it was warm, the house was just for the furniture and for distinguished guests. Besides, Kondra's house was intended to further his personal ambition. So on days off he'd settle on the balcony, from which the village could be taken in as though on a saucer, and intercepted the envious glances of the passersby, as he frowned browlessly, thus inflating his ego: that's it, you'd better not envy the goods of others, but take care of your own weak

heads. It was clear even to a dolt that you didn't have to sell your last shirt to build those "dovecotes," but he had made himself a second story out of scratch, so to speak. Yet how chic it was!

Kondra went on sneering at human stupidity from on high until Patrihura, who appeared in the suburban village from God knows where, built the foundation of his house next to Kondra's. It was not simply a foundation wall, but a real concrete story, with partitions, recesses, and window and doorframes of various sizes.

"And what'll be here, on the first floor? Come on, neighbor, spill it out," Kondra said, as he put his hands behind his back and rocked his stout body back and forth from heel to toe.

"All the domestic amenities, neighbor," Mykola replied. He looked with his deep kindly eyes at Kondra, and then opened his hand: "The two large southern sections will go for the kitchen and garage, and on the north from you there'll be a pantry, basement, bathroom and toilet, so that the entire floor above will be living space. Why on earth should I litter my personal plot with summer kitchens, garages and, excuse me for mentioning it, all sorts of one-seat throne rooms?"

This information cut Kondra to the quick — and so badly his playfully rocking body missed a couple of beats and cold sweat covered the eyelids above his red-fringed pupils. Yet he lacked the strength to put on a smile.

"Good idea, good indeed. And the garret you'll transform into a mansard, I guess?"

"By all means, neighbor. Am I worse than the others, or what? If you build, you have to do it well," Mykola said good-naturedly.

"Right! That's the way to do it," Kondra praised him again, but his lips seemed to have become frozen and it was no use trying to brighten them with a smile. "Looks like you want to build three stories and outdo me, don't you?" he asked, pulling at the end of his mustache.

Kondra was seething inside. What a blockhead, what a bald jackass you are! he cursed himself for the miscalculations he had made in building his house. Why hadn't he raised the foundation wall as high as Patrihura? There was still plenty of lime in the pit for another story and there were enough plaster panels and bricks stacked behind his barn. Why hadn't he raised the foundation another meter? That way he could have killed several birds with one stone: he'd have saved on the land of his personal plot, enlarged the floor space, and have an altogether different house, damn it!

"Good, but how long will you be working on this house? Are you intending to live in it at least when it's finished?" Kondra asked.

Patrihura responded with banter that had but one idea behind it: why had he started building in the first place?

"Well, my house is smaller," Kondra said. Oh, how his words stung him. "Yes, indeed: it's lower by an entire story, and smaller in size. Do you know how long I slaved on it? For a little over ten years. It tortured me so much I had no strength left by the time I moved in," he said, surprised at his own cunning, because the house gave him joy, and great joy for that matter. It made him sort of famous throughout the entire region. A newspaper had featured a photograph of his house, along with a caption, black on white: "The family of the collective farmer Hryhoriy Kondra from the village of Zalanivia now lives in this mansion." By God, that was much more important than a portrait of the house owner himself, because a man is famous not for his face, but for his deeds. He had kept the newspaper with the photograph yellow with time behind the icon to this day, and looked at it and read it over every Sunday, his heart going pit-a-pat with inward joy. After the picture had appeared in the newspaper, he had surrounded his house with a concrete path and planted flowers all around. If a stranger asked for the local leather-dresser, he was given brief and clear directions:

"He's the one who lives in the best house."

"Oh, things are done at a different pace now, neighbor," Mykola stuck to his guns.

How did you like that! This here greenhorn was wising him up! Whether he liked it or not, he'd have to pass every single brick through his fingers several times: at first loading them onto a truck at the brickworks, then unloading them, after that handing them to the bricklayers, and then throwing them up to the second floor. You'll rub your fingertips bloody yet, boy — and more than once. Or take the ceiling, for instance: How many laths or reed stems will you need for that! You'll end up with all your nails blue and chipped. And the mortar you'll need will make many a blister crack on your palms. A man with little strength can crack up from the strain — Kondra looked his skinny, shortish neighbor over, and shook his head with pity.

But this sort of intimidation only made Mykola laugh.

"Oh my, my, you'll see me move into this house in less than a year, neighbor."

We'll see, we'll see, said the blind man, Kondra sneered mentally at the man who behaved as if he really believed in fairy-tale castles appearing by magic. On the other hand, it was logical: he that never climbed, never fell. You don't know yet what it means to build a house. Kondra could tell him about it, but it would be a long story.

Still, he couldn't get a wink of sleep till midnight that day. Patrihura was set on outdoing everybody else. The realization made Kondra painfully uncomfortable, as if someone had stuffed his mattress and pillow with stones.

Once after Kondra had come home from work, his wife served him the evening meal, and said: "Do you remember, Hryhoriy, how you went about in a plaster cast?" Sure, he remembered it all right! When he was removing the timbering supporting the ceiling in the cellar, a board hit his arm so hard it broke — not the board, of course, but the arm. Why did she have to remind him about it? Had she really got pleasure out of tying and untying his shoelaces and buttoning and unbuttoning his shirts the whole winter through? But the woman was in a chirpy mood: "Oh, the trouble we had with that ceiling, what with getting all the cement and gravel, setting the timbering, and the two of us mixing the concrete for that blasted cellar. And then you had that mishap with your arm. It must have been overwork that did it. Oh yes, Patrihura put up an entire wall out of prefab panels today." Not believing his ears, Kondra rushed to the window and instantly felt his body grow heavy. What he saw affected him so deeply that he started to complain of insomnia from that day on.

A couple of days later, after hearing a dull monotonous rumble outdoors, he looked out of the window, and froze. Not believing his eyes, he went on wiping the window with his hand as if he wanted to erase a vision. But all in vain! Even if he had smashed the glass, nothing would have changed (save perhaps that he would have cut his hand), because the crane in Patrihura's yard would go on rumbling and the stacks of brick would continue floating through the air from the truck right to the prefab panel ceiling. Yes, that shrimp Mykola was not joking. Look what a pace he's set. In that instant a pain shot through Kondra's eye (the left one under the black patch), and it hurt so acutely the pain made him dizzy.

That day he had a horrible nightmare, in which he was throwing bricks onto the ceiling of the second floor — him throwing, and his wife catching. Soon the bricks came flying at him from another side — that was his son giving him a helping hand. Now he had to get rid of a brick as fast as he could to catch the next one. His neck hurt, for his eyes followed each brick to the heap above, the small of his back seemed to have been fettered by an iron band, but there was no letup on his son's part! Attaboy! Kondra was pleased that his boy was energetic and no lazybones like others, say, Mikhas Khaliavko whose house was full of holes and open to all the winds, while its respected master didn't care a rap about it. An engineer from the district center had staked out the site for his

new house a long time ago; the willow stakes he had driven into the four corners of the site had grown into tall willow trees by now. Kondra's son, though, was a nimble sort and had taken after his daddy when it came to pounding the anvil. Back from the army just recently, he had already found himself a job in the district. His hands could stand Kondra in good stead now, for who else could he expect to help him? Not Khaliavko, surely? Now if Kondra hung out a bottle of moonshine on the gate he'd have hands coming from high and low like flies to honey. But, I beg your pardon, what drunkard makes good help? He might, God forbid, twist his leg, and then Kondra would have to pay him in cash for every day of the illness. Who else would give a drunkard paid sick leave today? Oh no, Kondra could manage it on his own. He knew what to do himself, he did. Just then he caught a brick (with both hands — this he remembered quite well), but the next moment he groaned in agony: a half of the brick had broken off and its sharp-pointed end had shattered his left eye...

The thought of Patrihura building away in double time robbed Kondra of sleep till the morning. Patrihura, dressed in a new suit, his hands clasped behind his back, would usually take up position by the house, while the work went on — and under full steam. Not even a speck of dust would fly into the man's eye. Where did the likes of him come from anyway?

Finally, Patrihura's house was ready by winter, and it screened the world off from Kondra.

In spring life confronted him with yet another puzzle. He saw that all of his neighbor's three apple trees were milk-white with blossoms, while Kondra's one and only tree was barren.

"Isn't that really odd?" he sought his wife's advice. "One sky, one sun and one earth — but look what injustice there is in this world."

"That's because of the winds," his wife babbled. "Our house screens his trees from the northern snowstorms, while his tower screens the sun off our little tree."

Such an explanation made his jaw drop: it was nothing but a lie that a woman had only long hair instead of brains.

"And that's how it'll always be?"

"I doubt whether the sun will change its course just for the sake of Patrihura's tower."

So in this case, too, Patrihura had got the better of him.

That same day he aired his grievance to Mykola:

"Listen, neighbor, you must do something because my apple tree will go to ruin without sunshine behind your skyscraper."

Mykola blinked at him in surprise for a long time, and when at last he had realized what the man was talking about, he said good-naturedly, "It's easier to replant an apple tree than move a house — that's clear enough, I guess," and flashed a row of young teeth at Kondra.

Oh, he laughs best who laughs last, Kondra wanted to warn him, but kept his peace, and wheeling round on his heels, carried home the splinters of the young man's laughter; they stung his heart, hampering his breath. He tramped around the barn in rage and looked into all his rooms, which only built up his fury, because these nooks seemed like beehive chambers to him. Patrihura's house, though, had enough room inside to roll a wagon around. That bugger could do things well, despite him still being a greenhorn without a single streak of gray in his hair.

His heart was still smarting from the insult with the apple tree, when he suddenly saw a newspaper photographer aiming his camera at Patrihura's house from this angle and that, like a beau dancing attention to a girl.

"Hey, why don't you come over to me?" Kondra asked, having stolen up to the photographer.

The photographer looked at his house, then at Kondra, and said:

"The earth is spinning, man, and time is flying. Your house is old news today."

"You don't say?!" Leaning on the fence, Kondra stood there for a long time as if someone had hit

him over the head. So you think it's old news? So Patrihura's out at the front of the stage? And I'm being shoved back behind the curtains, eh? So I'm worse now? Well, well, we'll see, philosopher, whether it's old news or not, we'll see.

In the evening he moved his armchair closer to his wife dozing near the stove, and pointing his index finger over his shoulder in the direction of his neighbor's house, asked in a secretive way:

"Do you think that squirt has any documents for his tower?"

"He must have... or probably he has as much of them as I have teeth now," she replied, opening her mouth, in which a couple of front teeth glinted yellow.

"Seems like a shower of gold made his house sprout."

"If it's built on his salary, he must have been saving for some fifteen years like we did."

"But I picked up extra money for the furs. Still, it was honest money. And here this cub builds himself a villa... No, he must be picking forbidden fruit somewhere. Just look what happens: people are sweating around his house, mixing mortar, lugging it to the bricklayers, while the man doesn't so much as bend a knee. He must have a pretty heap of coin, or otherwise he'd have had his shoulder to the grindstone like we did."

And they came to the conclusion that Patrihura had built himself a veritable Egyptian pyramid on ill-gotten money.

"What is done by night appears by day... someone will inform on him," Kondra said as if by the way.

"Sure. Round here if anyone gets uppity, he's taken down a peg right away."

He looked at his wife with such gratitude as if her words had reduced the neighbor's blasted palace to smoke right then and there.

"Someone will squeal — and that's the end of it. Then suspicion will fall on us," his wife carried on.

"You're feather-headed, woman," Kondra said, crinkling his nose, as if some invisible hand had tugged violently at the tip of his mustache. "That's just the bad thing about it. If it's only Patrihura they squeal on, he'll look daggers at his nearest neighbors."

"Well, if we're slandered, it won't hurt us any: I've got all the receipts lying in the wardrobe," his wife calmed him.

"All of them, really?" he asked, awarding her such a kindly look, as if she had suddenly become some thirty years younger. "That's wonderful. Maybe they'll come in handy." The next moment he was pacing up and down the room nervously, thinking. How can I be sure that someone will squeal on both of us? And who'll do it, eh? A keg of beer to the one who'll drag Patrihura and me through the mud! But who, who will be the one to enjoy the beer? His reddish eye became instantly bloodshot, giving off a rapacious glint, and his mustache stirred with delight, like that of a cat that has spied a tasty prey. He quickly made off to the summer kitchen, as far away as possible from any witness, even his wife. Like a cat he rushed lithely to the table, took a fountain pen out of the drawer, unscrewed the cap, pressed the plunger a couple of times to make sure the ink had not dried up, and convinced that everything was all right, he settled in an armchair. Tugging at the end of his mustache, he collected his thoughts. Sweat drenched his forehead. His heart thumped wildly. I haven't stirred a finger yet, he thought, but my body's rattling as if I had thrashed five sheaves of rye. Kondra wavered for a moment. Maybe someone else could take that squirt on his conscience? The next instant the lash of Patrihura's snicker resurfaced painfully in Kondra's memory, and his chest bore down on the table. But much as he tried he could not keep his hand in check — it trembled violently. So he put the pen into his left hand which was steadier. Hey, that was much better and more reliable! he almost shouted out loud as he weaved the first word. After finishing the

anonymous complaint, he glanced through it: "Dear superiors, I ask you to look into the matter of the incomes on which Hrinko Kondra and Mykola Patrihura from Zalanivia put up such big houses..." He rubbed his hands with glee. That's it — nobody will ever guess whose doing it was. And the main thing, Patrihura will look straight into my face, because common trouble will make us close friends. Exactly! A sly piece of writing. Then, shaking his fist at his neighbor's house, he said through clenched teeth:

"We'll see whether you'll get any pleasure out of your house after that, you miserable bugger!"

Just as he was going out of the summer kitchen, he heard Patrihura calling him to come over. Kondra froze in his tracks. Oh, my God! Had Patrihura guessed anything? For some reason Kondra looked at his left hand, and seeing traces of ink on his fingertips, he balled them into a fist. He was about to walk to his house, when he came to his senses, cursing himself for being such a fool. At any other time he would have cocked a snook at his neighbor, but with the letter in the desk drawer, he had to be alertly careful not to occasion any suspicion. Mykola seemed to have noticed his wavering, and explained that he wouldn't delay Kondra too long: the two of them would just haul a wardrobe and sofa upstairs, because Patrihura couldn't manage it alone, and then each of them would go back to his usual business.

Kondra heaved a sigh of relief. If the cap fits, wear it. "Why not give a good man a helping hand?" he said out aloud, while to himself he thought: It were better if I hadn't set my eyes on you at all, you tramp. The man is already filling his nest with furniture. How do you like that? Was it bought on honest money? That was something to be taken with a grain of salt. He was too much of a green hand to have earned it! Mind you don't have to lug that furniture back out of your house soon! Will you call me then, too? Oh, I'll put your pipe out in the shake of a lamb's tail. You'll rue the day your photograph appeared in that newspaper, and the photographer will have his peck of trouble, too. Yes sir, he who laughs last, laughs the best.

The two of them were barely able to haul first the wardrobe, then the sofa up the stairs. Then Mykola invited him for a drink, so that the furniture wouldn't dry up, while his mother, an elderly gray-haired lady, served them sandwiches and some apples and also settled in beside them, although she refused to eat a morsel. Kondra downed what was no more than a thimbleful of the drink, but he talked for two, since he was in good humor. It wasn't the drink that had made him dizzy, but the anticipation of the trouble his neighbor would be in soon. Again and again he praised him for being a man of his word and moving into the house in a year, after all. Who would've thought it possible?!

At this point Mykola's mother spoke up to say that Mykola would hardly have built the house so fast, if it were not for outside support. You see, his father had died, she moved to her daughter to take care of the grandchildren, then she sold her house and gave the money to her son so he and his wife and little children wouldn't have to go on living a wretched life in rooms for lease. Although Mykola was young, his strength had been sapped by a mujahedin bullet in Afghanistan. He couldn't help, but had to hire other people to build the house.

"Oh-h!" a low moan escaped Kondra's lips and he doubled up as if he had been hit in the solar plexus. A heavy weight seemed to press him down into the armchair. Good God, how easily he could have made a fool out of himself! The words he had been about to utter had frozen on his lips and, crushed, he kept licking the violet fingertips on his left hand and wiping them on his knees.

"What's the matter with you, neighbor?" his host asked, alarmed. "You've gone as pale as a sheet of paper."

"It's nothing... I'm all right now," Kondra replied brokenly. "Well, how was it out there, beyond the mountains I mean? Dreadful, I guess?"

Mykola gave a smile as if to say that "dreadful" wasn't exactly the word. When you can see the

enemy and engage him on an open battlefield, there is no fear. But over there it was different, because you never knew where you'd be shot at from — from behind a stone, a corner, from below, from above. This uncertainty kept people in a state of permanent tension. A secret enemy was the worst of all.

When Patrihura looked at Kondra, the latter shuddered and the fingertips of his left hand grew numb for no apparent reason.

After he had trudged back to his summer kitchen, Kondra took the anonymous complaint out of the drawer and burned it. He seemed to be burning his own soul folded in four; his chin trembled, the blood hammered in his temples.

Presently he heard Patrihura calling him again.

"Hey, neighbor, there's a man here looking for you," he said, pointing to a shortish, stout man holding a parcel under his arm. "He's looking for you, but he came to my place."

A couple of minutes later the guest had unfurled six muskrat skins and asked Kondra to dress them for an ample reward.

"Well, that can be done. They'll be ready in a fortnight," Kondra mumbled, not even offering the customer a seat, because he was in such a mood that he'd make conversation with a wolf (venting his wretchedness in an angry howl) sooner than exchange pleasantries with a guest.

The man, though, being of a talkative type, was in no hurry to leave. He carried on about what was happening at the place he worked, in his family (his son got married last winter, so how could he do without a prestigious fur cap?), and blurted out that his crony had recommended Kondra to him, with the advice to head for the finest house in the village; and he had lost his way and ended up at his neighbor's house which was as beautiful as a doll, catching your eyes from so far off that you just couldn't stop admiring it.

Every word made Kondra shudder. Why such torment? What a horrible day! Why did they have to keep rubbing salt into his raw wound? So the photographer must have been right! Like a man demented, Kondra grabbed the skins, pushed them under his guest's nose, and pointed to the gate.

"Get out of here! Come back in a year's time to a better house, do you hear?!"

Not able to understand what he had done wrong, the flabbergasted customer backed out of the door, while Kondra smacked his fist against his forehead. You flaming idiot! Why did you have to scribble that darned complaint with your left hand? Why, everything was simple as simple could be: there were bricks, prefab panels, and lime galore behind the barn — what else did he need, what else? It must have been the Lord God Himself who had sent him this chatterbox of a customer.

A little while later he was already stripping the roof of tiles.

"Lordy, the man's gone crazy in his old age!" his wife wailed from below.

"Hold your jaw, woman, and mind your own business. I'm building a second story!" he hissed at her.

"Who needs it? The four rooms we already have are more than enough. And there's the summer kitchen besides."

Kondra looked down on her from the roof like a hawk on a wretched chick, and she beat a hasty retreat to the summer kitchen.

In a month or two the house had grown taller. He didn't have to sacrifice his last shirt for that. All right, so he had to buy an additional ten thousand bricks he was short of, but in the end he regained his former stature. The entire village could be taken in from the mansard window as before, and his neighbor's house would no longer be an eyesore to him. He had a popped sleep. The other day, for instance, he had gone to bed and snored away for a whole twelve hours. People said there had been an earthquake in the meantime — the tremor was so strong it made the townsfolk run out into the

streets. But Kondra didn't feel a thing and slept like a log. That's what the second story had done for him!

Once again he took in the whole village at a glance, and went downstairs.

At the gate he stopped, his eyes involuntarily turning toward the house. A palace, a real palace, he thought. He was drenched with the sunshine of joy. The next moment he felt a staggering jolt. Somebody seemed to be working a drill in his left eye. His fractured arm grew numb, each bone paining him sharply, and all his calluses seemed to be afire. But no, no, what he saw was simply impossible! It was just an apparition and nothing else! He rushed up to the house and feverishly fingered the rough wall that had cracked from the earth to the roof. Like a sleepwalker he turned the corner and on the northern side of the house saw another crack, one finger wide at the ground and two or three up on the second floor. On seeing this, he burst into a roar or hysteric laughter.

People came running to his wife's wails and screams. The wretch was pulled away from the wall, in which he was painstakingly filling the crack with earth. Then the medics were called and the situation was soberly assessed: "It's because of the foundation... it was too weak to carry two stories. The man worked himself into such a state. Why did he have to overstep the mark like that?"

Translated by Anatole Bilenko