



**Vasyl Stefanyk
(1871-1936)**

THE STONE CROSS

I

Ever since Ivan Didukh was remembered in the village as a farmer, he had only one horse and a small wagon with an oak shaft. The horse he hitched on the nigh side, and himself on the right. On the horse he put a breast collar and neckstrap of leather, and on himself a breast collar of rope. He had no need of a neckstrap, because with his left hand he could bring the horse to a halt perhaps much better than with a neck-strap.

Whenever the team hauled sheaves from the field or manure the way back the veins on both Ivan and the horse bulged prominently. When they went uphill, the traces of both resisted the effort like taut strings, and when the wagon rolled downhill, the traces dragged over the ground just as slackly for one as for another. As the horse plodded up the hill as if it were treading across ice, a vein on Ivan's forehead swelled so enormously it seemed someone had hit him over the head with a stick. From above, it looked as if Ivan had strung the horse by the neckstrap for some great offense, while Ivan's left hand was engirded by a net of blue veins resembling a chain of blue steel.

Often in the morning, still before sunrise, Ivan drove to his field down the dusty road. He did not wear a breast collar, and walked on the right side, holding the wagon shaft under his arm, as it were. Both the horse and Ivan bore themselves firmly because they had rested during the night. Whenever they went downhill, they broke into a trot, leaving in their wake the tracks of wheels, hooves, and Ivan's immensely broad heels. The grass and weeds along the roadside swayed in all directions behind the wagon, spraying these tracks with dew. At times, when the wagon attained its highest speed just in the middle of the gradient, Ivan would begin to limp and rein up the horse. Then he would sit down on the roadside, take his bare foot into his hands, and wet it with saliva to find the place where the thistle had penetrated his foot.

"That foot should be scrubbed with a hoe and not washed with saliva," Ivan would say irately.

"Gramp Ivan, since that plow horse eats your oats, why don't you use the whip to make it run?"

The remark came from someone in the neighboring field making fun of Ivan on seeing him suffering the ills of his flesh. But Ivan had long since become used to such wags, and quietly continued removing the thistle. If he failed, he would drive the thistle deeper into the foot with his fist, and say on rising:

"Oh, go to hell; you'll rot and fall out anyway. I have no time to fuss with you."

The villagers called him Doubledup Ivan. His loins were maimed, because he always walked stooped, as if two iron hooks were pulling his trunk to the ground. It was a draft that had caused this physical defect.

Back home from the army, he found both his parents dead and only a ramshackle hut to live in. The sole fortune his father had left him was a plot on a hump, the highest and worst piece of land in the entire village. On that hump women had once dug for sand, which now yawned into the sky in the form of gullies and caves like a horrible giant. No one ever plowed or sowed this plot which was not marked off by any boundaries. It was only Ivan who took to cultivating the parcel of land. He brought the manure by wagon to the foothill from where he carried it up the hill in a sack. From time to time, his rough voice would carry from the hump onto the sown fields below:

"Oh my, you're so heavy I'll buck you off so hard you'll burst in every single thread."

But, of course, he never threw it on the ground, regretting to see the sack go to waste, and so lowered it slowly from his shoulders. One evening he told his wife and children of his day's experience:

"The sun was burning, actually not burning but spitting fire, as I was clambering up the hill with the manure. The going was so rough it almost peeled the skin off my knees. Sweat dripped from every single hair of mine, and my mouth felt so salty it was almost bitter. I barely managed to make it to the top. Up there, a breeze blew at me, but it was a faint breeze really! Imagine, just a minute later I felt as if knives were slashing my loins — I thought it would be the end of me!"

Thereafter, Ivan walked around stooped, and people nicknamed him Doubledup Ivan.

Although the hill had broken him, it rewarded him with good harvests. Lest the autumn and spring rains wash the manure away into the gullies, Ivan lugged solid chunks of turf up the hump and placed them around the poles and stakes he had driven into his plot. He spent his entire life on that hump.

The older he became, the harder it was for him to descend the hill.

"That darn hump keeps pushing me down head over heels!" he used to grumble.

More than once, when the setting sun found Ivan on the hilltop, it cast his shadow, along with the hump, far over the sown fields below, where it hovered like a giant bent in the middle. At such times, Ivan pointed at his shadow and said to the hill:

"See, how you bent into a bow that poor wretch Ivan! But as long as my feet carry me, you've got to yield bread..."

His sons and wife cultivated the other fields, which Ivan bought for the money he earned in the army. But most of the time he busied himself around that hump.

In the village, Ivan was also known for attending church only once a year, at Easter, and for training his chickens. He trained them so well that none of them dared to show up in the yard to scratch in the manure. If one happened to scratch it once, it met its death from a shovel or a stick. No matter how much Ivan's wife would come down on her marrow bones to; make him spare the chicken, it was all in vain.

Also, Ivan never ate at the table, always preferring to take his meals at a bench.

"I was a farmhand, then I served ten years in the army, so I didn't know what a table is. Guess my insides don't take in the food so well at the table."

That's what Ivan was like, an odd character both in nature and in work.

II

Ivan's guests had filled his entire house. He sold all he could call his own, because his sons and wife had made up their minds to go to Canada, and so the old man had to finally yield to them.

Ivan invited the entire village to his home.

He stood among the guests, holding his share of *horilka* in his right hand, and was obviously petrified, because he could not make himself utter a word.

"I thank you kindly, landholders and your wives, for treating me as a master and my wife as a mistress of this household..."

Without finishing his speech or drinking to anyone, he stared impassively and shook his head as if he were saying a prayer and nodding in assent to each of its words.

At times when a deep-water wave uproots a rock and washes it ashore, that stone remains lying there heavy and inert. The sun chips flakes of old silt off its surface and paints it with tiny phosphorous stars. The stone gleams with a dull luster from the rising and setting sun, ' and with its stony eyes it beholds the lively water and grieves that it no longer bears the burden of the water as it had for ages. From the shore it looks upon the water as upon some lost happiness.

That's how Ivan now gazed at the people— like that stone by the water. He kept shaking his gray hair resembling a mane of forged steel threads, and concluded his speech:

"I... I thank you kindly, and may God deliver unto you whatever you ask of Him. Let God grant you health, Grandpa Mykhailo..."

He handed Mykhailo a glass of *horilka*, and they kissed each other's hand.

"Ivan, may God prolong your life in this world, may the merciful Lord take you successfully to your destination, and may His grace help you become a landholder again!"

"If God wills so... My friends, please do help yourselves... I thought to invite you to this table on my son's wedding, but it didn't happen that way. I guess the time's come for us to know something our grandfathers and fathers didn't know. That's the Lord's will! So help yourselves, friends, and forgive me for the rest."

He took a glass of *horilka* and went over to the women sitting at the other end of the table near the bed.

"Timofiy's missis, I want to drink to you. The sight of you, as they say, makes me recall my younger days. Where, oh where? Where have those years gone, when you were a hale and pretty lass? Many a night did I spend with you dancing, and you danced as smoothly as a yarn windle. Where have those years gone? Oh well, look back upon that time, and forgive me for bringing up the dancing at my age. Come on, help yourself..."

Seeing his wife weeping among the women, he produced a handkerchief from his bosom.

"Here, old lady, take this handkerchief and wipe your eyes clean so that I don't see any tears in this place. Better look after the guests; you'll have enough time yet to cry your eyes out."

He walked over to the men and shook his head:

"I'd speak my mind, but I'll keep mum out of respect for the icons and for you, sinners that you are. But anyhow, God forbid any good man to come round to a woman's reasoning. Just look how she is crying! And do you think it's because of me? Is it because of me, old lady? Is it me who's chucking you out of your home at this age? Better hold your peace and stop sobbing, or else I'll pluck out your gray braidies right now and you'll go to that America like a cropped Jewess."

"Ivan, let your wife be! She's no enemy to you or to your children. She's just sad to leave her kith and village."

"Timofiy's missis, if you don't know what's what, put your tongue to rest. So she is sad, and I'm skipping for joy to get there, ain't I?"

His teeth gnashed like millstones. He shook his fist at his wife like a mallet, and then beat his chest.

"Now take an ax and hit my liver. Maybe it'll burst my gall, 'cause I can't bear it any longer. People, I'm so miserable with grief I'm at my wit's end."

III

"Please, friends, help yourselves without ceremony and forgive us, 'cause we're already packed up. And don't be surprised at this old codger for putting down his wife a bit — there's a reason for it. Oh yes, there is! It would've never happened, if it weren't for her and our sons. Mind you, my sons are literate, so when they laid their hands on some letter and a map, they went after the old lady and nagged and nagged at her until they got their way. For two years you could hear nothing but Canada and Canada in this house. And when they put the squeeze on me and I realized they wouldn't give up if I didn't go, I sold everything to the last crumb. My sons didn't want to be hired hands when I'd breathe my last, and said: 'You are our father, so take us to some land and provide us with bread, because once you divide your fortune between us, there'll be nothing left for anyone.' Let God help them eat that bread, I'll die anyway. But, friends, how can I, a broken man, take to the road? I'm a wretch — my body's one big callus, with crumbling bones; it makes me groan a dozen times until I piece them together in the morning."

"Let bygones be bygones, Ivan, and don't you let grief go to your head," a neighbor advised. "Maybe after you'll show us the way, we all will follow you. This country isn't worth taking grief close to heart! Besides, this land isn't any good to support so many people and bear so much misery. The peasant is no good, the land is no good, and both are no good anymore. We don't have any locusts around, but we neither have any wheat. The taxes, though, keep mounting: what used to cost a *leu*^{*}, is five now; once we used to eat salted meat, and now it's potatoes. Oh, did they muzzle us all right! We're under such a heavy hand that no one can free us, unless we run. But one of these days this land will see a reckoning, and it'll come to slaughter. So you've got nothing to grieve over!"

"I thank you for these words, but I can't accept them," Ivan replied. "Sure, it'll come to slaughter. But isn't God wrathful at those who put the land on sale? Nowadays nobody needs the land, but only bills of exchange and banks. The young landholders have become smart now. They're such hotheads they don't give a rap for the land. Now look at my old fiddle of a wife. Can you imagine her being put on sale?! Why, she's more like a hollow willow — once you poke her with a finger, she'll pitch over. Do you think she'll get to our destination? Why, she'll tumble into a ditch somewhere, and the dogs will tear her to pieces, while we'll be driven on, without even a chance to look back! How can God bless such children? Old lady, come over here!"

Ivan's wife, old and withered, came to his side.

"Kateryna, what do you think you're up to, poor woman? Now where am I supposed to bury you? Or is a fish to gobble you up? A decent fish won't have enough for one bite of you. Look!"

He stretched the skin on his wife's hand, and showed it to his guests.

* Romanian coin — *Tr.*

"Only skin and bones. Is this, my friends, supposed to wander away from the bed on the stove? She was a good mistress of my household, worked hard, didn't waste her time, and in her old age she takes to the road. There, do you see where your road and your Canada lead to? Over there!"

He pointed to a grave through the window.

"You were against going to Canada, but now we'll be knocking around the world and drifting like leaves across a field in our old age. God knows how we'll fare... so I'd like to ask your forgiveness before these our people. Just as we made our marriage vows in front of them, I want to ask your forgiveness in their presence before death. Maybe you'll be buried in the sea without me being around, or the other way. So forgive me, old lady, if I told you off many a time, if perhaps I did you wrong, forgive me for the first time I did it, the second time, and the third."

They kissed each other. The old woman fell into his arms, and he said:

"After all, poor dear, I'm taking you to a distant grave..."

But these words were drowned out by the women's sobbing. It swept like a gust of wind from amongst sharp swords and bent the men's heads to their chests.

IV

"And now, old lady, go to the women and mind that each has her fill, and whet your whistle, so I'd see you drunk at least once in my lifetime.

"And you, men, I'd like to ask to do me two favors. Maybe some day my sons will let you know through the post office that my wife and I are no more. So I'd like to ask you'd have a divine service arranged for us and then get together for a little dinner like you did today and say the Lord's Prayer for us. Maybe the Lord God will thus write off some of our sins. I'll leave the money with Yakiv, 'cause he's young and honest and won't pinch an old man's *Kreuzers*."

"We'll have the service arranged, we will, and we'll say the Lord's Prayer for you," the neighbors promised. Ivan fell to thinking, his face betraying something like shame.

"Don't be surprised and don't make fun of an old man. I myself am very ashamed to tell you this, but I would sin, if I didn't tell you. You know, I put a cross for myself on that hump. It was bitter toil getting that cross to and up the hump, but I put it there. It's so heavy the hump won't throw it off, and it must bear it like it bore me. I wanted to leave at least such a memory of myself behind."

Cupping his hands, he pressed them to his lips.

"I yearn after that hump like a child after a teat. I wasted my life on it and got crippled. If I could, I would have placed it in my bosom and taken it along with me into the world. I yearn after the tiniest crumb in this village, the smallest child, but it seems I'll never stop yearning for that hump."

His eyelids quivered in sorrow, while his facial muscles trembled like a black tillage under the sun.

"This night I was lying in my barn and kept thinking and thinking: 'Merciful God, what grave sin have I done for you to chase me beyond the world's seas? The only thing I did all my life was work, work, and work!' Many a time, by the end of day, I'd fall on my field and pray fervently to God: Lord, never leave me without a piece of black bread and I'll work always, save perhaps when I'll be unable to stir either hand or foot..."

"Then I'd be overcome with such grief it made me gnaw at my knuckles, tear at my hair, and roll in the straw like cattle. The Evil One must have tempted me! I don't know how but one day I found myself under a pear tree with a rope. I could have strung myself up in no time. But the

merciful Lord knows what He is doing. When I figured back to my cross, I felt relieved at once. Oh, did I make it on the double to my hump! Within an hour I was sitting by the cross. I kept sitting there for a long time, and somehow it took the load off my heart.

"Now mind, as I'm standing here before you and talking to you, that hump doesn't go out of my head. I see it before my eyes all the time, and I'll be seeing it on my deathbed. I'll forget everything, but I won't forget that hump. I used to know songs, but I forgot them up there, I had strength, but I lost it on the hump."

A tear rolled down his face, like a pearl down a cliff. "So I ask you, friends: when you'll be having your fields blessed on Holy Sunday, never pass by my hump. Let any of the young men run up the hill and sprinkle the cross with holy water, 'cause you know that a priest won't walk up there. I beg of you never to pass by my cross. I'll pray to God for you in the other world, only grant an old man his wish."

It seemed as if he wanted to prostrate himself in his plea, and his kindly gray eyes wanted to implant his wish in the hearts of the guests for all time.

"Ivan, stop tearing your heart in two, and cast grief aside. We'll always remember you, now and forever. You've been a decent man, never being rude to others. Never did you plow through another man's plot and seed it, or steal a grain of anyone's harvest. Oh no, you didn't! People will remember you and they won't pass by your cross on Holy Sunday."

That's how Mykhailo drove away Ivan's grief.

V

"All right, friends, I said all I had to say, and now whoever likes me will join me in a drink. The sun's over the hill already, and here you haven't drunk your share of *horilka* with me. As long as I'm still in my house and have guests at my table, I'll drink with them, and he who hates me will drink with me too."

All the guests took to such drinking which usually transforms men into foolish boys. Shortly afterward, the already drunk Ivan willed to have the musicians called to play for the young people who had packed the entire yard.

"Hey, shake your feet so that the earth'll rumble and not a single blade of grass remain in my yard!"

Everyone in the house was drinking and talking, without listening to each other. The talking rambled on of its own accord, because it had to break out by all means, each just had to say his piece, even if it went to the wind.

"When I curried my horses, they were curried all right. Whichever was black looked as if it had been dusted with silver, and whichever was white had the look of oiled snow. My horses were in such shape the Kaiser could ride them! Oh my, and did I have money. Oh yes, I had!"

"If there were such a desert, where only God and me were around, I'd roam there like a wild animal, if only I wouldn't see any of those Jews, lords or priests. Then I'd really could be called a lord! As to this land, let it go to ruin, let it go to ruin right now and I wouldn't care a hoot! Know why? 'Cause they flogged our fathers, put a yoke on them, and now they don't give us a piece of bread to eat... Oh, if I just had it my way..."

"There hasn't yet been a tax collector who could squeeze any taxes out of a peasant, oh no! There was the Czech, the German, the Pole — and shit, beg your pardon, that's what they got. But when the Mazurian came around, he found even a sheepskin coat that had been buried under a cherry tree. I tell you, the Mazurian means real trouble, and if you burn his eyes, that'll be no sin..."

All sorts of talk drifted back and forth, but it scattered in every possible direction like rotting trees in an old forest.

Ivan's and old Mykhailo's singing cut into all this noise, babble, screams, and the dolorous jollity of the fiddle. Theirs was the singing that is frequently heard at weddings when old men get into the mood and strike up old songs. Its words came out of old throats in fits and starts, as if not only their hands but their throats as well had become calloused. The lyrics drifted along like yellow autumn leaves chased by the wind across frost-hardened ground, now and then settling in every gully and quivering with their frayed edges as if before death.

Thus Ivan and Mykhailo sang about their younger years which their memories had revived in the twilight of life, while they already did not want to return to them even as guests.

When they had to grapple with a high note, they squeezed each other's hand so hard their joints creaked; and when they came across a dismally mournful passage, they leaned toward each other, forehead-to-forehead, and foundered in the sea of grief. Then they'd catch each other's neck, kiss, and beat their chests and table with their fists. Their rusty voices intensified their sorrow to such an extent that in the end, they could not utter anything but "Oh, Ivan, brother!", "Oh, Mykhailo, friend!"

VI

"Listen, Father, it's time to go to the railroad, and here you are singing away as if you'd get a splendid treat of booze for it."

Ivan turned his bulging eyes on his son in such an odd manner that the son grew pale and drew back. Ivan leaned his head on his cupped hands and tried to recall something for a long time. Then he got up from behind the table, walked over to his wife, and took her by the sleeve.

"Old lady, off we march — *einz, zwei, drei!* Come on, let's dress like lords and leave to enjoy a lordly life."

Both went outdoors.

When they returned, all the guests burst out weeping. It was as if a cloud had let loose a shower of tears, or human misery had burst a dam on the Danube. The women wrung their hands and held them clasped over the head of Ivan's wife lest something fall on her and crush her then and there. Mykhailo seized Ivan by the shoulders and shook him violently, hollering like someone demented:

"Hey you, if you're a farmer, throw off those rags of yours, or I'll baste you like a whore!"

But Ivan didn't look his way. He clasped his wife round her neck and started to dance with her.

"Play me a polka just like you'd do for the lords. I've got the money to pay!"

The guests froze, looking on as Ivan whirled about his wife so madly it seemed he didn't intend letting her out of his grip alive.

The sons rushed into the room and forcibly carried them outdoors.

In the yard, Ivan continued to dance what looked like a polka, while his wife had grasped the threshold with her hands, saying over and over again:

"Oh, how many times have I crossed you! Oh, how much did I wear you off with these feet!"

All the time she gestured with her hand to show how deeply she had worn off that threshold.

VII

The fences along the road cracked and tumbled, as the entire village walked down the road, seeing off Ivan. Hunched in his garb of cheap factory-made cloth of gray, he walked beside his old wife, stepping and hopping in a polka all the time.

Only when everyone had stopped opposite the cross on the hump, did Ivan recover his senses a bit. Pointing the cross out for her, he said:

"See our little cross, old lady? Your name's carved on it, too. But don't you worry, it's got both mine and yours on it..."

Translated by Anatole Bilenko