



Ostap Vyshnia
(1889-1956)

THE SCRATCHRANIANS

(An Attempt at a Scholarly Description)

The Scratchranians were an odd people living in an odd land called Scratchrania, which was located beyond Atlantis. The name " Scratchrania" is derived from its people's habit of scratching their pates. On the basis of reliable material this scholarly paper attempts to provide a description of these odd people.

CHAPTER I

The land of Scratchrania, as is evinced by the finds unearthed during excavations of the tomb of the Scratchranian King Tearpantsriotchorus, extended over a huge area from the River Son to the River Dian mentioned in the Scriptures. Along the River Dian to the west ran a mountain range called the Carper Mountains.

In the south Scratchrania was washed by the waters of a sea of blue. It had been blue throughout the ages — since the world's greatest cataclysm, when God had separated the oceans from the lands. At that time the sea had wanted to become an ocean, so it swelled itself up until it turned blue, which color it has remained to this day.

The most beloved river of the Scratchranians, the Dmytro, spilled into the blue sea. To the southwest of it there was another big river, the Dsytro. From these rivers the Scratchranians derived their corresponding local names — the Dmytronians and the Dsytronians. The Dmytronians were those who lived along the Dmytro, while the Dsytronians were those who lived along the Dsytro.

There was a huge number of Scratchranians — over thirty million or so, although in most cases they themselves did not know who they essentially were.

When asked, "Could you tell me what nation you belong to, sirs?" they'd scratch their pates, and reply:

"Who knows?! We live in Shenheriyevtsi. Orthodox, that's what we are."

Scratchrania was a land of farmers. Most of all the Scratchranians loved their garden sunflowers.

"It's a fine plant," they said. "When it bursts into blossom, it blossoms and blossoms and blossoms."

And then when it drops its head and stands before you as if on its knees, it makes you feel as

if it were you, and you were the lord. An insistently meek plant. Hence, a good plant.

CHAPTER 2

The Scratchranians had a total of five profoundly national traits. They were so typical of them that whenever a Scratchranian lost himself in a million-sized crowd of humanity, anyone who had ever lived among the Scratchranians for even a short time could guess with certainty:

"This is a Scratchranian."

And the man was never wrong.

His, the Scratchranian's bearing, movements, expression, his entire body, so to speak, betrayed to an amazing degree these five basic traits of his pleasant nature.

These traits, according to their ancient nomenclature, were as follows:

1. If I only knew.
2. I forgot (about it).
3. I was late.
4. It'll work itself out somehow.
5. I knew it would happen.

Let us consider each of these five traits separately.

A brief reminder: the material unearthed had been seriously ravaged over the millennia, and some of it had been torn up as if for rolling cigarettes, although it bears no resemblance to either books on agriculture or newspapers.

One of the books, written in verse, was found in a pitcher. Academicians believe that the Scratchranians must have covered their milk and cream pitchers with books of verse: so highly developed was their culture at that time.

The book was utterly ruined by the cream that had turned into a solid crust. Chemical analysis proved it to be largely chalk. Scholars assume that this cream pitcher was covered by a book in the vicinity of a large city.

Since it has been very difficult to work with such material, the description of each trait of the Scratchranians might be only partially complete, for which we ask the reader to make certain allowances. It is not we but the millennia that are to blame for this.

For lack of time and space it will hardly be possible to undertake an elaborate scholarly study of each separate trait. So we will have to restrict ourselves to citing striking examples of each trait: such an approach will, we believe, expedite the account and make it more intelligible to the broad readership.

This is the most typical genetic trait of the Scratchranians.

The Scratchranians acquired it after the following incident. Once one of them was thatching the roof of his house. He climbed right up to the chimney, lost his footing and started to slide down. As he was sliding, he yelled:

"Wife! Wife! Some straw! Straw! Straw!"

Thump!

"Forget it."

The point was that he'd been yelling his head off for his wife to put some straw in the place where he would come crashing down. His wife was too late. Hence the phrase, "If I only knew." Following this incident the trait took deep root in the Scratchranians' nature. Whenever a mishap occurred, you'd hear immediately:

"If I'd only known where I'd hit the dust, I would've spread straw there."

Or:

"If I only knew my neighbor's got some heady brew."

Every similar event in the life of a civilized Scratchranian was marked in this way.

Say, for instance, the Scratchranians were putting up some public building, and after it was finished it simply collapsed. Then the first thing you'd hear would be:

"If we'd only known it would fall down, we'd have built it somewhere else."

In the unearthed finds there is a distinctive entry describing how the Scratchranians embarked on building their culture. They set about the job very thoroughly. Then for some reason they quarreled, grabbed wagon shafts (they used them as a weapon in the manner of medieval knightly spears), and were soon embroiled in brutally bitter polemics. They argued and argued until they saw that all of them were dripping blood. So they stopped exchanging words and began to moan:

"Oh, if we'd only known we'd bash each other's heads in, we wouldn't have come to blows."

This incident checked the development of their culture formidably. Small wonder: there's little chance of getting cultural life going when your head is bashed in.

Once they decided to organize a theater, for which purpose they engaged someone special. They kept running around, talking, discussing, praising and boasting. In the end, this person let them down: he did not organize the theater, quite the contrary.

So they scratched their pates, and said:

"If we'd only known..."

And then they started anew.

There wasn't a single Scratchranian who didn't utter that famous "If I only knew."

Whenever the Scratchranians set about doing something in any field of endeavor and an outsider or, say, someone more sagacious would remark, "Are you sure you're doing it right?" a Scratchranian would invariably ponder for a while, scratch his pate, and reply:

"Oh well, it'll work itself out somehow."

Then he was back to work.

When he suddenly saw that he had done it all wrong, he'd say: "I knew it would happen!"

"What did you know?" he'd be asked.

"That it would happen this way."

"So why did you do it?"

"If I only knew."

"But you said that you knew it, didn't you?"

"But I thought it would work itself out somehow."

When an Indian sage was told about this, he commented in bewilderment:

"It's some weird perpetuum mobile."

The second and third traits of the Scratchranians are, we believe, plain enough not to need any special explanations.

"Why did you do this?" a Scratchranian would be asked.

"Oh, my God! I simply forgot!"

Or:

"Why didn't you come?"

"I stayed too long at my friend's place, and lo! I saw it was late! So, well, I just... let it be. It'll work itself out somehow, I thought."

A truly odd people.

CHAPTER 3

Scratchrania was destroyed by the elements, together with Atlantis.

One Scratchranian poet, taking fright at the fury of the elements, clambered up a tall willow tree and waited for the worst. When the water flooded his perch, he recited dramatically:

*Oh, fields, my fields,
Oh, land, my mother dear.
How much of your blood and tears
Has the wind scattered for years!*

At that moment the elements were carrying an Atlantean past the willow tree, and he said, choking on the water:

"Well, it certainly didn't do any damn good!"

Afterword

As I read all this material, I shook my head in great sadness.

After having finished it, I fell to thinking, heaved a sigh, and together with the sigh, against my will, there escaped my lips the words:

"Never mind! It'll work itself out somehow."

Oh, damn it!

Translated by Anatole Bilenko