

ИВАН ФРАНКО



УДАВ

BOA CONSTRICTOR

И ДРУГИЕ РАССКАЗЫ

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ
НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
МОСКВА

I VAN FRANKO



BOA CONSTRICTOR

AND OTHER STORIES

FOREIGN LANGUAGES
PUBLISHING HOUSE
MOSCOW

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
BY FAINNA SOLASKO

DESIGNED BY A. TARAN

CONTENTS

| | PAGE |
|------------------------------|------|
| AT WORK | 11 |
| THE OIL-WORKER | 35 |
| THE CONVERTED SINNER | 87 |
| THE <i>POLUIKA</i> | 171 |
| THE BOA CONSTRICTOR | 197 |

BORISLAV STORIES



AT WORK

I. AT THE WINDLASS

Just think of it! I've been working in Borislav all this time, but I've never been underground yet! All I do is turn the windlass, unload the clay, and pump air into the shaft! Do you call that a living wage—eight shistkas* a day? You can scrape along on it or drop dead,

* *Shistka*—a small coin of about twelve kopeks.—*Tr.*

whichever you choose—the boss doesn't give a damn one way or the other!

Take Matvei, now. He works underground, in one of the galleries. True, he says the gas down there is murderous. Well what is he, his mother's little pet! But look at the money he gets! A silver piece and a half a day! Honestly, I don't grudge him the money, but am I worse than he is? What's wrong with me? What has he got that I haven't? I'm scared of nothing—why I'd dare the Devil himself. There's the choke damp to be sure. Well, I think I can take it. And if I can't, damn it, I can always come back up again. You have to try everything once. Just think of it—I've been here in Borislav for eight weeks and I haven't been underground yet!

Look at this damn windlass. See how it keeps screeching and slithering round. By the time you haul up a tubful of clay three hundred and fifty feet you're ready to croak. You keep turning away, your lungs are bursting and your arms grow numb, as if they've been cut off, but you dare not stop—no! just keep on turning and turning! The hell I will! I wish it were tomorrow already. Tomorrow's Sunday. Honestly, I'll get a job down below, in the gallery! Do they think I'll spend the rest of my life here working for nothing?

And if my wife starts blubbering, when she finds out, well, that can't be helped. What do I care? Of course, they need the money at home, but a man has to be on some sort of terms with his friends here too, and it can't all be done on forty-eight shistkas a week.

Thank God, this takes care of Saturday. Ah, I can't even feel my arms any more! That dog, Ivan, must weigh a ton, God damn him! By the time you haul that wretch up, you're ready to drop. Well, perhaps that was the last time I pulled that jailbird up!

There go the bosses out for a little stroll. I hope they break their necks! The sons-of-bitches are all dressed up,

twiddling their thumbs on their bellies as they walk around the wells, watching poor Christians sweating and killing themselves, working for them!

Ah, where can one find the truth? Perhaps it's been tucked away into these heathens' pockets by mistake?

II. AGREED

"Hullo, Matvei!"

He didn't even turn round! See how stuck-up that rich fellow is! He thinks he's lord and master if he's making fifteen shistkas a day. Hm! Well, maybe I won't be making fifteen, but I'll surely get twelve!

Oh, those dogs of bosses are no fools. I know they'd strip a man to the skin without his ever guessing it. What about me? Aren't I the same as the rest? It's no use worrying about it now, for I've agreed to work for twelve, and work for twelve it shall be. The thing that makes me mad, though, is that this fellow gets fifteen while I get only twelve. How come? Am I weaker than he is? Can he work better? You bet your life he can't!

However, I went to see the boss.

"Well, Grinya?" he says.

"Nothing special," I answered.

"What did you come for then?"

"It's like this," I said, "I'd like to work in the well."

"Fine!" he said. "Go ahead."

"How much will you pay me?" I asked.

"The same as the rest, twelve shistkas."

"Why, you old so-and-so! What do you mean, twelve? The men here get fifteen a day."

"Who does? Where?" the boss asked.

"Why, my neighbour Matvei gets fifteen," I said.

"Which Matvei? Who's Matvei?" the boss asked.

"You know, Matvei. We're from the same village. He

works in the fifth well from the end. He himself told me he gets fifteen."

"I don't know any Matvei," the boss said. "He's probably lying! Everybody here gets twelve, not fifteen. Your Matvei was just boasting."

What could I do? He stood his ground and wouldn't raise it a copper.

"Well," the boss said, "if you don't want to work for twelve, don't! I'm not forcing you. Go back to the windlass—that pays eight a day!"

I could turn the windlass for eight, or work underground for twelve. Oh, my God! How I hated turning that windlass! I had turned it for eight weeks, and my head was in a whirl day and night, and so was the whole world. All you do is turn and turn from sunrise till sunset.

"Well," I said to myself, "whatever I do, I still have got to work."

And I agreed to twelve shistkas a day. I hope you choke on those three shistkas and go straight to hell!

That dog! You know, he lied to me! Everybody gets fifteen. The heathen cheated me, damn him! I only found out about it after lunch. It's too late to go looking for another job now—the offices are closed down for the day. But it was for the last time that he played a dirty trick on me.

III. AFTER ALL MY TROUBLE

God damn that liar! He thought he could put one over on me! Ha, ha!

"Don't go down into the pit, Grinya," he says, "it's full of choke damp there and you'll never come back up alive."

"How do you manage to come up alive, then?" I asked.

"Don't compare yourself to me, I'm used to it," Matvei said.

“How did you make out while you were getting used to it?”

“What’s the use talking about it? You’ll soon see for yourself. You’ll have your full share of funks when you’re all alone way down there. It’ll be so bad, my boy, that you’ll think you’re seeing ghosts.”

Ha, ha! What a fox Matvei is! The way he talks you’d think there never was anyone stronger than he. I can take it, he says, but you won’t be able to. If that isn’t the biggest joke I ever heard!

He started questioning me, as if I were a boy:

“Do you know how to dig a drift? Can you set up timber? And what about this, and that, and the other?”

What a chap! As if I was born yesterday! Why, I built the barn by myself back home, and I remodelled the store-room. I can’t count the times I’ve done carpentry work. That fool thinks he’s the only one who knows how to do anything.

Oh, but those oil-workers have crazy ways! Take my initiation, for instance. Who’d ever think those fellows could put on a show like that. Ha!

The minute they found out I was going to work underground they crowded round like vultures.

“If that’s the case, you’ll have to be initiated! Come on, let’s go to Kirnitsky’s.”

We went there. I had to stand them to five quarts of raw vodka. There was no other way. After the first round they said:

“Well, the time has come to baptize you, friend.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about that.”

“Hey, give me a handkerchief or a rag, somebody.”

“Now, come here,” Matvei said.

I came up to him and he blindfolded me. Whew! I could hardly breathe, but there was no backing out.

“Get down on your knees.”

I did.

"What are you?" Matvei demanded.

Someone whispered, "Say you're an oil-worker."

"I'm an oil-worker," I said.

"What did you say?"

"I said I was an oil-worker."

"You're lying, fool!" about ten of them shouted at once. "Do you think you look like an oil-worker? . . . Well, perhaps you do now." And with these words a lout slapped something sticky on my head. Lord! What could it be? I sprang to my feet, and they all burst out laughing. I got mad and tore the rag from my eyes—and there I was—my hair full of oil, my white shirt filthy and mucky all over!

"Are you mad, or just plain crazy?" I shouted.

But they laughed all the louder.

"Well, you're one of us now! Baptized and all. Hey, Mr. Kirnitsky, let's have some vodka and beer! Let's drink to our new friend here. Ha, ha!"

IV. A STRANGE DREAM

Wait a minute! I had a crazy dream last night! It was such nonsense, and yet so terrifying. I can't get rid of it, but I don't seem to remember exactly what it was about. I must have glanced at the window* first thing this morning, and that's one sure way of forgetting everything you've dreamed about.

I seemed to have been standing over a pit-mouth and looking down into it. And it was bottomless, dark, and frightening.

Meanwhile, they were adjusting the winding-rope and

* There is a belief among the people that if you look at the window on awakening, you will forget what you dreamt.—*Note by I. Franko.*

had fastened the strap round my hips. Then I climbed into the tub. Someone shouted, "Let her go!" I don't even know who it was. Then the windlass went whirr-whirr! All of a sudden I felt I was going down into the shaft, but so slowly that I was barely moving at all.

Overhead, in front of me, all around, and under me everything was becoming lighter and brighter and more spacious. I was breathing easier. And there wasn't even a trace of choke damp. So far so good. Then, suddenly, I was on a green meadow full of fragrant flowers and tall grass; butterflies flitted back and forth and bees buzzed on the flowers; grasshoppers were chirping and birds swayed on the tall weeds. It felt so good to be there. The warm sun shone down from the clear sky. I felt like going on and on, but I couldn't. My movements were hampered by the very same rope steeped in oil and grease that they had tied round me when they had lowered me into the shaft. I tried so hard to get it off; I struggled and struggled, but all in vain.

Suddenly, a woman appeared in front of me. She was robust and good-looking, but she didn't seem happy.

"Well," she said, "how do you like it here?"

"It's nice," I answered. "I like the green pastures and the soft grass."

"Do you feel happy here?" she asked.

"I would," I answered, "if only I could move about freely. But you see, no matter how hard I try, I can't get these cursed ropes off."

"Do you know what sort of ropes these are?" she asked.

"Why they're ropes—or cables. Why do you ask?"

"You're foolish and that's why you don't know; you're blind and that's why you can't see," she said. "You've been entangled by the boss's hands and the boss's cunning, my pet. Look around. There's no one here, but once there were many people here. Do you know where they all are now?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, come along, then, and I'll show you."

I followed her and seemed to have got rid of the ropes that were binding me. Then I looked down and saw that I was standing right before a pit-mouth.

It was as bottomless, dark, and frightening as the first one had been. I shuddered at the sight of it. There were such fumes coming up from the bottom that nothing in the world could save a man down there.

"They're down there," the woman said, but this time her words sounded menacing.

I became even more scared than before.

"Do you know who sent them there?" she asked.

"No."

"I did."

"You? Who are you?"

"Don't you know me? Well, I am The Strangler who chokes people to death. And now do you know whose turn it is to land in the trap?"

"No, I don't," I said, but I was trembling like an aspen leaf as I said it.

"It's your turn!" she yelled and pushed me down the shaft.

"Lord!" I cried as I fell—and woke up. "God damn you," I thought. "May you rot in hell!" What in the world could the dream have meant?

V. INTO THE DEPTHS

Hurry up and fix the winding-rope! And make it tight, man, or else I'll fall—and then you'll have hell to pay!

What's so funny, stupid? You'd better check the pump and see to it that it's in good working order. Where's my lamp? Do you think I'm a cat to see in the dark down there? (O Lord, how deep it is! It makes my hair stand on end just to look down! Br-r-r! And how dark it is! And

the smell from down there! Have mercy on me, Holy Mary, Mother of God! It's hard at first, but a man can get used to anything.)

What a fool you are! Why are you releasing the winding-rope? Can't you see I'm not ready yet? Let me get in the tub first, and don't rush me! Hand me the pick. The spade is here. Fine. I'll carry the axe and the bit. Let her go! And slowly, hear me? Slowly! The moment I give the signal, pull me up again! (Who knows what may happen? I'll signal if anything goes wrong. This cursed cable! How thin it is! And I'm no feather; what if it snaps half-way? But then, Ivan's heavier than I am and it holds him.) Well, here's hoping for the best! Go ahead!

Oh-h-h! How it sways. Where am I? What's happening? I can't see a thing, and the shaft seems spinning round. Why are the walls whizzing by so fast? What's happened up there? Perhaps the rope has got stuck, or something else has gone wrong; why have I stopped? Why is there such a draught down here when there wasn't even a breath of wind on the surface? Lord, how dark and frightening it is! Where's the bottom? It's gone. Nothing but darkness and gas. How stuffy it is and hard to breathe. Why aren't they pumping down any fresh air? How draughty it is down here; everything seems turning and whizzing by. Matvei was right, it is terrible here! Where am I? I've been going down for such a long time now and still haven't reached bottom! And as for the lamp—who ever said it could shine? Where's the bottom? Lord, they were lying. This shaft isn't 350 feet deep. I must have gone a quarter of a mile down already. My heart is beating so fast. What's going to happen to me? If I begin to suffocate, I'll die ten times before they have a chance to pull me up. Mother of God, have mercy on me! St. Nicholas, don't let me die here! Oh, I'm still dropping! How fast—it takes my breath away. My blood is pounding in my head. Still no bottom. Nothing but the endless walls. What if they aren't strong enough

and cave in? It won't be the first time such a thing has happened. Sen Yatsikhin from back home got killed like that. He was mashed to a pulp. Dear God, save this sinner's soul from death!

What has happened? Am I still dropping? No, I think I've stopped. Wait, I'll trim my lamp. . . . I'm on the bottom! Thank God! So this is the bottom!

How deep the shaft is! It makes you shiver. . . . What's that? Is it night up there already? How dark the sky is! Well! Are those candles I see up there or can it be that I'm looking at the stars? But it was morning when I started down. How is it I can see the stars? Maybe I'm just seeing things? Begone, Satan!

VI. IN THE GALLERY

How cramped I am here! How dark, and stifling, and frightening it is! My lamp is barely flickering. Its rays can scarcely pierce the darkness. What is this dark hole like an oven opening or the entrance to a fox-hole? Is this the gallery? How do you crawl into it—and how in the world do you work in there? God, I'll soon be a hunchback, working here, till I die of gas-poisoning.

Ah, no! It's wider farther on. I'm beginning to get used to the dark. Honestly, I think my eyes are turning into cat's eyes. Ivan must have been digging here the day before yesterday. I guess this is where I'm supposed to dig too. I wonder how long it'll take me to reach the paraffin wax.

Ah, it's not so bad once you start digging. I have to keep at it as hard as I can, although that pound of a boss isn't worth a spadeful of dirt. That'll teach him to cut a poor workingman's pay! But it's best to keep moving. It's so difficult to breathe here; it's so stuffy! Why aren't those idiots pumping more air down here?

Matvei is an awful fool, but he likes to boast. Can I put up

props? Ha! I'd like to know whose timberwork is better, his or mine? There's nothing that can bring my props down!

He certainly tried to scare me. He thought I'd turn yellow. Why, I feel like I've been here all my life. (Still, it's not easy. And I get chills down my spine every now and then. But that's of no importance!)

What a pick! You've a sharp beak, a witch's iron tooth. (Why are they pumping so little air? I can hardly breathe any more.) Let's see what you can do, friend! One-two-three! *Boom!* What's that noise? The first sound was dull, as if it were coming through a pillow, but now it sounds like it's coming through an empty barrel. There it goes again. The rumbling seems louder. What can it be? (Why, I'm hearing things. There's nothing to worry about. But why does my heart keep thumping so hard then? And the blood is rushing to my head.)

It's better now. I'll dig a little ways more here and then I'll put up some props again. The axe gleams so strangely in the light of the lamp. It's as if misfortune was grinning, showing her iron tooth. Bah! Begone, away!

What's wrong with this prop? Is it rumbling too? Or is it moaning as if it were dying? How strange everything is down here. It's exactly the same as the mine was in my dream, when The Strangler pushed me down it. The Strangler! Perhaps there actually is someone who chokes oil-workers to death. Perhaps I'm hacking away at her underground kingdom, and that's why the wall is rumbling so.

Good God! What's that? As if someone grabbed me by the neck with a clammy hand! I can't turn around! I can't get free! I can't, I can't!

"Who is it? Oh, it's you! What do you want? You Strangler, what do you want of me?"

.
Ding-a-ling-a-ling! Help! Help! Ding-a-ling-a-ling! Help!
.

VII. THE STRANGLER AND HER KINGDOM

A whole week! Good Lord, I was certain a full day hadn't passed yet! What places I've been to, what sights I've seen this past week! I could go on talking about it for a hundred years and still not finish. I'm not even sure whether it was a dream or whether I really was there. Although I do think it really did happen. You know, I saw it all as clearly as I see you now. You say they pulled me up half-dead, and unconscious. Well, well. . . . And that after they brought me to I was delirious for a whole week? Fantastic, that's what it is. Matvei, why don't you sit down? Come, sit down over here, and, Marunka, you come and sit close by me. Now, I'll tell you what I saw.

You know how I went down into the shaft. I was scared at first, and it was not easy, but that's not important. I began to dig, then I fixed the props and went on digging again. It kept getting harder and harder for me to work, I felt as if something were pressing on my chest, and I didn't know what was happening to me. I tried my best to keep on digging, but all kinds of crazy things came into my head: spooky stories I heard when I was a boy, and then suddenly remembered about a woman called The Strangler. I had even dreamt of her the night before. No sooner had I recalled her than I felt—and I really did feel it—someone grabbing me by the neck. The hand that held me was as cold as ice. I froze to the spot. I tried to turn round, but I couldn't. Then, finally, I did manage to turn my head. Dear Lord, it was she—The Strangler—standing right behind me! And she was exactly as I had seen her in my dream. She spoke very sharply to me and said:

“What are you doing here?”

I was scared to death and couldn't even utter a word.

“Wasn't your dream last night warning enough for you? Have you forgotten? I forgave you then, but not this time. It's too late now! You're mine!”

I felt that my hand was trying to yank the signal-cord that was dangling right beside me. But I couldn't, I was frozen to the spot. I know I tried to shout, "Help!" but my voice got stuck in my throat. Something like an enormous stone was pressing on my chest.

"No, my pet," The Strangler said, "all your efforts are in vain. No one has ever gone free who has fallen into my hands. Follow me."

She lifted me up and carried me off.

I seemed to feel better, and I could turn my head and look round.

"It's unbelievable!" I thought. "Why, I haven't hit this spot more than two or three times with my pick, and there's a pit here wide enough to drive a team of oxen through it."

The Strangler was carrying me straight into the pit. It was cold and dark there. We kept flying along. It was very quiet. I finally got up enough courage to ask her:

"Where are you taking me?"

She did not answer. We were silent again. Then she asked:

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-three," I said.

"Are your father and mother living?"

"Yes."

"Are they well-off?"

"No," I said. "Do you think I would ever have gone down into that hell if necessity had not driven me there? A man wants to live, no matter how miserable his life may be!"

"Aha," she said, "so you want to live, do you?"

"Who doesn't? Sure I do."

"Is it difficult for you to give up living?"

"What a question," I said. "I grew up in misery, and misery led me here, so you see, I really had no time to live at all. I thought I'd save up a little bit of money and marry,

and perhaps God would take pity on me and make my life easier."

"I see." She fell silent once more.

"Well," she said after a while, "it's all over for you. You are in my hands now. Come, and I'll show you my kingdom."

She carried me off into the air and we sped along so quickly that it made me dizzy. Soon I saw a broad, flower-decked meadow below. It was the very same one I had seen in my dream. There were small hills there and the slopes were covered with cornfields. It was light and bright and merry-looking and it did my heart good to see such a scene.

"Is this your kingdom?" I asked.

"No," she said, "it's my elder sister's kingdom. We'll come back to see it later. My kingdom is here."

We had come to a deep, dark pit like the one I had seen in my dream. Gas fumes rose above it in a thick black column. The horrible thing was that such cries, groans, and shrieks issued up from it as if thousands of people were dying in terrible agony there.

"What is this?" I asked in a shaking voice.

"Go on down and you'll see," she said. "This is my kingdom!"

And she whisked me off into her dark, loathsome pit.

VIII. AN OIL-WORKER'S LOT

I tell you I found myself in a trap more terrible than anything I had ever dreamed of in my whole life. At first everything was pitch black all around me. The shrieking and screeching gave me goose-flesh. Then my eyes got accustomed to the dark; and what do you think I saw? It seemed that I was in a long, dark, narrow gallery, or something like one. It was full of people and they were all oil-workers. They were so haggard and their faces were

so black it was terrible to look at them. One was wandering about with a spade, another with a pick, a third with a hoe. They were fussing and crawling and seemed to be looking for something.

"What are they looking for?" I asked The Strangler who was standing beside me.

"Look and you'll see," she answered.

Suddenly I heard a cry close by. It came from an oil-worker. Why was he howling so? I looked closer. Good God! What was the matter with him! His right arm and leg were completely smashed. The blood had clotted and the broken ends of the bones were sticking through. He was hobbling *along and wailing*, "*You damned boss, give me back my health! You can have my miserable pay! You can have my cursed money, you can have everything I own, but give me back my health! I have little children to support, I can't earn a living without my arm! My house is far away from here! I can't get home without my leg!*"

I was petrified as I listened to his voice.

"What's the matter with him?" I asked.

"Why, nothing," The Strangler said. "He worked at a well for two months, and then, before payday, the boss let a board drop on him from some height—as if by accident, you see—and thus he fell into my hands."

I could not hear her out because of another voice that interrupted her. It came from a child that was crawling along the ground. I could hardly make it out, crawling along, as it was crying, "Mama! Mama! I'm hungry! I'm hungry!"

I shuddered.

"What's wrong with this poor thing?" I asked.

The Strangler looked around.

"You mean the child? Oh, I have thousands of them here! That shouldn't surprise you. Cold, and hunger, and sickness, and a hundred other things toss them into my hands!"

Lord! I could see better by now. There were so many people there in that abyss! Holy Mary, how many lads and lasses, women and little babes there were! It was a terrible sight! There were faces pinched with sickness and starvation, bloated bodies, like those of people who had been drowned ("Quite a few of them drown!" she said. "The deserted wells are left open and fill up with water—it's easy to fall in, isn't it?"), some were frighteningly black, like charred embers. ("And fire has served me well," The Strangler added. "All that is needed is a fire at a pit—the rest is child's play!")

I was both frightened and sorry for these people.

"Do you mean that they all died in the wells?"

"Certainly."

"Are there many here?"

"You can see for yourself that there are quite a lot. But this is not all. Come along!"

We flew down the gallery and it seemed to open up before us, although it was as stifling as ever. Suddenly, we came to a stop. I looked closely again. As far as the eye could see, the ground was covered with men—most of them young men, as tall and strong as stout sycamores. They were lying on the ground, pressed close together, and there were spades and picks beside them. Their faces were blue, their fists were clenched, and their eyes were opened wide.

"What happened to them?" I asked.

"Why, they suffocated in the wells. Quite a number, eh?"

She chuckled, but it sounded so horrible that I shuddered.

"I see you're not too happy in my kingdom. Do you know there was a place prepared for you here, among them? But I feel kind towards you, my pet. There are many whom I snatched up the very first time they went down a well, but I like you! I'll let you off this time. Remember, if you ever go down again it'll be the end of you."

By then my teeth were chattering.

"Then how is it Matvei goes down every single day and nothing ever happens to him?" I said.

"Don't worry, there's a place here for him too. He won't be long in coming."

My heart sank and I began to plead with her. Would you believe it, Matvei, I even wept, I pleaded so with her. It was no use.

"No!" she said. "I'm not the one in charge here. There are ones above me and I must heed what they say. I don't want you to think you've seen all there is of my kingdom, so come along and I'll show you more."

"You mean this is not all?" I cried in terror.

I looked back. God Almighty! The cursed gallery stretched on and on into the distance and it was full of oil-workers: I saw cripples and freaks who had starved to death or been killed by frost, fire, chicanery, or in any of many other ways. And this was not all! I nearly lost my senses from the shock of it.

IX. HOW OIL-WORKERS LIVE

"Now keep your eyes open and remember what you see!" The Strangler said sharply.

I collected my thoughts. It was dark and chilly all around. I realized I was back in Borislav—yes, in Borislav.

"Well?" she said. "Do you recognize the place?"

"Yes, I do," I answered. "We're back up on the surface now."

"Fine! Come along and you'll see how powerful I am here too."

We entered some kind of house or big barn. The cold penetrated through all the chinks in the walls and the earth was cold and dank underfoot. There were hundreds of

people lying huddled on the floor. Many of them I had seen before: some worked at the windlasses or pumps; others sorted the paraffin wax, or worked in the warehouses, or did other jobs. The real drillers, those who worked underground, looked down upon them and considered them just so much trash; they called them *kaptsans* or ragamuffins. There were quite a lot of young people here, and others who were quite old. They all slept together. At times someone would cry out in his sleep or have a fit of coughing.

We had been gazing at them for quite a while, when The Strangler broke the silence:

"See how many of them there are? They're all mine!"

"Lord!" I cried. "Are they all to die here?"

"Sooner or later. But this is only the beginning. Let's go inside. Do you think these people work for nothing, and that they don't make anything? See that old man over there, the one that's tossing about and moaning? He's squeezed in between the others and he can't get up. He won't be here after tomorrow. And not he alone. There are many more, too, who won't be able to go on like this. They'll all be mine. You ask, how can it be that they work for nothing? I'll answer by saying that they work for less than nothing! It's not only that they'll lose their health and strength working here (you know very well how hard the work is, even turning the windlass), but their pay will cost them dear."

"What do you mean? How can that be?" I wondered.

"Can't you see the way they're sleeping here? The ground is damp; it's cold and the air is stale. How long do you think a person can survive here?"

What could I say? An animal would soon breathe its last in a hole like that, let alone a human being.

"Listen to their breathing," she said. "A good half of them have consumption already, and no doctor will ever

be able to snatch them from me. You know yourself that they have to pay a good part of their wages for a place in this doss-house. Count it up. The paraffin-wax sorters and warehouse workers get four shistkas a day, and those who work the windlasses get six. Right?"

"Yes," I said.

"Pay-day is once a week. The first get three guldens four shistkas, the second get four and six. Is that correct?"

"I suppose so," I answered.

"There you are! Now, how much do they pay a week for food? At least two shistkas a day, which makes two guldens and a shistka a week. This flop-house (and there's no better to be found, as you know yourself) costs them a shistka a night, that makes five shistkas a week, right?"

"Yes."

"Now, count up how much they'll have left."

"I know that count only too well," I said. "It's in my bones by now. The warehouse workers have eight shistkas left and the men at the windlass have two guldens left."

"Isn't it working for nothing to slave in this hell for a week and have eight shistkas left at the end of it?"

She sounded so sad and mournful that I had nothing to say.

"Wait a second," she continued. "I counted two shistkas a day for food. But what sort of food is that? Bread is dearer here than it is anywhere else. The bosses know there are plenty of people wanting to buy bread and they raise the prices. You need one shistka a day just for bread. And what if a workingman decides to have a drink after a hard day's work, or have some hot food two or three times a week—that takes care of the rest of his pay. You can't keep body and soul together on bread alone, and especially not on the kind they sell here. Now do you see what the people get for their labour? Nothing but the most

meagre rations. Oh yes, and this sort of lodgings too! What sort of wages do you call that? And is this really living?

"Well," I objected, "that's how the warehouse workers live, but a person working at the windlass can put aside a little something. After all, he has two guldens left over each week."

"Wait a minute, friend," she said. "You worked at the windlass eight weeks. How much did you save up in that time? You should have sixteen guldens. Do you?"

To tell you the truth, I felt a bit embarrassed.

"It's like this," I said, "by the time I paid for this and that I had nothing left! At first the boss gave me a small sum every day to cover my expenses. He'd give me five shistkas a day, and sometimes even eight, but it all went. You know how it is—there are so many things a man needs. Then the boss left town for a while. I had to live on credit for nearly a week. When pay-day came round I gave Kirnitsky my pay to cover my debt, but it wasn't enough and I found I still owed him something. And so it goes; you just can't manage to save anything at all."

"See what it all leads to," she said. "Do you think that you are the only one who lives from hand to mouth like that? No, my pet, it's the same with everyone else too. People used to be able to save up a bit, but those times have gone! The bosses got to understand that if the oil-workers were given a chance to save up enough money to buy a plot of land for themselves, there would be no one left to do the work. The bosses want to keep you in constant want so that there will always be hands available to make money for them: the more workers there are, the less they have to be paid! If there's a crowd of men willing to work for the masters, this brings down wages. You are told that such are the rates and not a copper more! You don't have to work here if you don't want to. There are others who will take the job if you don't. You try one

place, then another, but it's the same story everywhere you go. You have the choice between going home hungry and empty-handed or taking the job at the rates they give you. You see, the main thing is that the bosses have all come to an understanding among themselves. 'We must first of all see to it that the workingman shall never save up enough money to pull himself out of his misery!' they say. That's why they put up taverns at every street corner and began to cheat the workers wherever they could: they paid the men in instalments, gave them credit, and then demanded more than was due. You'd think that was enough. Then they began bringing in less bread so that the price of bread went up. They charge a shistka a night in the lodging-houses, when the price used to be half a shistka. And they finally had things their way. They're in the saddle now. The peasants have been reduced to beggary but the landlords and other leeches are grinding them down. More and more workers are pouring into Borislav and the bosses are cutting wages. You know it all goes into their pockets."

"My God!" I cried at this. "None of us ever guessed the reason behind it all. The more we suffer, the more we say that it is God's will and that He is punishing us for our sins. Now I see the real cause."

"It certainly is. You fools think that you'll make your fortunes in Borislav. Simpletons! Why should the bosses help you? You'll find your death here instead of help from them. Then there's another thing. The men are leaving the villages to find work in the towns. That means untended fields and neglected farms. On the one hand you'll lose your health here for nothing, and on the other, your farms will be going to ruin in the meantime."

"You're right. God have mercy on us! It's the end of the world!" I cried. "And is there nothing to be done about it? Is there no way to free ourselves of these cursed snares?"

She fell silent for quite a while.

X. THE THREE WAYS

"There are ways," she finally said. "There are three ways out, my friend. But I cannot tell you what they are. It is not in my power to do so. Think hard about it and perhaps you'll come to it yourself. I'll tell you one thing, though, and that is, never count on 'God grant us an easier lot!' At first, the men who worked in the wells got a gulden and a half a day, but there were plenty of people willing to face death or getting maimed to make some money. So the bosses cut their wages by three shistkas a day."

"I thought I was the only one who got less."

"You were the first, but now they've cut everyone's pay. They've agreed on it among themselves—it's the same everywhere. Leave this place, you poor wretch, go—for you'll never find happiness here. Tell your friends to go too."

"Where shall I go?"

"Anywhere. Find work as a farm-hand. You won't earn much that way either, but at least you'll be working for one of your own kind, and not for the enemy. I have to go now. Good luck to you!"

With these words she vanished. I came to, and, as you see, found myself among you.

"What do you think of it? Isn't it crazy? But it must have been true, for you just said that they've cut your wages too. What shall we do? Don't laugh, Matvei. Delirium or not, I know that The Strangler, or whoever she was, was speaking the truth. I shan't keep you from doing what you want to, but I for one will never go underground. Not for anything in the world. I'm through with this job. I'll look for work as a farm-hand, but I'm not going to stay here any longer!

"Something's bothering me, though. What were the ways she hinted at? She said there were three ways out. And that if I really thought hard about it I'd find the answer. How

can a man think if his head feels like it's been bashed in? Think! Try as I will, my mind's a blank. Everything seemed so clear while she was speaking, but my own thoughts are in a muddle. Ah, how poor we are! While other children were going to school, I was tending the village herd so as not to die of starvation.

“What's wrong, Marunya? Why are you so sad? How thin you've become. I didn't even notice it at first. Well, what do you say? Shall we leave together? This whole place can go to hell! No matter how hard our life will be, it will still be better than losing our health here for nothing. Well, men, have you been thinking about the three ways out? I wish you the best of luck. Perhaps the Lord will help you rid yourselves of your harsh lot and the bosses' snares!”

1877



THE OIL-WORKER

I

Ivan! Ivanochko, my darling!”

“What do you want?”

“You’re so cross and unfriendly today....”

“Well, what do you want?”

The autumn wind was whirling and whistling through the narrow streets of Borislav, scattering the damp clay

that had been scooped out of the wells during the day. The night was dark.

"How long am I supposed to wait here till you decide to say something? Why did you call me outside in such a wind?"

"I wanted to talk to you ... like we used to before. Remember, in the village?"

"So that's it! Well, you've picked a fine time and place! Hurry up, what do you want? Can't you see I'm frozen stiff!"

"I know!" Her voice shook. She felt much colder than he did. "I can see you don't love me, Ivan. You don't love me as you used to."

"Really? What makes you think so?"

"It's that round-faced Ganka you spend all your evenings with."

"Oh, for God's sake! I spend my time with her? It's she who runs after me. I can't forbid her to see me."

"Then why won't you let me meet you?"

"You always take everything personally! What do you want? Do you need anything? Tell me, if you do. You know I never refused to help you when you were in need."

The girl sighed.

"In need! Lord, if you only knew how great that need is! What's the use of talking about it. There's only one thing I need, Ivanochko."

"What?"

"You."

"Well, here I am."

"What's the good of that if I am not in your heart, if you've forgotten me, if you don't love me! I'd never be afraid of anything if I were with you. I'd do anything for you. . . ."

"You're a silly goose," Ivan interrupted her. "Silly, and that's all there is to it. You think I'm pining away for that Ganka, and she never even enters my head."

Then he came up close to her, drew her towards him, and added more gently and softly:

"Don't worry, Fruzya! I won't forget you. Remember, I gave you my word, there, beneath the linden? The Lord heard me and he's my witness. We have to stick it out a while longer. Don't you think I know how hard things are for you? They're not easy for me either. Wait another week or two. Calm down, it's time you were home. You're shivering with cold. Come into the tavern with me. Come on, you'll warm up. It's a long way to your lodgings."

"No, I . . ."

"Don't argue. Come on!"

He all but dragged her into the noisy, crowded tavern. The place was full of men and women workers, and the air reeked with their foul-smelling, oil-soaked shirts and denims, and all this was mixed with the smell of vodka. All around bursts of boisterous laughter could be heard. No one paid any attention to them. They sat down at a table close to the stove, and Fruzya cast a quick glance around the room to see if her worst enemy and rival for Ivan's affections were there. She wasn't, and Fruzya breathed more freely. A glass of cherry brandy warmed and enlivened her, and she began to talk of their village and friends, and finally she pulled Ivan's head towards her and whispered:

"I've some news for you!"

"What is it?"

"I'm expecting a newcomer."

"A newcomer? Where from?"

"Guess."

"How can I guess who's coming to see you?"

"You should know."

"I *should*? Well, who can it be?"

"Oh, you're so dumb!"

She smiled and tweaked his ear.

"A baby! Your baby, Ivan!"

She tried to sound casual and happy, but she lacked the courage and the strength. Her heart was fluttering in her breast. Fruzya knew that so much—perhaps even her whole life—depended on how Ivan reacted to her words. From the moment she knew she was going to be a mother she was terrified by the thought of having to tell Ivan. What would he say? And now, after the words had passed her lips, she sat there pale and frightened, as if she had sinned terribly, as if she were waiting for him to pass sentence on her.

It all seemed to have made not the slightest impression upon him.

He turned away, fixed his gaze on the ceiling, and began to whistle softly. Then he turned to her and asked negligently:

“Will you have another glass?”

“No, I don’t want any more,” the girl answered faintly.

In silence, Ivan ordered a glass of beer. She was more dead than alive, and the same thought kept turning in her head: “This is the end! This is the end! He doesn’t love me! He’ll leave me, right here in this filthy den!”

She could no longer breathe the noisome air of the crowded place. She felt she was choking, something was pressing on her chest. She stood up.

“Going so soon?”

“Yes.”

He didn’t budge or ask her to stay a while longer, but kept examining the ceiling. There were tears in Fruzya’s eyes, and it took all her strength to choke down her sobs.

“Good night to you!”

“Good night!”

In the street the wind caught her up in its cold embrace, tugged at her skirts, and tossed bits of clay into her face, but she noticed nothing.

Her heart felt colder and darker than the alleys of Borislav.

Lindenbaum's big storehouse stood on a piece of wasteland at the outskirts of Borislav. It was a big wooden structure standing among the wells and was used to store paraffin wax. Outside its walls were heaps of grey clay from the wells. From every side narrow wheelbarrow tracks weaved among the heaps to the entrance.

Behind the storehouse lived the watchman. His shanty was well-nigh lost among the high clay heaps, so that the sun hardly ever peeped in through the narrow windows. The watchman was a widower who had farmed out his children to other families. To make some extra money besides his pay from Lindenbaum, he had put up a partition in the shanty and rented out one of the rooms to women workers while he lived in the other. He did not mind this arrangement, since he was up all night going his rounds, for there was no police in Borislav in those days.

It was late and the dirty, crowded, stifling cubby-hole was full. The bare wooden walls had a thin layer of white-wash, and on one of them was a picture and a bit of mirror. In a corner stood a trestle-bed of three planks, with a straw pallet and a shawl on it; at the window was a tall three-legged table. Such were the furnishings. There was no stove, there were no kitchen utensils, blankets, pillows or chests in the room. The trestle-bed was empty, but human forms, packed as tight as sardines, were huddled on the floor; their breathing was loud and heavy; in the dim light they resembled a heap of dirty rags, coats, shawls, and boots. It was in such conditions that workingwomen slept, old and young, driven by need from distant places. They lay side by side on the cold wooden floor after a hard day's work at the windlasses or emptying the tubs and sorting out the paraffin wax. Their heads rested on their arms; they pressed close together, because there was not enough room on the floor and it was warmer this way.

Their faces were pallid from want. The clay and paraffin wax seemed to have filled the pores of their hands, and their shreds of clothing barely covered their bodies. There were aged faces lined with care and anxiety, and young ones with the last traces of beauty on them, but these had long lost their colour from early hardship, poverty, and vice. It was quiet in the room; at times someone would cry out in her sleep, strike out, mumble a curse, or put her arm around her neighbour, thinking probably that she was embracing her lover. One old woman was more restless than the others; there was a time when she had been the wealthiest woman in her village, but now she was no different from a beggar. She could not work much, since her old arms were weaker than a child's, and all she could do was sit in a corner of a shed and sort the earth brought up from the well. She got three shistkas a day and was supposed to be grateful for it. She would come to life at night when her better days seemed to be revived in her mind. She croaked her long-forgotten girlhood songs in a broken voice, straightening out her rags as if she were arranging a fine frock in front of a mirror; then she would nod pompously, as if she were talking to her old neighbours and showing off a new string of beads; sometimes she would smack her lips, as if tasting a warmed glass of vodka and honey. This would be followed by curses, sobs, moaning, and then snatches of songs again—and thus till the morning. Often, awakened by the old woman's dreams, her neighbour would curse and shove her to make her quiet, but it was of no avail. The old woman would waken without any recollection of her dreams, yet she could not sleep peacefully.

A small candle, made of crude yellow paraffin wax, burned on the little table by the window. The flame flickered, casting strange shadows on the sleeping women. A girl sat bent over the table; she was the only one in the whole house who could not fall asleep. Her mournful eyes followed the deft movements of her needle. She was sewing

a shirt—a tiny baby shirt—and she was taking great pains with it this late at night, for there was other work to be done during the day.

“He said he never thinks about Ganka,” she mused unhappily, “and maybe it’s the truth. But he didn’t say whether he loves me or not. What’s the use of saying it? I can see for myself. No, he doesn’t love me; he doesn’t even think of me! He’s forgotten his vow, although he said he remembered it. What are words? Just wind, nothing more. And the dear Lord won’t come down from heaven to punish him. That’s what Ivan thinks, and he’s probably laughing at me behind my back. He’s laughing at a foolish girl who left her parents and her home and lost her good name—and all for him! I gave up everything for him, everything I had! And now, when there’s nothing more to take, he doesn’t need me any more, he’s sick of me!”

Her eyes filled with tears once more, but this time she did not try to hold them back and swallow them, and they fell on her sewing.

“Dear God, for what great sins have you punished me so cruelly?” her wretched heart moaned.

The needle stopped. Her gaze was drawn towards the flame. Blue smoke rose up from it and hung in a thick haze under the ceiling. Her head ached. The wind was whistling without, and the cold air, penetrating through the cracks, chilled her.

Fruzya had a good cry and felt better.

“He does love me. I’d die if he stopped loving me. What have I done that could make him forget me? And what will I do without him when the baby comes, when the unwanted newcomer arrives?”

However, Fruzya had not the slightest idea what she would do with Ivan when the baby came. Certainly, she had seen him screw up his face and turn away when she said she was expecting a baby. She knew he had no money,

that he spent all his days at work, and there was nothing at all she could do.

Fruzya had realized all this an hour ago, as she had walked shivering home from the tavern. Now she tried not to think about it. The thought terrified her, and as a drowning person clutches at a straw, so did she cling to the thought: if only he loved me! If only he were here with me! I'd never be afraid of anything if he were with me. He would help me in everything!

She deceived herself with this thought and talked herself into believing it until she was nearly certain that all would be as she wished. It had to be! For surely God saw everything! It was not for nothing that she had left her parents and followed Ivan; it was not for nothing that she had suffered so! And he had promised that they had but a short time more to wait and then everything would change; all their troubles would vanish. What was he going to do? She could not guess, but she felt suddenly as light-hearted and gay as a blade of grass pushing its way through the snow in the springtime.

She gazed vacantly at the candle which had burnt down and no longer gave any light but filled the room with acrid smoke. Her heart was beating fast, and the needle seemed to be moving deftly of its own will: the collar was turning out nicely. There was no trace of her former fatigue or chill. She heard the strains of music, and she felt as though she were following a long, sunny path through a green corn-field. She seemed to feel the touch of soft, loving hands. She leaned her head on the table and fell asleep.

The wind brought with it the muffled sounds of shouting and singing, the voices of oil-workers tumbling out of the tavern. The loudest voice was Ivan's. He sang:

*I shan't leave you, my dear,
I'll take care of you like a baby.*

III

Next morning Fruzya was up before the others. She had a headache and felt feverish and sick, but paid no heed to this. She washed quickly and rushed to the tavern where she took her breakfast, paid for a week in advance: a jug of hot milk and a chunk of bread. The food stuck in her throat. She forced herself to drink the milk, tucked the bread away under her jacket and dashed off. Where to? She herself could not say. It was too early to start work. She wanted to see Ivan, but she knew there was hardly any chance of meeting him in the street, and she had no idea as to where he spent his nights nowadays. She stumbled on at random through the heavy, sticky mud, whipped on by the wind, trying by walking and fatigue to allay the fears raging within her.

Borislav was coming to life. Dirty, sleepy-eyed people were emerging from their dark burrows and stale, stifling, crowded shanties. They began their day with curses and arguments, without washing or crossing themselves; they dragged themselves over to the nearest tavern, swallowed a glass of vodka and ate a piece of stale bread; they crammed another chunk of stale bread, a piece of sausage or garlic into their pockets and set off for work. In the sheds bells jangled, foremen shouted, and the windlasses creaked. Carts laden with firewood, sacks of potatoes, grain, and other provisions bumped along the road. The grey, gloomy sky above the town seemed lost in its unhappy thoughts, and far off in the distance, on the slopes, the tall fir-trees of Dil Forest gleamed a deep green.

As Fruzya trudged on along the dirty street she looked into every nook, into the open tavern doors and into familiar sheds, but Ivan was nowhere to be seen. She bumped into Ganka on the corner, near Kirnitsky's inn, the main gathering place and centre of night life of the Borislav workers. Ganka came from the same village as Fruzya and

Ivan. She was big-boned, red-faced, with bulging eyes and thick lips and she seemed a giant next to pale, thin Fruzya. Her bare red feet trod the wet clay firmly as she carried two full pails on a yoke. Her black braids were wound round her head, her beady black eyes were full of laughter and exuded health and strength which were apparently never troubled by anxiety or worry. She was one of those crude beings whose soul (if indeed it existed) lay buried far beneath the surface. Such people, even when living in abject poverty and toiling ceaselessly, actually do not know the meaning of trouble or grief brought on by unfulfilled desires, anxiety, the contradictions between the possible and the desired. They seem to be made for hard work, like an ox for the yoke; their troubles begin when they lose their hitherto iron strength and health.

Fruzya had never liked Ganka, but now that she saw Ivan grow merry and laugh, dance, and jest in her company, she had come to detest her rival. Ivan's words of the previous night—that it was Ganka who was running after him—made her blood boil.

"Listen here, Ganka," she said without greeting her.

"What do you want?"

"Do you work for Kirnitsky?"

"Yes. This is my fourth day there."

"Was my Ivan there yesterday?"

"Your Ivan? Who's your Ivan?" Ganka jeered.

"You know whom I mean!" Fruzya said, holding back her anger.

"He's as much yours as he is mine. In fact, he's even more mine. He can't stand the sight of you, but he's gay when he's with me."

"You're lying, you dish-washer!" Fruzya shouted. "You're lying, you're lying! Don't you dare run after him! He told me himself that you were chasing him. If I see you with him once more I'll scratch your eyes out!"

"Go to hell! Don't bother me!"

"Don't you dare!" Fruzya seethed. "Don't you dare get him mixed up with you!"

"What if I dare, what'll you do then? I was with him yesterday; I'll be with him again today, and whenever else I feel like it too. You can choke and it won't bother me in the least."

Fruzya threw herself upon Ganka in a frenzy, but her rival merely doused her with a pailful of water.

A crowd of oil-workers that had gathered in the street to listen to the quarrel burst out laughing.

"Good girl, Ganka! Give her a bath! Cool her off!" some shouted.

"Hey, Fruzya, pull at her braids! How dare she take your sweetheart away?" others teased.

Fruzya was burning with shame and anger. She was drenched and shivering with the cold, but her rage overcame her. She grabbed Ganka by her braids and began to pull at them and pommel her. For an instant Ganka stood there holding the yoke and pails and hesitating: should she hang on to the yoke or defend herself? She suddenly made up her mind, lowered the yoke and with her free hand hit Fruzya full in the chest with such force that she tumbled over and let go of her braid.

"Ho-ho-ho!" the men roared. "That girl's a real fighter! Let her have it!"

"Hey, Ivan!" others called to Ivan as he was coming out of the tavern. "Come here! Look at this show."

"What's up?" he asked.

"Come over here! The girls are murdering each other over you. Just have a look! Lucky fellow to have girls fighting over him."

Ivan walked up and in a flash saw what was happening.

"Ganka," he said threateningly, "what are you doing?"

"This scarecrow started it all. She stopped me and insulted me in front of everyone."

With great effort Fruzya rose to her feet. Her chest ached and she gasped for breath.

"Ivan!" she uttered.

"Go to hell!" he growled. "What are you pestering me for and embarrassing me in front of people in the street? Go home and change, you're wet through."

"I doused her to make her shut up," Ganka taunted. "Next time she'll know better than to cross me."

She snatched up the yoke and pails and ran off. Ivan spat in disgust, turned on his heel, and went off to work with the other men. Fruzya was left alone. She was shivering and felt weak, wretched, and deserted. Life seemed so useless. Everything was clear now. There could be no more doubt that there was nothing more to hope for. She did not remember how she found her way home, threw off her wet clothes, and changed; but instead of going to work she lay down on her trestle-bed, moaning quietly. There was no one in the shack. Her head was splitting and every bone in her body ached. She was burning with thirst and it took all her strength to crawl off the bed and fetch some water. She had a drink and wrapped a wet towel around her head. Then she lay down again and fell asleep.

IV

That evening Ivan dropped in to Kirnitsky's for a glass of beer. Ganka set his glass before him and walked off without saying a word. Ivan paid no attention to her either; he sipped his beer in silence, his mind now vacant, now rambling. Ganka passed him several times with sullen looks, and it was obvious that she wanted to say something biting, but each time she controlled herself. It was when Ivan had ordered his second beer and she was setting the glass on the table that she said maliciously and with seeming reluctance:

"Well, where's your girl?"

"Which girl?"

"Your fiancée."

"My fiancée? I don't have one."

"Liar! What's Fruzya then? She puts on such airs that you'd think she was your wife, let alone your fiancée. 'Don't you dare get my Ivan mixed up with you!' " she mimicked.

"Ha-ha!" Ivan laughed, but it was false laughter.

"Tell her not to bother me," Ganka said angrily. "I'm not her dish-washer and she has no right to boss me around! If she pesters me again I'll knock her teeth out and beat her up, despite her pious mug. I'll teach her a lesson! Understand?"

"Let me alone! You can tell her whatever you want to yourself. It's between the two of you, so just leave me out of it," Ivan said.

Ganka walked away. Ivan sat at the table, sipping his beer. Suddenly, a crowd of oil-workers burst into the tavern. When they spotted Ivan they began to tease him:

"Hey, Ivan! We heard you're leaving Borislav."

"Me? I didn't even dream of it."

"They say you're marrying Fruzya and going to live with her family."

"Are you crazy?"

"You're the one who's crazy if you're ready to chuck up your free life here and trade it for an ox's yoke."

"Boys!" Ivan shouted and banged his glass down on the table angrily. "Whoever says that is a son-of-a-bitch!"

"We didn't say it. The girls who live with Fruzya told us. She told them everything is settled between you two."

"She's mad. What's there to settle? She tried to talk me into leaving town several times, and just to get rid of her I said: 'All right, all right, let's wait another fortnight and see how things are then.' That's all there was to it."

“Ha-ha-ha!” the men laughed. “That was well said, ‘Let’s wait another two weeks and see how things are then!’ Smart fellow! In a fortnight’s time things will be exactly as they are today!”

“Of course. After all, the Lord won’t come down from the sky to perform a miracle for me or for her. You know I don’t have any property of my own. What I earn is all I have.”

“But you used to,” someone who knew him better than the rest hinted.

“Eh, that’s all gone and lost long ago!” Ivan shrugged his shoulders. “What’s it to me if my father was the richest man in the village? What did I get from it?”

“Just a sour taste in your mouth!” someone prompted.

“Right! And you’ll never fill your belly with a sour taste. Take Fruzya, now. What has she got? She says she left her father’s house because of me, but I know differently. She left because she had to, because there was no room for her at home, because her father has two more daughters and he has to marry them off without a dowry. All he owns are two strips of land and his hut. If a fellow has a bit of land himself he’ll take a girl with a strip of land—if she’s healthy and a hard worker. But if you have to divide it up into three plots no one will even bother to look. Besides, Fruzya’s no worker, believe me. If you’re well off and can dress her decently and take care of her as you would of a child, then perhaps she’d look human; but if you’re poor and you have to earn your keep, and you marry someone like her—why, you’d be better off tying a stone round your neck and jumping into the river.”

“That’s the truth,” the men agreed gravely.

Just then a pale and shrinking figure appeared from behind the large stove in the corner. It was Fruzya, who had slipped into the tavern by the back door, unnoticed by anyone amidst the noise and drunken carousing. She was racked by fever, her eyes were unnaturally bright,

and her lips were parched and almost white. She walked unsteadily towards the centre of the room, making her way through the crowd, and stopped in front of Ivan. Everyone fell silent and watched her bow low before him and touch the floor with her hand.

"Thank you, Ivan," she said. "Thank you for saying what you think, openly and honestly at least this once. Now I know what to do. Don't worry, I'll not get in your way again. I won't bother you, and I'll never reproach you for anything. Do what you like, and may God keep you."

She bowed low to him again. Ivan squirmed in his seat.

"Let God forget that you once promised to marry me, to buy back your land, and to be your own master! Now I know you were lying, but I believed you until now. You were wrong when you said my father drove me here to Borislav. That's a lie, my friend. Father didn't even know what happened to me. No one did. I alone knew, and so did the Lord, who probably put the idea into my head for my sins. But when I heard that you were sick here, that you were lying all alone in a cold, empty shack, that there wasn't a single soul to give you a drink of water all day long, something pierced my heart. 'After all,' I thought, 'we were lovers. You were my betrothed in the eyes of God, if not in the eyes of the world.' So I put my things together and set out for Borislav. The Lord must have needed my suffering if He sent me such a full measure. You've added to it now—up to the brim and over. Thank you once more. Good-bye!"

She bowed a third time and left.

The men were silent after this unexpected scene, but they soon found their tongues and there followed a cascade of rude, cynical remarks:

"How the wasp stings!"

"What a bitch!"

"Her kind won't help a man in his work, she'll eat his heart out with her talk and tears."

"Marry someone like that and you'll have your own hospital at home."

Ivan was the only one who sat silently with bowed head.

V

When Fruzya left Kirnitsky's inn she didn't stop, but wandered aimlessly down the street. It was cold and dark, and the drizzling rain lashed her face. The muddy street was more a wide ditch than a thoroughfare. Breathing hard, Fruzya plodded along, wearily dragging her feet out of the mire. Her chest felt on fire, but her eyes were dry, and her mind was empty of thoughts. Get away from here! Escape! Hide! Such was the blind urge that drove her on. Where could she hide? And from whom? She could not realize that she was running away from herself, from her own aching heart.

She had not gone far when Ganka suddenly appeared. Where had she come from? She had probably heard what Fruzya said, and when she saw her leave the tavern Ganka had dressed and ran after her, unnoticed by anyone. She materialized out of the darkness so suddenly that Fruzya gasped and crossed herself in fright. Ganka laughed softly.

"Did I scare you? Don't worry, it's me, Ganka."

"What do you want?" Fruzya whispered.

"Nothing. I'm just walking along the street. What's the matter; can't I walk next to you?"

"Why are you going this way?"

"Why are you? You live in the opposite direction."

"I don't care," Fruzya said.

"Well, I have to go this way," Ganka mumbled.

They walked on in silence for a few minutes. The street was deserted; they could hear the singing and shouting

of the men in the taverns and dark Dil Forest rustling and moaning in the autumn rain.

"Ha, your Ivan certainly put you in your place," Ganka said viciously.

"It makes you feel good, doesn't it?"

"Me? I couldn't care less. I knew it all along."

"What did you know?"

"What I heard just now. That Ivan doesn't love you. That he was lying to you and that he didn't intend to marry you."

"Did he tell you that?"

"Who else could have?"

"Then he loves you?"

"Me? How do I know? I don't care one way or another."

"Then why do you run after him and stick to him like a leech?"

"Ha-ha! You're talking nonsense. He's the one who's following me and who talks such sweet talk, but I understand what it's all about."

"You understand each other like a couple of horses," Fruzya said with contempt.

"And it's much better that way. I know that if he's running after me it's because he can get something out of it, and he knows that if I want him it's not because I love him, but because I expect to get something out of him."

"Ugh!" Fruzya spat indignantly.

"Spit if you want to, but it's much better that way. All your great love did for you was to make you run away as fast as you could, while I'm content, healthy, and well-fed. And he's not so badly off with me like that either."

"He?"

"Sure. Can't you see how merry he is when he's with me? He talks, jokes, and sings, but when he's with you he's cross and glum."

"You've put a spell on him. You gave him some kind of potion."

"No, dearie! I didn't put any spells on him; it's you who are a dummy! You've no brains in your head, that's the trouble! You don't know how to behave with the boys. You got stuck on one and think there's no light but what comes in through the window. Ha-ha-ha! If you only knew how other people live and what they do! He won't live to see the day that I pine away for him and cry my eyes out! He can pine away for me!"

"But what can I do if I'm made that way?"

"If you're like that, then blame yourself for everything, and don't say I put a spell on him. What do I need witchcraft for if he'll sleep with me tonight anyway?"

At these words Fruzya clutched her heart silently and swooned. She would have fallen if Ganka had not caught her in time.

"Fruzya! Fruzya! What's wrong with you?" she cried out.

But Fruzya did not answer. Her head hung over Ganka's arm and she seemed dead.

"That's a nice how-d'ye-do!" Ganka muttered as she held the unconscious girl in her arms like a bundle of hay. "Is she dead or has she just fainted?"

She bent her head and listened.

"The poor thing's stopped breathing! What shall I do with her? If I shout, maybe someone will come and help me bring her to?"

Ganka looked round. The night was as black as pitch. They had been walking down a side-street. There were neither houses, nor taverns, nor even sheds to be seen, nothing but great heaps of clay on both sides of the street. When she looked more closely, Ganka realized that they were near the disused wells. They had run dry and been abandoned; other wells had been sunk farther off, and there was nothing here now but the heaps of clay and the empty wells—some were boarded up, others were left open and were full of water.

"Who'll ever hear me shouting in such a wind?" Ganka muttered, still holding Fruzya in her arms. "What's the matter with me anyway? Am I crazy to try to revive her? I'll just dump her here and let her come to by herself! She has some nerve calling me a dish-washer! And then pulling my hair out! Why you scarecrow, I'll teach you a lesson yet!"

Ganka was seething. She looked round furtively once more and listened. Seeing nobody, she crawled up one of the mounds of clay like a thief, still carrying the unconscious Fruzya in her arms. Again she looked round, then cautiously climbed down the funnel-shaped hollow. In its centre was the mouth of a well. Feeling her way along, she came up to the framework. The well had been boarded over with a couple of planks, but one had been torn off. She laid Fruzya on the ground, found the opening and yanked at the other board. It was rotten and was nailed to the framework with two nails. She pulled it off, placed her feet wide apart for better balance, leaned over the edge of the framework, and let the limp form slip head first into the yawning mouth of the well. It was filled with water. The body sank to the bottom quietly, like a little lump of clay, without sound or splash.

VI

"Where've you been all this time, Ganka?" Mrs. Kirnitskaya cursed when the girl came into the kitchen half an hour later, all wet, spattered with mud, and as pale as a ghost.

"I've been out to fetch some water."

"You're lying; the pails were in the passage."

Ganka did not try to find any more excuses; she ran out of the kitchen, grabbed the pails, and dashed out to fetch the water. Her mistress grumbled a while longer, but soon

calmed down. It was no concern of hers where Ganka spent her time! She knew that no matter what happened, one could not forbid a Borislav servant-girl from hanging round the men.

It was well past midnight when the merry crowd of drunken workers piled out of Kirnitsky's tavern. They were walking down the middle of the road, laughing, talking loudly, and yelling songs. Ivan alone did not join in the merriment: he seemed a changed man that evening, hardly drinking anything and not talking to his friends, as if he were thinking about something. Actually, his mind was a blank. There was a feeling akin to remorse rising up in his heart at the thought of his wasted youth and the land he had squandered, once he had had a taste of the reckless life of Borislav. Fruzya's words troubled his heart with bitter reproach and drove away all desire to eat, drink, jest, and sing.

"Ivan's in a bad mood this evening," his friends laughed, and soon forgot his presence.

He had fallen behind the others when suddenly Ganka grabbed his arm. Ivan started: in the darkness he couldn't see who it was.

"Eh! Who are you?" he cried.

"It's me, Ivan," Ganka whispered.

"You? What do you want?"

"Are you angry at me?"

"Why should I be?"

"Honest to God, I'm not to blame for anything," Ganka whispered feverishly, still clutching his arms. "Why should I want to bother her? She was the one to start the argument, then she threw herself on me. Well, what else could I have done?"

"Did I blame you?" Ivan answered glumly.

"Ivanochko, you're so good! Then you're not angry?" Ganka said breathlessly. "But why are you so sad? You were so strange in the tavern tonight. Why?"

She was walking beside him, hanging on to his arm and pressing close to him, as if afraid of darkness and solitude.

"Ah, what's the use of talking!" Ivan said and tried to free his arm.

"No, no! Wait a minute! Where are you going?" Ganka cried.

"I'm going home to sleep."

"Let's go to my place. You'll be more comfortable there."

"I don't want to."

"Oh, come on! Don't worry, it's all right for you to stay there."

"I don't want to."

Ivan had spent a night at Ganka's once before. She had her own corner in Kirnitsky's storeroom. Her wide trestle-bed stood among the bales and sacks. Ganka owned two pillows and a warm blanket, and although the storeroom was not heated, still it was much warmer there than in the barracks where Ivan and the other oil-workers slept. But that evening he somehow did not feel like going to Ganka's place. He could not get Fruzya's thin, pale face out of his mind; her eyes seemed to be pleading with him, complaining of something.

Ganka would not let him go. She was holding on to his arm; she had put her other arm around his waist, dragging him, begging and pleading with him to come home with her.

"Ivanochko, darling! Won't you do me this little favour? I don't know what's come over me, but I'm afraid of being all by myself! I won't let you go, I won't stay by myself! Let's go!"

She trembled like a leaf at the thought that she might be left alone.

"Bah! What's the matter? Are you a baby? Are you afraid of sleeping by yourself? That's a fine thing!"

"Oh, I'm frightened, I'm so frightened! I won't stay

there by myself tonight for anything in the world. Beat me, kill me, but I still won't let you go. If you don't want to come to my place, I'll go with you to where you sleep."

"Are you mad? There are no girls there."

"I don't care! I'm not afraid of the fellows. I'm afraid to be by myself, I'm afraid of the dark . . . and of her."

"Of whom?"

"Her. . . . Your girl. How she bowed to the ground to you! Did you see her face as she left the tavern?"

Fruzya's name on Ganka's lips pierced Ivan to the heart, as if she had struck him in his sorest spot.

"Leave me alone! Don't remind me of her," he said. However he yielded to her pleading and the two of them headed for her place. Ganka was both leading and dragging him, never letting go of his arm for a second or ceasing her stream of talk.

"What's come over you, girl?" Ivan finally asked. "Have you got wet and caught cold? Have you got a fever, or really fallen sick? You're shivering all over, your hands are as cold as ice, your head is hot, and you're babbling away a mile a minute."

"It's nothing, Ivanochko. We'll go to bed and have a good night's sleep and it'll all pass."

However it did not all pass as quickly as Ganka would have liked it to. In vain did she press close to Ivan. The moment he dozed off, she would become terror-stricken and wake him up.

"Ivanochko, don't go to sleep! Talk to me!" she whispered, shutting her eyes tight so as not to see the terrible darkness.

"Are you crazy?" Ivan grumbled. "I'm tired and I want to sleep. What am I supposed to talk about?"

"Just anything at all, but please don't go to sleep! I'm so frightened."

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I’m scared. I can’t fall asleep.”

She began to cry. She wanted to tell Ivan everything, but something kept her from doing so. She clenched her teeth and bit her lips till they bled, and said nothing. She fell asleep towards morning, when it was getting light outside.

VII

Several days passed. Ivan went to work, drank and sang in the tavern, spent his nights at Ganka’s place and did not think of Fruzya at all. Ganka calmed down and no longer feared the dark, but she was still afraid to sleep alone, and so would make up to Ivan every evening in order to induce him to spend the night with her. There had been many times in the past when Ivan had asked Ganka to let him stay with her, but he now went there reluctantly, with a feeling of repulsion. It annoyed him to have her press close to him, he cursed her when she would tease him or caress him, and he would move away in disgust when she would fall asleep next to him. Ganka fell asleep quickly, but then she would begin to moan and sigh, or scream so terribly that Ivan would wake up with an uneasy feeling.

“What can she be dreaming about? Why is she moaning so?” he wondered as he listened to her laboured breathing after her screams. Then she would breathe more evenly, until, after tossing about for another half-hour, Ivan would finally doze off again, only to be awakened once more by a terrible scream.

“What devil is torturing you, to make you scream like that, Ganka?”

“Did I scream?” Ganka would say, shuddering and clenching her teeth. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Next time get a dog to sleep with you, for I shan’t,”

he muttered angrily. "You scream in such an unearthly way that you kill all my desire for sleep."

"Ha-ha-ha!" Ganka laughed. "In an unearthly way. You say such funny things. Tell me, Ivanochko, how do I scream?"

"As if they were killing you."

"And what do I say?"

"Do you think I can make it out? You bellow like a cow."

"I've always been that way."

"Don't lie. I never heard you scream like that before."

"It comes on in spells sometimes. Don't let it bother you, Ivanochko, it'll soon pass."

"I don't care if it does or not, but one thing's certain and that is you'll never drag me into your damn storeroom for the night again!"

"Now you're getting angry. Ah, Ivan!" Ganka would say, and that evening she would make up to him again, plead with him, and buy him beer and vodka until he would get drunk and agree to spend the night with her. He slept better when he was very drunk and did not hear her screams. Therefore, Ganka got him drunk every evening and would even take a bottle of vodka along to the storeroom to put under Ivan's pillow. If he would wake during the night, all he had to do was put his hand under his pillow, take a draught, and drop off to sleep again. True, he would wake up pale and sickly green, and with a splitting headache, but Ganka did not care—and neither did he, for he had no time to waste looking at himself in the mirror. Thus, with a heavy head he would set off for work. A marked change came over him: he became melancholy and no longer sang or jested.

"Oh, Ivan, something's wrong with you," his friends would say.

"Yes, I guess so," he'd agree sadly.

"Are you sick?"

"I don't think so. My head aches in the mornings, but that's probably from vodka."

"No, you're wrong. Vodka alone won't give you a headache. The trouble is, you mix it with beer, and that's what gives you your headaches."

"Maybe you're right. I won't mix my drinks any more."

VIII

At noon one day, when Ivan had been pulled out of the well and lay on a heap of clay in the shed, half-dead from the gas fumes, panting and taking sips of vodka to pep him up, old Granny Orina came in. She was the one who slept next to Fruzya, who seemed to be dozing all day long and came to life at night. She knew all about Fruzya and Ivan, and so, after greeting the workers, made straight for him.

"Listen, Ivan," she said, "do you know what's happened to your Fruzya?"

"My Fruzya?" Ivan grumbled. "She's not mine."

"Whatever she is, then, she's more yours than mine. I've come here to ask you where she is."

"Do you think I follow her around?"

"That's the kind of fellow you are! I'm asking you nicely. You should answer an old woman politely and offer her a sip of vodka. . . ."

Without a word Ivan poured out a glass and handed it to her. She gulped it down, puckered her loose lips, wiped her mouth with her dirty sleeve, and said quietly as she moved a little closer to him:

"Thank you so much! That went right to my heart. What was it I was going to tell you? Ah, yes, it was about Fruzya. You know, she hasn't been sleeping with us these past two weeks. I thought you might have found a place together, and I wanted to tell her to come for her things. She has a little trunk there with her stuff, but don't you

worry—it's locked and no one has touched anything in it, God forbid! Tell her to come and fetch it."

Ivan was stunned. Perhaps it was the gas fumes, or his morning headache, or the old woman's words, but be that as it may, he did not seem to understand a word of what she was saying, and listened to her chatter as if she were telling him a story.

"Yes, yes!" he agreed, nodding. "You're right. She should come for her things. But where can she be?"

"Don't you know?"

"I haven't seen her these past two weeks."

"And you don't know where she's gone?"

"Let me see! It was that evening . . . at Kirnitsky's. We had a little tiff. Then she left, and I haven't seen her since."

"When was that?"

Ivan could not remember what day it had been.

"Well, if you had an argument, maybe she found a job somewhere else to keep away from you. And she's staying somewhere else too, so you won't find out where she is. But you should try to find her, dearie, because the watchman who owns our lodging-house wants his rent. We won't pay for her, you know. And he might sell her rags for the money."

"All right, I'll try to find out and drop in later."

The old woman left, and for a long while afterwards Ivan sat there, lost in thought, or perhaps just staring vacantly into space. Then he had his lunch, for it would soon be time to go to work again.

That evening Ivan asked Ganka if she knew where Fruzya was. Ganka fixed her bulging eyes on him, went pale, and choked the words out:

"No, I don't."

Ivan did not question her further; he made inquiries among his friends, but they could not help him. No one had seen her since the day she had quarrelled with Ganka

in the street. This thought was very disturbing to Ivan. It had been the very day he and Fruzya had had their argument in the tavern.

He questioned Ganka again:

"Ganka, do you remember the day you and Fruzya had a fight in the street?"

"Sure, she was the first to start it."

"That evening she was at Kirnitsky's."

"I didn't see her there."

"You didn't? Don't lie!"

Ganka turned pale again, but soon pulled herself together.

"What do you want of me?"

"You see, the girl has vanished since that evening."

"Can't you live without her?"

"What do I care about her! But. . ."

"Has she disappeared? Fine! Thank God! Don't worry, the devil won't take her. She saw that it was no use hanging on your neck, so she went back home."

"But she's left all her things here."

"So what! How many things did she have? The whole lot isn't worth two shistkas!"

"Oh no! Her dresses are all there."

"Well, then she'll show up for them."

Ivan calmed down a bit. It was quite possible that Fruzya had been very upset that night and that after leaving Kirnitsky's she left Borislav and went back home. He made no further inquiries about her; the very next Sunday he went to where she lived, paid the watchman what she owed him, and took her things to his place. He decided to go to their village for Christmas and take her clothes back. Not that he missed her or that he had decided to marry her; no, it was just that he had begun to feel ill at ease and anxious these past few days, since he had been making inquiries about Fruzya, as though he was guilty of something. However, he was caught up in the current of

Borislav life and soon forgot this short-lived impulse. Neither Ganka nor anyone else ever mentioned Fruzya's name, and so he too ceased thinking of her. Yet something seemed to be bothering him. He walked about in a daze, gave up drinking, carousing, and singing, and began to save up money, something unheard of among the oil-workers. He spent only half his pay the first week, at the end of which he had five guildens left. The money began to worry him. He carried it around in his pocket, wrapped up in a bit of rag. Eventually a plan developed in his mind. True enough, he was leading a care-free life in Borislav, but was this really living? And what sort of freedom was it, when all he had to himself were his Sundays and holidays. He was worse off than a dog all the other days. In the full sense of the word, he was the slave of the mine-owner or his foreman. Underground he constantly risked his life, and on the surface there was nothing but curses, orders, and being pushed around. To that he could add the stench, filth, and a constant drunken stupor. Was that what awaited him the rest of his days too? He shuddered at the mere thought of it.

He recalled the green fields, the bright meadows, the grey oxen, the gleaming whitewashed huts, and the vast orchards of his native village; he heard the sheep bleating, the goslings hissing, and the creaking shadoof, and tears rose to his eyes at the memory. How could he have exchanged that paradise for this hell, with no qualms about it whatsoever? A long chain of scenes of his former life passed before his eyes: the ploughmen shouting, the creaking carts piled high with hay, the scythes flashing on the meadow, and the dewy grass falling in rows with a soft rustling sound; the families sitting down to supper on the fragrant hay on Easter Sunday; guns firing into the air, followed by excited voices proclaiming, "Christ is risen!" and the church choir singing, "Blessed Easter, the Lord's Easter!"—women carrying Easter cakes to church

to be blessed, children rolling Easter eggs, boys crowding round the dummy cannon.

These thoughts were always associated with Fruzya, for she too had made his life in the village happy and beautiful. If the memory of the creaking shadoof was so sweet, it was so because she had stood there with him in the evenings. In the beginning they had jested and flirted, and later they had spoken softly of their love. At mowing time, when she was bringing her father his lunch, how many times had she chosen the longest way round, just to pass the meadow where Ivan was mowing, just to say in her sweet voice, "God bless you," or offer him a drink of cold water from her grey earthenware jug! And then, at Christmas . . . and at Easter . . . and so many other occasions. . . . His restless mind recalled many a moment when Fruzya had been essential to his former happiness, and then his heart grew heavy, lonely, and sad. "Fruzya was right. I have to get out of Borislav as quickly as possible and go back home!" he thought. True, he had been blinded by his present way of life and had squandered his inheritance, gambled away his quiet paradise, and cast Fruzya from him. But he was still young, healthy, and strong; it could all be won back. He had already saved five guldens that week, and could have saved eight! That meant four hundred a year. He could buy five and a half acres of land with four hundred guldens! He then and there made up his mind to turn a new leaf, save his money, and not tell a soul about his plans. Time would take care of the rest.

IX

Ivan actually did set out for his village at Christmas-tide. He had fifty guldens wrapped up in a rag under his jacket and a wonderful plan in his head: he would buy back at least some of his land.

He went straight to the innkeeper who had bought his father's hut, garden, orchard, and four acres. This man had never intended to farm the land. He had decided to turn the hut into a tavern and engage in money-lending and other pursuits. Somehow, he had had no luck in his undertakings. There were already four taverns in the village and he could not get a licence to open a fifth. He was not much of a usurer, as there were several other leeches who "spoiled business." As if that were not enough, he had been robbed, so that instead of becoming wealthy, he had been the loser when he had bought Ivan's land and hut. "It's an unlucky spot," he said and was eager to sell it and move somewhere else. Needless to say, Ivan, with his plan of buying back his father's land, was a most welcome guest, the more so as he had not come empty-handed. They agreed that Ivan would pay the innkeeper four hundred guldens for the whole lot—which he had originally sold to the man for three hundred—and that during the year and a half that he was paying off the sum, the innkeeper would hold the deed to the land. The very next day they went into town and arranged the contract at the notary's. Ivan paid the innkeeper the first instalment of fifty guldens and breathed freely. He was now working towards a definite goal, his job seemed easier and his spirits rose.

He hardly thought of Fruzya any more. The innkeeper told him she had never returned to the village; he said that when her father had recently found out that she was not in Borislav, he had gone to the police, but had as yet heard nothing of her whereabouts. Ivan was troubled at the news. He did not want to meet the old man, so he decided to go straight back to Borislav without stopping at the village and had Fruzya's junk taken to her house.

X

The days passed and slipped into weeks. The gendarmes who questioned Ivan, Ganka, and the other workers about Fruzya found out everything that had happened till that fateful evening. There was no more progress and so everything soon quieted down again. Someone started the rumour that she had got a job, but no one knew exactly where. Some said it was in town, others that it was in the hill country, while yet others maintained that she was employed as a servant in Striy or Stanislav. That seemed to end the chapter.

Ivan had left Ganka just before Christmas. They did not actually quarrel, but he had become tired of her and could not bear her presence. At first she did not seem to care. What if Ivan no longer cared for her! It meant less bother for her. She had got along without him before and she would get along nicely without him now. However, in the following weeks she grew paler and thinner. Again beset by fears, she was afraid to sleep alone, and would scream in her sleep and then wake with a start. Finally she asked Granny Orina, the one who used to sleep next to Fruzya, to take the terrible spell of fear off her. The old woman, who was considered a sorceress and healer, said she would cure Ganka and began to question her cautiously to find out what had frightened her so and when it had happened. Ganka readily confessed that it had all begun after Intercession Day (that was when Fruzya had disappeared), but would say no more. The old woman whispered something over a basin of water, then she held it above Ganka's head and poured some molten tin into the water. When she looked into the basin she cried out:

"Oh, dearie! Oh, you poor orphan! Nothing can help you!"

Ganka was petrified.

“What’s the matter?”

“Look, dearie. The tin has scattered all over the basin in tiny drops.”

“Does that mean anything?”

“Ah, it’s better not to talk of it at all.”

Ganka questioned her no further, but the old woman stayed on and kept peering into the basin, shaking her head and moving her flabby lips as if she were carrying on a silent conversation. Ganka’s blood froze as she watched her; she thought that the old woman was calling on some ghost, that her half-blind eyes could see into her soul and now knew her terrible secret. She snatched the basin from the old woman’s hands and hurled it through the open window on to the garbage heap. The old woman watched her calmly and smiled wryly.

“Something’s wrong here, my girl,” she said. “It’s not fright at all.”

“What is it then?”

“Something’s weighing on your heart, dearie. I know, I can tell. And you won’t feel better till you tell me what it is.”

Ganka flushed.

“What are you talking about? What am I supposed to confess? Do you think I killed or robbed someone?”

“How should I know?” said the old woman, shrugging her shoulders. “It’s none of my business. Don’t think I’ve thought it all up. It’s what the holy water says. Do as you think best.”

She was getting ready to leave. Ganka now felt worse than she had before and knew that she would never again fall asleep if she remained alone. She decided to ask the old woman to come and live with her, for she now had her own cubby-hole with a stove and a trestle-bed. At first, the old crone would not even hear of it, but Ganka was so persistent that she finally agreed to move to Ganka’s place the very same day.

XI

There seemed to be no doubt about the fact that someone had cast a spell on Ivan. He was a changed man. He spoke to no one, lived in complete solitude, stayed away from the tavern, did not touch liquor, and always seemed to be absorbed in thought and whispering something; how miserly he had become! He skimped on everything, lived like a dog, without a single friend, and had retreated into his shell. There was a time when he had enjoyed a good drink and a song, and he had never been one to shy away from the girls, but all that had now changed. It was clear that he had been bewitched.

That was the unanimous opinion of the oil-workers. They had tried everything, they had scolded him and teased him to make him see the light, but all to no avail.

"Leave me alone! You don't understand anything. You go your way and I'll go mine." He would say no more.

They would shrug and walk off. Some said he had decided to marry, others that he had sold his soul to the devil and now repented of it, but Ivan paid no heed to them.

Finally, they found out that Ivan intended to buy back his father's land. He himself had never mentioned it to any of his friends, but someone from his village had brought the news to Borislav.

"Oho! So that's why he's saving all his money! We'll show him a thing or two yet. You'd think he really had a secret, the way he keeps away from us!"

A few days later they played a "joke" on him and stole his money during the night. There were only about eight gulden in all, but he felt the loss keenly and made a fuss about it. However, the money was gone.

"Ivan, I heard that you've been robbed," the foreman said.

"Yes," Ivan muttered.

"I heard you're putting your money aside to buy some land?" the foreman continued.

"Yes, I am."

"Excellent! Good luck to you. I can see right away that you're an honest man. Money is a very important matter. It's so hard to earn and so easy to squander. If you earn it just to let it slip through your fingers, you're working for nothing. It's the same as letting your life and your strength slip through your fingers. What for? When you're old and sick you'll really need money."

The foreman spoke very sensibly. He was a kind-hearted man, and finally Ivan told him of his ambition. The foreman praised him and said:

"I'll tell you something, Ivan. Why carry your money around on you and run the risk of it being stolen by drunks? Trust it to me. Get yourself a little notebook; every payday I'll give you as much as you need of your pay, and you can leave the rest in the safe. I'll write the amount down in my book and you'll write it down in yours so that there won't be any mistakes, and when the time comes for you to pay for your land, I'll give you the whole sum at once. Don't worry, no one will steal it here."

Ivan hesitated. True, the foreman was right, but he could not be trusted. On the other hand, there was no other solution. He had been robbed once, and could just as easily be robbed a second time. The best thing would be to do as the foreman suggested. Ivan agreed.

God forbid, he had no complaints. He soon had fifty guldens saved up, and he immediately withdrew them; the foreman even told him to send the money by postal money order to the notary who had witnessed the contract.

Ivan was pleased with the foreman and himself, and was practically certain that all would go well. Here it

was, the beginning of Lent, and he had already paid off a fourth of the money!

His thoughts were constantly returning to his native village. No matter what he was doing, turning the windlass, digging deep in the mine or in the dark gallery, his mind was far away: he was basking in the bright sunshine, ploughing, mowing, carting the hay, threshing, and feeling that he was his own master. He pictured his life in Borislav as living in a dark passage from which he would soon emerge on to a wide bright yard fragrant with green grass, full of apple-trees in blossom, hissing goslings, and bleating sheep.

XII

Fruzya's father came to Borislav the first week of Lent. He found out where Ivan worked, and went to see him.

"Where's my daughter, Ivan?" he asked. He had changed greatly since Ivan had last seen him, and was grey and hollow-cheeked. Ivan felt sorry for the old man.

"I don't know," he answered.

"You don't? Well, you should know. You were the one who talked her into leaving home and following you to Borislav, and you're the one who should know where she is."

"I knew her whereabouts when she was here, but now that she has left Borislav I don't."

"Where did she go?"

"I don't know. I thought she went back to you. Maybe she's found work somewhere else?"

"No, she hasn't. I've made inquiries already. The gendarmes searched for her and made inquiries in Striy and Stanislav. I sent a 'missing person' notice to Drogobich. She's not in any of those places. Now I've come to you. Give me back my girl."

"I haven't hidden her," Ivan answered calmly.

"You've hidden her away in her grave!" her father shouted threateningly. "You've murdered her. They say she was expecting a child—your child. And you wanted to get rid of her. You've murdered her!"

"As God's my witness, I haven't," Ivan said, turning as white as a sheet.

"You can call on a thousand devils to be your witnesses, and I still won't believe you."

"Do as you think right. Hang me, if you want to, but I'll still say: I don't know what's happened to her."

The old man gradually relented, and finally broke down altogether. The workers and foremen gathered round him and tried to console him.

They told him of the evening at Kirnitsky's when they had last seen Fruzya; of the way she and Ivan had parted; they said she had walked out of the tavern and disappeared, but that Ivan had stayed on till midnight. The foreman spoke of Ivan as a hard worker, who neither drank nor threw his money around, and in the end the old man no longer knew what to think. He had come from Drogobich, where he had demanded that the gendarmes arrest Ivan, but he was not too sure of himself now. It would be easy enough to have the boy arrested, but would it be just? What if Fruzya had got angry and had found work somewhere in the mountains and was now too ashamed to let him know of her whereabouts? Anything was possible. Had not the gendarmes themselves told him not to lose hope? It was no laughing matter to accuse someone of murder. It would have been quite another thing if even the slightest clue that she had been done away with had come to light. As yet, however, no such clue had been found.

Thus, Fruzya's father left for his village, placing all his hope in the Lord.

XIII

Easter had passed. The days were becoming warmer. Fragrant, blooming Spring had come into her own in the valleys, although Dil Forest was still shrouded in mist. Borislav now seemed a bottomless pit full of soggy clay and churned-up mud mixed with oil; it seemed a stinking lake of sewage in the midst of the green Podgorye region.

It was Saturday and the sun was looking down from a serene, cloudless sky. Two foremen in their good coats and marten hats were walking along a path through the arid, deserted fields between Borislav and the Kotovskaya Banya.

"Ah, Mendel, I've got such trouble on my mind that my brain is drying up in my head," one foreman was saying to the other.

"Is it because of the man who fell down the shaft?"

"Partly. Why on earth did he have to go into the shed when he was drunk, and sit at the pit-mouth? It was the devil that pushed him in!"

"Was there an investigation?"

"Yes."

"Well, what happened?"

"They fined we twenty guldens."

"Why, Khaim, why?"

"For negligence. You see, I'm negligent. I wasn't careful enough! Did you ever hear of anything like that? I was supposed to look after him as if he were a wee baby. Thank God, it all blew over, because the others all said that he had climbed on to the edge himself and fallen in by himself too. If not for the witnesses, the assessor would have said that he'd been pushed down the shaft."

"Is the assessor a severe man?"

"Oh, he's such a grand gentleman and so severe—he was quite ready to arrest someone and close down the well."

"Is that the new assessor?"

"Yes. Oh, Mendel, how scared I was! I kept praying that the Lord would save me from his wrath!"

"Ah, the Lord is merciful, Khaim. Why should He send such misfortune to an innocent man?"

"Don't say that, Mendel! You can't tell what the Lord expects of us. Why did He cause me to bear such great losses? Have you heard? The least I've lost on the storehouse is fifty guildens. Who's to blame? No one knows. And who has to pay the damages? Khaim!"

"No, I haven't heard a thing. What happened?"

"I hope the boss's guts burst! He bought two new wind-ropes and sent them to the storehouse together with the other things. Well, I put them all away. How was I supposed to know that there was a bottle of sulphuric acid on the same shelf? You know, they use it for purifying the wax. I had distributed most of it and stored the remainder away. There wasn't much of it, no more than two measures, and probably even less. Who the hell needed the bottle? So there it stood on the shelf, corked with a glass stopper. Once, they needed a winding-rope for the mine. I went to the storehouse, took the rope down from the shelf, and knocked the bottle over accidentally. Did I get scared! I grabbed it with my naked hand and burned two fingers. Well, while I was putting the bottle back, the stopper fell out and a tiny bit of that damn acid—not more than two or three drops of it—splashed on the rope. I picked up the stopper, corked the bottle, and put it back in a corner of the shelf. My fingers felt as if they were on fire. I packed wet clay around them and tied them with a handkerchief. Then I carried the rope out into the yard, but when I looked at the place where the acid had fallen on it, it seemed as if it had been sliced through with a knife! A whole coil just fell in two in my hands."

"Ai-ai!" Mendel cried.

“My word of honour! I haven’t told a soul. I’ll have to pay for the rope, there’s no other way out.”

Mendel sighed and clucked in sympathy. When they reached Borislav he accompanied Khaim to the storehouse to see the acid-eaten rope. He stood looking at it for quite a while, shaking his head and clucking, but when Khaim turned his back he quickly poured a few drops of acid into a little bottle, not more than a thimbleful. Nothing was noticed by Khaim and when they left the storehouse, he locked the door and the two friends parted, wishing each other a pleasant Sabbath.

XIV

Several months passed, and harvesting had begun all around Borislav. The days were long and sultry. Ivan lived as if in a feverish dream. With each passing day his life in Borislav became more and more unbearable. The soil he trod burned his feet, something was choking him, pushing him, chasing him from Borislav. His sole thought was to escape from there. He would become frantic at the mere thought that he would have to continue working underground until autumn or winter in order to pay the innkeeper the full sum. “I can’t bear it any longer!” he would say to himself and count the remaining hours and days. He had laid aside another two hundred guildens; the foreman had them in the safe, and Ivan was planning to take them home on St. Elijah’s Day to give to the innkeeper. However, as the day approached, he was in the grip of a new thought: “I’ve paid him a hundred guildens already. I’ll give him another two hundred and leave Borislav for good. I’ll earn or borrow the fourth hundred, but I’ll never come back here!” At first this thought was only a cherished dream, but it soon acquired a more definite shape. He planned further: “I’ll

marry. Even the poorest girl has a hundred guildens in her dowry. Perhaps there'll even be a strip of land to the bargain." Then again, he would decide to buy a pair of horses and become a carrier; or hire out as a field hand; or get work as a lumberjack. He would go anywhere and work at anything in order to earn the last hundred and pay off the innkeeper. Then he would be his own master, and it mattered not whether he would be the poorest man in the village, for he would still be his own master on his own strip of land. Ivan shared his plans with no one. A week before St. Elijah's Day he said to the foreman:

"Listen, Mendel, can you give me all my money next week?"

"Why not?" Mendel answered. "Are you going to send it by post?"

"No, I want to go there myself on St. Elijah's Day."

"Why bother going there when you can send it?"

"I'm homesick for the old place. Perhaps I'll remain there for good."

"Do you mean you won't come back here?"

"Yes, I do, if only I'll be able to find some work there and pay off the innkeeper."

"Well, that's your business," Mendel said, ending the conversation. "I'll give you the money on Friday. When is your holiday?"

"On Sunday."

"Fine. Then you can start out on Saturday after work."

It was agreed, and they spoke of it no more.

XV

Ivan was on the night shift on Friday. It was to be his last visit to the underground world, to the kingdom of darkness. He was in excellent spirits, but something happened to spoil his good mood.

He was on his way to work after swallowing a glass of vodka and a roll, when Granny Orina came up to him. It was she who had been the first to tell him of Fruzya's disappearance so long ago. He did not notice her as she crept up to him, but she stretched out her dark, bony hand and grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Hey!" Ivan jumped. He had been walking along, lost in thought, and he now felt as if he had been jolted out of his sleep. He turned to find himself staring straight into the old woman's horrible, yellow, wrinkled face which seemed to be smiling icily at him, its blue lips pulled apart to reveal the protruding naked gums. Ivan crossed himself. His first thought was: "This is Death looking into my eyes." A clammy, superstitious fear came over him.

"So, you're crossing yourself, are you?" the old woman shouted. The grin disappeared from her lips and was replaced by a glum look. "What do you think I am—an evil spirit? Or an unbaptized soul? Just look at him, crossing himself as if I were the devil himself! As if he never saw me before!"

Ivan recognized the old woman and tried to find some excuse.

"Forgive me, Granny. I didn't recognize you at first. I was thinking of something else and walking along when you suddenly popped up. You should have called me. . . ."

"Aha! Some nerve! You'd never think of greeting an old woman first, of looking her way and nodding, and offering her a drink! Let the old hag drop dead if she can't buy herself a drink."

"Come, come, you're not dying yet." Ivan smiled. "Did you want to talk to me about something?"

"Yes, dearie, I did. You see, it's like this. . . . I don't even know where to begin. I thought that since you're both from the same village you should know best."

“Whom are you talking about?”

“Ganka. You know, I used to sleep at her place, but she’s been so sick lately that I spend my days and nights there now.”

“Is she sick? What’s the matter with her?”

“How should I know, son? At first I thought she might have some kind of woman’s ailment, but it’s not that. It’s something else. I don’t know what it could be. Perhaps her conscience is bothering her?”

“Her conscience? Why, does she scream at night?”

“Oh, she screams day and night now. The minute she dozes off she has nightmares and begins to shriek so loudly it’s enough to make you deaf. She jumps up and tries to run away, to escape. I thought the devil had got the poor girl’s soul.”

“Didn’t you try to cure her?”

“I certainly did! I tried every cure I know, but nothing helped. And how could it, when it’s something else entirely that’s bothering her? I almost guessed what it was, although I wasn’t exactly on the right track. ‘The girl’s here alone in Borislav,’ I thought, ‘it’s certain she’s got rid of her unborn baby and now its soul comes back to haunt her at night.’ Ganka swore by everything that’s holy that it wasn’t so. Then I really didn’t know what to think. I sat up many times at night, trying to make out what she was screaming about, but it was no use. All I made out was: ‘Over there, in the well!’ . . . ‘In the water!’ . . . ‘In the mud!’ . . . ‘It’s moving!’—but I don’t know who, what, or where. Oh, I tried to get it out of her, but she’s a stubborn one, and won’t say a word. She’s as thin as a toothpick, she’s lost all her colour, and she’s got one foot in the grave already. Ah, what a girl she was till last spring—built like an ox! She knows she won’t last much longer and that there’s no hope for her, but she still won’t say anything.”

“Do you really think she has something on her conscience she’s keeping a secret?”

“What do you mean—do I think? There’s no need to think now, I know for sure.”

“What do you know?”

“I know now that she murdered your Fruzya, dearie.”

“Killed Fruzya? *She* did? God! When? How? Why?”

“Ask her why. It’s the devil’s handiwork. He must have had his eye on her all along. Let me tell you how it came about.”

The old woman walked down the street with Ivan, but she could not keep up with his pace, so she grabbed him by the coat and stopped him.

“Wait a minute! Can’t you see I’m all out of breath? Don’t rush off to work; it’s not so important. Stay here and listen to me.”

“I’ll be late! Can’t you hear them ringing for the night shift?”

“To hell with the night shift! Don’t go to work this evening, better come along with me to Ganka’s place. It’s more important.”

Ivan hesitated for a second.

“No, Granny, it’s too late now. Why should I go to Ganka’s place? I’ll be there right after work tomorrow and we’ll think of something then. But first, tell me how you found out what you’ve told me.”

“Well, she didn’t sleep a wink last night. God alone knows how she suffered. This morning she looked as if she’d been nailed to a cross, nothing but her eyes had any life in them.”

“‘Ganka,’ I said, ‘do you want me to call a priest?’ When I said that she jumped as if she’d been bitten.

“‘A priest? What for?’

“‘Why, dearie, you know yourself you don’t have much time left on this earth. He should come to administer the last rites.’

“‘No, I don’t want to,’ she answered. ‘This will pass and I’ll get better.’

“Don’t fool around with the Lord, my girl. Don’t say such things and deceive yourself. You’ve not much time left, and I’ll go fetch His Reverence.”

“No,” she answered, “I’ll tell you myself when the time comes. Don’t go away, I’ll doze off for a while.”

“The moment she shut her eyes she began to shriek again:

“She’s creeping out! She’s creeping out! Ai, she wants to touch me! Ai, she grabbed me, she won’t let me go! Ai-ai-ai! Help! Granny, help me!”

“She jumped off the bed and grabbed hold of me; she was shaking like an aspen leaf, looking round, and screeching and howling like a frightened baby.”

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts,” I said as I crossed her. “Who’s creeping? Who’s holding you?”

“She is. Can’t you see her? Look, her arm has rotted away and the flesh has fallen off it—there’s just the bone left, but it’s stronger than a vice!”

“God forbid! What’s the matter with you, Ganka? Who is it you see?”

“Her, Fruzya!”

“Which Fruzya?”

“But she wouldn’t say any more. She was shaking and pressing close to me, but she had shut up like a clam. It took me a long time to quiet her and get her back into bed. I kept soothing her, talking to her, and all the while the tangled ball of yarn in my head kept unravelling more and more, making things much clearer. I really had to talk about all sorts of things; then I cooked her a bit of meat and she ate it. She wouldn’t let me move an inch away from the bed.

“Stay here! Don’t leave me! Talk to me to keep me awake. I’m frightened, for the minute I fall asleep she’ll be there waiting for me.”

“Why are you so afraid of her? What can she do to you?” I asked.

“Oh, Granny, dear! If you only knew how horrible she is! It freezes my blood just to look at her, but I can't tear my eyes away. They seem to be glued to her face.”

“Is she the one who's been haunting you, Ganka?”

“She was silent.

“Confess, my child!” I said sternly. “You thought you could keep it all a secret. What good is it to you to have kept it from everyone if the Lord knows everything? See, He has merely touched you with His finger, and look what has happened to you today? If they had hanged you, you never would have known half the suffering you've endured already!”

“She listened to every word I said, and then burst into tears. She sobbed like a baby.

“Oh, dear Granny, you're right! I'm a miserable wretch! I murdered her! She was so weak she fell right into my arms, and I threw her down the shaft while she was unconscious. I thought no one would ever find out, and then Ivan would marry me. Oh, Granny, tell me what to do!”

Ivan shuddered as he listened to the old woman's words. He was mortified. His memory re-created the events of that evening: Fruzya's departure, the night he spent with Ganka at the storeroom, and her anxiety. He even recalled Ganka's words: “I'm afraid of her”—and their meaning was clear to him now. He was crushed by the news and kept sighing and whispering, “My God, my God!”

The old woman rattled on. She said that Ganka had told her which shaft she had thrown Fruzya down, that something had forced her to return to the scene to destroy all traces of her crime, that while she was there a worker had all but noticed her, that she had begun to see Fruzya in her dreams, and that she had grown to hate and despise Ivan.

“And what is she doing now?” Ivan interrupted the old woman.

"She had her cry and fell asleep. She didn't jump up in bed after that, she's sleeping quietly now. I sat with her for a while and then decided that I should tell you about it. Tell me what to do, son."

Outwardly, Ivan seemed to have turned into stone, but within him his soul was raging and howling as if in anguish, from reproach or from the qualms of his own guilty conscience.

"How do I know?" he said tonelessly. "You should tell the police. But it's a terrible thing!"

"Maybe I'd better go to the elder first?"

"Yes, that's what you should do!" Ivan cried, jumping at the idea.

"Will you come with me? I don't want to go there alone."

"Why should I go? They might suspect me if I did. You go alone. I'll come to see you tomorrow, right after work. Go on, go!"

The old woman said no more. She crossed herself and walked off.

XVI

As Ivan approached the shed he worked in he caught sight of Mendel the foreman, who was walking along, talking to a man from another field.

"Good evening, Ivan!" Mendel said. "Going to work?"

"Yes," Ivan answered. He was in a daze and had no idea whom he was speaking to or what he was saying.

"Are you leaving tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's your business. The money's yours."

Ivan did not answer. He headed for the shed. Mendel went on talking to the man who was to take Ivan's place the next day.

"You'll like it here," Mendel was saying. "I'm not one to make life hard for a man. Ask Ivan. Many's the time he left his pay in the safe, waiting till he had fifty or a hundred guldens saved up, and then I'd give it to him in a lump sum. He's leaving for his own farm tomorrow."

"His own farm?" said the man incredulously. "Where'd he get a farm? He squandered it long ago!"

"Right, but he's bought it back. He drew his money yesterday—that's the last instalment on the farm—and he's going back to the village. Do you know whose idea it was? Ask him! It was Mendel's, that's whose it was!"

At that moment they heard a shout from the shed, followed by the sound of running feet. The man who had been turning the windlass was running down the street, shouting:

"Foreman! Foreman!"

"What is it?" Mendel shouted back.

"Hurry, come to the shed! Hurry!"

"Tell me what's happened!" Mendel demanded, but did not wait for an answer. He ran off towards the shed with the newly-hired workman close on his heels.

"What is it?" Mendel asked in a croaking voice when he caught up with the worker.

"There's been an accident!"

"What kind of accident?"

"I don't know! Come on, you'll see for yourself! Oh, Lord, I nearly died! I never saw or heard of anything like it!"

The three of them raced towards the shed. It was dark inside the dimly-lit structure. The man at the pump was standing beside the well, holding a loosely dangling piece of winding-rope, one end of which was wound around the drum.

"Now, what's wrong?" Mendel said, looking round as if he were trying to establish what had frightened the workers.

"The rope snapped."

"What! How could that have happened?"

"How do I know? Take a look!"

The worker standing at the pit-mouth pulled at the rope again; as he shook it the rope slapped against the shaft walls like a whip.

"So. And what about Ivan? Where's Ivan?"

"Down there."

"What do you mean? Has he reached the bottom?"

"He probably has, but not alive. See, only about ten yards of rope have been paid out."

"How did it happen? Tell me how it happened!" Mendel could not seem to grasp what had happened.

"O Lord! How do I know? Ivan came along, tied himself to the tub, and I began to lower him. I kept turning and turning and then, suddenly, when I'd fed out several yards, I felt something yank at my arm, and then I didn't feel a weight on the windlass any more. Then I heard something go *boom-boom-boom* in the well! There was a terrible shriek, and then everything was quiet. That's all. The rope snapped and Ivan clattered three hundred feet down to the bottom."

Mendel said nothing. He began to pull his hair and rush to and fro like a madman.

"Oi-oi! Oi, what a calamity! Such a misfortune! Wait! Maybe he's still alive. Listen, Dmitrunya," he said to the man he had just hired, "do you think he might still be alive?"

"Perhaps. Is the bottom rocky?"

"No, it's clay."

"Well then, if he didn't fall on his pickaxe or crack his skull on the way down, he might still be alive."

"He'd be screaming or moaning if he were," the man at the windlass objected.

"He could have been knocked out or stunned," Dmitro insisted.

“Go down, Dmitrunya! God bless you! Go down, maybe he can still be saved!”

“I’d gladly go down,” Dmitro said, “but what sort of a cable is it that snapped under his weight?”

He walked over to the pit-mouth, pulled up the two or three yards of cable hanging down the shaft, and examined the end under the light. He was an old-timer, but even he was at a loss now. He had never seen anything like it before. He stood examining the loose end for quite a while, touching the wires, holding it up to the light and shaking his head, as if he was puzzled by something. Mendel watched his every movement with anxious eyes and bated breath.

“I just can’t understand it! What actually did happen to the cable? How could it have snapped?”

“Maybe it rusted through?” Mendel suggested timidly.

“It looks like it; if someone had cut it on purpose it would have been a clean cut. It must have rusted through.”

“Ah, it’s an old winding-rope! I should have changed it!” Mendel chimed in hurriedly. “O God! This morning I had a premonition that something would happen. Something seemed to say: ‘Mendel, change the winding-rope!’ But I thought: ‘I won’t change it on a Friday. We’ll wait till Sunday and do it then.’ And just look what happened! Who could have known that it would snap?”

Dmitro kept looking at the cable and shaking his head.

“Listen here, Mendel! It couldn’t have rusted through! This isn’t the way cables rust. It would take more than rust to snap a rope like this! Back in the village I’ve a shed hanging on a cable like this these past five years. The rain pours down on it, and the snow too, but it isn’t rusting like this one and it’s still as strong as ever. But that’s holding up a shed, not a man.”

“No, Dmitrunya. You see, there it hangs and no one bothers it, but this cable keeps winding and unwinding day and night, and that makes the wires snap sooner.”

“You’re right,” Dmitro said after a moment. “But then

the wires would have snapped gradually, first one strand, then another, then a third. This cable snapped all at once. And they didn't snap at the same place—I'd say it looks as though a mouse had been gnawing at them. No! I've never seen anything like it in all my days."

Meanwhile, Mendel brought a new winding-rope from the storehouse; the men wound it around the drum, Dmitro got ready to go down, and climbed over the edge of the pit-mouth. Half an hour later they pulled up both men—Dmitro and Ivan. Both of Ivan's legs were broken and his skull had been crushed in against the shaft wall. He had probably never reached the bottom alive.

XVII

Next day before dawn the Borislav elder—in those days the elders were peasants—accompanied by two gendarmes and a witness, came to Ganka's cubby-hole. She was still deep in slumber. For the first time after so many sleepless days and nights she was sound asleep. The old woman opened the door and they entered, but when they looked at Ganka's drawn, deathly face, wracked by the agony of mental suffering, they had not the heart to wake her.

"Ah, let her sleep," the elder said softly. "We'll wait outside."

"There's not much the world can take from her," one of the gendarmes added.

"The Lord has not waited for the world to judge her. He has judged her Himself and punished her already," the other said.

No sooner had they left the room than Ganka woke up.

"Are you here, Granny?" she asked.

"Yes, dearie, I'm here."

"Was I dreaming or was someone here?"

"Who could be here?"

"I thought some people came in . . . and gendarmes."

"Yes, my dear, they did."

"Did they come for me?" Ganka uttered, rising.

"Yes."

"Do they know?"

"Yes, they do."

Ganka gazed at the old woman and then extended her thin hand.

"Thank you, Granny," she said. "I made up my mind to go to them and confess at least a hundred times, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. That's all over now. I'm not worried any longer."

She raised herself with difficulty from the bed. The old woman helped her to dress.

"You can call them in now."

The elder and witness entered, followed by the two gendarmes.

"What's the matter, girl, are you ill?" the elder asked.

"Yes."

"Have you got anything to tell us?"

"Yes."

She went on to tell them quite calmly of all that had taken place that evening. One of the gendarmes wrote down her testimony. She was then taken to the scene of the crime. With long hooks the men pulled out bits and pieces of poor Fruzya's rotted corpse and took them to the dead-house. Ganka got on a cart and was taken to the jail in Drogobich to await the inquest, but she died before it was ever begun.

The gendarmes were immediately put on another case, a death that had taken place in one of the near-by oil fields: a winding-rope had snapped, and a man had plunged to his death down a pit-mouth. They were to examine the scene of the disaster and the corpse, and question the witnesses.

"Something's wrong here," the younger gendarme said to his senior.

"It's the owner's fault. The cable rusted through."

"It might be worse than that. What did Dmitro say about some money?"

"Do you think it's murder? Perhaps someone cut the rope on purpose?"

"That's quite possible. Money might be the motive. The foreman said he paid off Ivan, but there's no money on the corpse."

"We'll search his lodgings."

However, when they came to his lodgings—that is, to the tavern where Ivan and several other men usually slept—no one could tell them anything about any money. All the gendarmes found out was that since the time Ivan had been robbed he had always carried his money around on his person, and when he hid it he made sure no one would ever find it. On the other hand, the Drogobich notary confirmed by mail Mendel's statement that Ivan always sent him the money for the innkeeper. Dmitro confirmed his statement that Ivan had withdrawn the rest of his money on the eve of his death, for he had heard Mendel say, "The money's yours," and had seen Ivan nod. Therefore, it followed that Ivan had received the money and had hidden it until his departure. If that were the case, there could have been no motive for murder.

The case was closed. Mendel was fined twenty guildens for negligence and using a rusty winding-rope.

Ivan was laid to rest in the same grave with the remains of his Fruzya.



THE CONVERTED SINNER

I

There was a time when Vasil Pivtorak was one of the wealthiest men in Borislav. He had enough land, cattle, corn, and other things, including money. He was a hard worker, thrifty and orderly, and so he prospered.

Vasil had three sons—strong, healthy, comely lads who

had all inherited their father's character and outlook on life. They were devoted to their parents, respected their elders, and never shirked a job, no matter how unpleasant. If a person's life were not dependent on chance, if the world never changed, Vasil Pivtorak would still be living happily and peacefully now, bouncing his grandsons on his knee.

However, that is not the way of things. There was a time when the tenor of life went on unchanged for a hundred years, but now it changes in ten. It is not the same now as it used to be in the old days. Everything changes quickly, life itself scuds on and on. One must watch the current warily and follow it. If not, if you remain at a standstill, then beware, for the very first onrushing wave will engulf you, the very first change will trap you, confuse you, knock you off your feet—and it will be the end of you. It is difficult to live nowadays. Life is a constant, eternal battle. Behind every bush lurks an enemy who will discover your weak spot, catch you unawares, and finish you off.

That was what happened to Vasil Pivtorak.

It all happened in the days when oil was first struck in Borislav. Men greedy for gain flocked to Borislav like flies to honey. Swarms of them hustled about the village, darting in and out of the cottages and scampering over the fields. They annoyed the farmers to death with their entreaties, "Sell me your land, man! I'll give you a good price for it . . . and I'll give you still more . . . and I'll pay more than the other two! . . . We don't need all of your land—even part will do!" They would pull banknotes out of their wallets, press them into the farmers' hands, stand them to drinks, and never bicker over the price. Many fell for their line of talk, many an unfortunate man was tricked into selling. But Vasil Pivtorak would have none of it. He loved this land of his which his forefathers had watered with their sweat. Besides, he thought: "What will come of it?"

I'll take their money and it will slip through my fingers. I'll buy one thing and another, and before you know it, I'll have nothing left. But the blessed earth will be here for ever!"

Tell me, now, did Vasil do the right thing? Were his arguments justified?

He was right, but not completely. They were justified, but not entirely.

Strangers came and hired workers to dig their wells. They struck oil and money flowed into the newcomers' pockets. More and more of them flocked to Borislav, the town was becoming overcrowded. The farmers sold out one after the other, and each new day brought them closer to poverty. One Sunday the villagers gathered to discuss what was to be done and find a way out. Vasil Pivtorak said:

"Friends! Strangers are digging here—why can't we do the same? They make money on the oil, and so shall we!"

Tell me, now, was that not a wise suggestion? It was wise, but none too wise.

The men of Borislav began to dig up the land of their forefathers. But they had no money to hire workers and had to do the digging themselves. The work proceeded slowly, and the profits trickled in just as slowly. Meanwhile, their farms were falling into neglect, for a dug-up field yields nothing. There came a shortage of corn, but no oil appeared. What were they to do? There was a way out: to go on selling the land so as not to die of starvation!

Of the hundred who had decided to dig up their fields only six or seven struck oil. And the rest? Why, the others went on digging wells on their land, getting oil and paraffin wax—but they were now hired workers.

How could such a thing have come about? Why were the strangers lucky and the farmers so unlucky? Puzzle it out for yourself, if you can.

After giving his fellow-villagers such good advice, Vasil Pivtorak decided to use some of it himself. "I have three sons," he thought, "and that makes four of us. There's no urgent field work to be done now, so we might as well try our luck. We'll need two men to a well, one to dig and one to turn the windlass. I've a plot mown behind the barn and we can sink two wells at once there. If we don't strike oil in one, we shall in the other!"

No sooner said than done. His wife stayed behind to look after the farm while he and his sons set out towards the site he had selected. They took along their spades, and tubs, and ropes, set up two windlasses and began to dig. At first, things went well. A day passed, then another. The piles of clay beside the wells kept growing higher and higher. Mikhailo, the youngest son, was in the first well, and his father was at the windlass; Sen, the eldest son, was in the second well, and Ivan, the middle son, was at the windlass. They dug down seven feet, and another seven, and another, and another. Sen reached a layer of sand and it was not long before water began to seep through it. He now had to bail it out with a bucket, but the amount of water kept increasing all the while.

"I'll dig somewhere else, Dad, there's too much water in this well," Sen said.

"What?" Vasil cried. "Bail the water out and keep on digging!"

Sen kept at it a week and then another. He did nothing but bail water, plug the holes in the sides, and dig deeper. The sand presented no great difficulty.

Then one day Ivan, who was working at the pit-mouth, let up a terrible cry. Vasil and some people standing near by rushed to the well, shouting, "What's the matter? What's happened?"

"The sand's caved in and buried Sen!"

Vasil Pivtorak stood aghast at the terrible words.

"Hurry, boys, into the well and get him out!" he shouted hoarsely.

They worked feverishly, but still not fast enough. When they pulled Sen up, he was dead.

Lord, how his poor mother wept and lamented! Through her tears she cursed Vasil for having killed her boy. As pale as a sheet, the wretched man was like one sentenced to death; he could neither shed a tear nor utter a single word.

The day of the funeral arrived. It was to be arranged in a style that "would please God."

"Vasil, thank God, you still have your land and two hard-working lads, and all sorts of farm equipment," the priest had said. "The funeral will therefore cost you twenty pieces of gold. It's God's will, and you should not begrudge the departed this last honour for the repose of his soul!"

What could he say? He could not refuse. And there was nothing worse than haggling over the price—as if the matter concerned a horse or a cow—at a time when his heart was so heavy. But he had no ready cash. There was nothing to do but to sell his land, or at least half of it, the very half on which the cursed well was. He found a buyer right away who paid him in full. The neighbours, good Christians, sighed and grieved, and ate heartily after the funeral, and the priest and sexton both sounded sad and mournful as they sang "Lord have mercy on us!" and "Praised be the Lord."

The good people left, and the money ran out. Vasil had lost his right arm when he had lost Sen. The old wife would give him no peace and kept weeping, the boys were completely crestfallen. But a poor tiller has no time to grieve. There is plenty of work to be done, and a dozen odd jobs to attend to. His grief is alleviated and his heart is less heavy when he works.

Harvest time was not joyful that year. The summer ended, and the autumn brought a poor crop. However bad it was, it still had to be gathered. Vasil and his sons took the grain to be threshed.

Now they could take things easier. However, the old grief returned as the hours of idleness slipped by. Again it was joyless in Vasil's house. The old mother still had many tears to shed for her favourite boy.

III

Misfortune is always round the corner. Was there any reason for Vasil to pass by the little meadow he had sold to the oil-pro prospector? No, there was not. But he did—either from lack of anything else to do or for curiosity's sake, to see what the man was doing there. In a word, he went there.

The prospector was wasting no time. He had hired two workers that summer, two poor Borislav lads who had been forced to leave their farms and earn their living. And what a shrewd thing that dog had thought of! He had said, "Oho, there's a layer of sand here; that lad got buried under it. Here's what I'll do: I'll drive long poles down the well walls and hold the walls with wattle-work; that'll make things safe."

"What do you think? Wasn't that a clever idea? I'm smarter than he is, if only I had had a bit of money (for I didn't even have enough to buy poles and twigs!) I would have done the same thing. Look how safe it is—you don't need anything else, it'll never cave in! Now the thief has dug through the sand, reached the clay—and struck oil!"

Such were Vasil's thoughts as he stood looking into the well. The unfortunate man watched the other man's workings with an envious eye.

“Merciful God! It’s my own land and a heathen’s making thousands on it! Look at the rat hopping around, rubbing his hands together with glee. And why not—such wealth! They’re pulling up tub after tubful of oil, working themselves to death, and all for him! If fate had not sent me such misfortune, who knows but that I too would now be making money hand over fist and hopping about gleefully too!”

Vasil stood beside the well for a long time, watching the men work, as envious as could be. Then he went to have a look at his own well. It had been standing untouched since the spring. The windlass posts still stood, but the windlass had been removed. Vasil had had the well boarded over during the summer to prevent anyone from falling down it in the dark. His heart began to beat strangely when he approached the little hill of clay beside the well and tapped the boards covering the opening.

“Who knows,” he thought, “perhaps there are riches there awaiting me! Perhaps, if we dig down another ten or fifteen feet, we’ll strike oil! Who knows? God punishes us, but He is merciful too!”

“Who knows,” another voice inside him whispered, “perhaps a greater misfortune awaits you here! Perhaps the Lord is angry with you for having spoiled and disturbed His sacred soil and will punish you more severely if you don’t come to your senses after His first warning?”

The days slipped into weeks, but Vasil could not rid himself of the idea. It was consuming him, and the poor man did not know what to do, or where to begin. He became pale and drawn, but would share his thoughts with no one, either for lack of courage or out of fear.

“I’m sure the old woman will start weeping again, recalling Sen, and will try to talk me out of it,” he thought. The temptation was too great. “The Lord did not grant us a good harvest this year, and there is nothing to eat. The

hay has rotted, there's no fodder for the cattle till the spring. What's to be done? If I had some money now it would certainly come in handy. I'm really up against a blank wall, and I haven't paid my taxes yet, either. Perhaps, if we dig down just a little more, we'll strike oil? Who knows? The other well isn't much deeper than mine. I'll put my faith in the Lord and try again. Let the old woman weep a bit! After all, she's a woman. She won't kill me for trying again. But this time I'll do everything the right way: we'll have wattle walls the whole depth of the well for safety's sake!"

Once he had settled the matter with himself, Vasil decided to tackle the problem and discussed it with his sons. Mikhailo did not object to working in the well.

"I know we'll never be able to live through the winter off the farm, Dad," he said. "Let's give it a try! And I pray that we'll be lucky this time! We'll do as you say and line the well with wattle walls for safety's sake."

What a fine lad Mikhailik was! He had never contradicted his parents in his life! God grant him a long life and much happiness!

They were now faced with a new problem: where were they to get the money for ropes, twigs, and implements? The father and sons saw eye to eye on the matter. "The only thing to do," Vasil said, "is to mortgage part of the field; we shan't sell it, just mortgage it for a while, till the money starts coming in; then we'll pay the mortgage off and it'll be ours again!"

And that is what they did. The old wife did not find out about their plans until they had actually started working once more. The poor woman had neither the heart nor the strength to berate Vasil. She wept bitterly and her heart froze, as if she had a premonition of some terrible calamity when she looked down the yawning mouth of the well into which Vasil was lowering her youngest son.

"Vasil, oh, Vasil," she pleaded a few days later, "you're

treading the wrong path and seeking profit in coffins. Beware, you might end up by burying your happiness and your soul in that well!"

"Woman, you don't know what you say," Vasil replied with annoyance, thus ending the conversation.

Work progressed slowly. It was impossible to obtain twigs for the walls. Whatever was brought into the village from the neighbouring villages was immediately bought up. They began the digging together, and kept lining the walls as they proceeded farther down. A week passed, then another. Mikhailo had reached a layer of hard clayey sandstone. It was difficult to work any faster. He could no longer use his spade and was now working with a pick. Meanwhile Ivan threshed the grain or did the wickerwork, and the old woman sat spinning in the cottage all alone; she would often burst into tears while watching through the window to see whether her boys were coming home to dinner.

IV

It was slow going in the well. The deeper Mikhailo dug, the more difficult it became, as if there were not enough air in the well. "It's nothing," he thought. Vasil was expecting oil to appear at any moment. His arms ached from turning the windlass; it was getting colder with each passing day; the money he had received for the mortgage was melting away—but he paid no heed to such things. The oil would gush forth at any moment and put an end to all his troubles!

And, indeed, it did gush forth!

One morning Vasil heard a shout from the depth of the well. It was a strange shout: at first it sounded joyous, and then confused. It ended as a terrible, piercing shriek. It all happened in the course of a minute or two. Vasil peered

into the well. He was cold and was shivering from expectation and anxiety. It was as dark as pitch in the shaft.

"What is it, Mikhailo?" his father shouted down.

Mikhailo did not answer. Instead, he jerked the signal rope, but very weakly.

Vasil did not know what had happened, he did not know what it was Mikhailo wanted or why his son did not answer him.

There was another tug at the rope. It finally dawned on Vasil that his son might be signalling him to pull him up.

"Why is he silent? Why doesn't he let me know what happened?" Vasil thought as he turned the windlass with all his might.

Oh, how hard it was to turn the windlass! It seemed so much heavier than usual. Or, could it be that his old arms would no longer take the strain, after so many days of hard work and anxious waiting? The weight rose slowly from the well and slowly it appeared from the darkness which enveloped everything there, below. Vasil bent over the mouth of the well as he turned the windlass. Good Lord! What's the matter? The heavy smell of oil hit him full in the face!

"Thank God! Thank God!" Vasil shouted.

At that moment he felt such a wave of joy come over him, there was such strength in his arms now! He peered down into the darkness. What was that? There was Mikhailo in the tub, but he did not have the rope tied round him as usual: he was holding on to the edge with one hand. The other hung limply at his side. His head had fallen helplessly upon his chest and was jerking spasmodically. But then the spasms grew less frequent, they seemed weaker. . . . Then his head was motionless. . . . there was a terrible moment. The hand holding on to the rope unclenched, the tub tipped over and with a terrible shriek Mikhailo plunged into the abyss and disappeared in the darkness. There was a dull splash far below as his body

hit the oil. Not another sound was heard. It all happened so quickly and unexpectedly that Vasil remained glued to the spot, unable to move, unable to grasp what had happened. He stood there in a trance, still holding on to the windlass. He understood nothing, he was thinking of nothing, he felt nothing, and saw nothing. . . . Finally, the pungent stench of crude oil that was rising from the well brought him back to his senses. His mind gradually returned to normal, but with it came the terrible realization.

"The boy is dead! Can this be called good luck?" were his first words.

When he came to himself completely he broke out in a cold sweat. He felt that some powerful, unseen hand was pushing him into the well, that an inner voice was shouting in his ear, "Jump in too! Die together with him! What will your life be like now? Jump! Jump!" And the unfortunate father felt a strong urge to leap into the dark, hellish abyss and die there with his son. However, when Vasil had leaned all the way over the mouth of the well, another force pulled him back—it was the hand of Nature, who always protects her creatures.

A thought flashed through the poor man's head:

"How can I save him by myself?" The very question brought home the full impact of the misfortune. Like a madman he ran through the garden to his house, shouting, "Help! Help!"

His wife, son, and neighbours came running at the sound of his voice. No one knew what had happened or who was to be saved. The mother's heart alone understood all.

She wrung her hands, gasped, and fell unconscious to the ground.

What was to be done? How were they to save the lad? In the beginning, no one wanted to climb down the well, for they were afraid of the fumes. The father alone kept insisting, "Let me go down! Let me go! I'll save him, and if I

can't, then let me die there with him!" It was all they could do to hold poor Vasil back.

"Dad, Daddy!" Ivan pleaded. "Don't go down! You won't save him and you'll get poisoned there yourself. I'll go. My head is stronger than yours and I'll make it."

This was agreed to.

Two of the strongest men were put to turning the windlass. They tied the cable tightly round Ivan and lowered him into the well. It was full of gas, but they worked quickly and soon heard Ivan shout to them from below—that was the signal that he had found his brother. In less than no time they had pulled the tub up again.

Meanwhile, neighbours were trying to revive the old woman. Little by little she was coming to.

"My boy, my Mikhailik! Where is he? What's happened to him?" were her first words.

Poor mother! Better not ask about him! Your son is lying on the ground, covered from head to toe with a thick, terrible tar-like liquid. It is frightening to look at him. His face, but recently so handsome, cheerful, and pleasant, has turned livid from the agony he suffered. Poor mother! Flee from this cursed place without a backward glance! Don't look upon the one who was still your son this morning! He cannot be saved, dear, and you will only eat your heart out looking at him.

V

They somehow managed to bathe poor Mikhailik's body and then laid him out on a bench beneath the window in his father's house. There the young lad lay, straight and handsome as a sycamore. His sweet face, now blue, was the only indication of his agony before he died.

But where is the old mother? Why is she not weeping and wailing, drenching her kind, wrinkled face with tears? Per-

haps her grief was not great enough? No, no, she loved her Mikhailik as much as the others, and God alone knows how great her grief was. She lay on her bed in the storeroom and could not raise her head or move a finger. This last misfortune was her undoing. When she saw her little boy dead—and in the state in which they had pulled him out of the well—she fell silently to the ground, without even a sigh, like grass under the scythe. Vasil Pivtorak looked at her lying on the ground, as if she were dead, beside his dead Mikhailik, and whispered, “There is no happiness in life. For all I know, I might have two funerals instead of one!”

They revived Vasil’s wife, brought her into the storeroom, and there the wretched mother lay, all pale and drawn, a blank expression on her wrinkled, sallow face. Her sunken eyes were dull; there was but a faint flicker of life in them like the flame of a dying candle; her blue lips moved imperceptibly. “Mikhailik, Mikhailik!” she whispered, sobbing like a baby. That was all.

Her Mikhailik lay in the room, silent and indifferent. He was not troubled by the frantic grief his father was concealing in his heart or by his mother’s despair and illness. The neighbours crowded in the passage, shaking their heads and shrugging their shoulders, but their sad whispering and prayers were in vain. They spoke quietly among themselves:

“Who could have ever foreseen such a thing! It is true when they say that when good fortune enters a house, it wrecks the home! What a fine lad he was! Thy will be done, O Lord.”

Vasil Pivtorak stumbled along to the priest’s house as one in a trance.

“Praised be Jesus, Father!”

“For ever and ever, amen! Well, what’s new, Vasil? I heard that you’ve struck oil?”

"Yes, Father, I have. . . . But a terrible thing has happened. My son was suffocated to death."

"Is that so? Hm! See how careless you are! Why didn't you get a pump to pump fresh air into the well before you began work in it? See what happened?"

"Yes, Father. I do!"

"And how are things in general?"

"All right, Father. I've come about laying the poor sinner's body to rest."

"Aha! It's a sacred duty, for he was truly an obedient child, no doubt about it. But you're a rich man now, Vasil!"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, you've struck oil. The Lord has been good to you."

"Oh, don't say He's been good to me! I would rather He were never so good to me. What care I for that cursed oil if my son found his grave in it?"

"Yes, yes, that's so. What you say is true. Well, my good man, you are now in a position to help God's church. You've no pleasure in that money anyway—am I right?"

"Yes, Father."

"There, what did I say! The funeral will cost you fifty pieces of gold. Agreed? That's not even money to you nowadays!"

"Oh, but that's an awful lot, Father! Have a heart, you know I'm in no condition to start bargaining with you now!"

"What's there to talk about, my friend? That's just the way things are, and there's nothing to be done about it."

"My poor wife is on her death-bed, and I don't even know whether she'll last the week. That means more expenses. I have no money, Father!"

"If that's the case, we can settle the matter of both funerals right now! That will be eighty pieces of gold, my good fellow!"

“Heaven forbid, Your Reverence! What are you saying!” Vasil cried in anguish. “Do you want me to order a living Christian’s funeral in advance?”

He could not say another word. Something was choking him. He bent and picked his hat up from the floor.

“Now, now, I was only jesting,” said the priest with a smile. “There’s nothing wrong in that. Well, good-bye for now. I’ll be along to see you tomorrow. We must bury the lad with all due respect. I’ll ask the priest from Popeli to come and assist me with the Mass. You must consider me too. Fifty paltry gold pieces are a mere trifle to you now, my good friend.”

“God bless you and good-bye,” Vasil managed to say weakly as he left.

“Good luck, my son. Hm! Well, well!”

VI

“Vasil, the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh—such is His divine will.”

“It’s the will of the Lord, Vasil, friend. Don’t take it so hard, man.”

“Nothing can help the boy now! What’s done is done.”

“My father—may his soul rest in peace—used to say that sorrow won’t measure a field.”

“God grant the departed repose in a bright and glorious paradise and us sinners a happy life on earth.”

“Take it easy, Vasil! Look, your old woman, poor soul, is already on her death-bed. What will become of the farm and of everything else? Keep your chin up, man! Here’s to your health!”

It was thus that Vasil Pivtorak’s neighbours, simple souls that they were, consoled him as they sat round the table, drinking. Vasil was silent. He sat there, his care-weary head propped on his hands.

"Eh, friend, take pity on yourself and don't grieve so. We'll all go sooner or later. Have another drink and you'll feel better. The priest will be here soon to hold Mass. Pull yourself together, we have to tidy up the place a bit."

"Almighty God, You should have taken my life and spared his. I have nothing to live for now," Vasil said in a lifeless tone.

"Don't talk like that, neighbour! God save us from misfortune! You can't change anything now. Why ask for trouble? Ill luck is never asleep, you know."

"How true, how true! It never sleeps," Vasil moaned. "And it never let me sleep, either. It kept whispering, 'Go on, start digging and you'll see what you'll find!' Fool that I was, I listened to that voice, and look what it led to! Mikhailik, me boy! My dear, dear boy! Did I tend and cherish you like a ewe lamb just to lose you like this?"

Tears ran down Vasil's cheeks and hung on his trimmed grey moustache. His friends and neighbours once again began to console him, sigh, and talk of what had happened.

Gradually, Vasil became more talkative. He had a glass of hot honey brandy, then another, and a third. . . . The blood coursed faster through his veins, his thoughts became muddled and jumbled, his aching heart warmed up and the pain was dulled, his grief dissolved more readily in tears, and his sorrow melted from this warmth as snow does in the spring sunshine.

"Oh, Mikhailik, my boy!" the poor father intoned, accenting each word as if he were stumbling over it, and swallowing one glass after another. The tears fell more readily upon the oaken table. His neighbours spoke solemnly and quietly. Their words resounded ever more faintly in Vasil's ears, as if they were little waves splashing in a stream or rustling autumn leaves. Subconsciously his hand poured out the hot, crimson liquor and emptied the glass

into his mouth, with the resulting effect of red-hot coals pouring down his throat, making his blood hotter still and bringing back forgotten memories.

"Oh, Mikhailik, my boy!" he babbled, wiping his tears with his sleeve.

"Come on, Vasil, get up and stop crying!" the neighbours chorused. "Look, His Reverence has come to hold Mass. Go into the house!"

"May his sweet soul rest in peace! Come! Mikhailik, my son!" Vasil babbled as he stumbled into the hut.

The light inside fell upon the corpse. There were a lot of men there, two priests were officiating at the Mass, two sextons were croaking and bleating psalms in high falsettos. Vasil stood on the threshold, watching and listening, but he could not make head or tail of anything. The light flickered before his eyes, the dead boy's face kept changing constantly—as soon as he would try to focus his eyes on it—and his heart felt as light as if he were preparing his son for a wedding and not for his obsequies. Only he felt the tears still streaming down his face, and knew the people were watching him sadly and whispering, "Poor man, he's heart-broken! And no wonder—to think that he's had to bury two such sons before their time! Thank God he's still got one boy left, otherwise the poor chap would really be done for!"

Vasil heard their words, but he knew that things were not as bad as all that any more. His thoughts, which were wandering far from there, kept returning less and less often to Mikhailo. However, the tears kept streaming down his face.

Mass was over. The priest ordered the coffin to be brought in and the body placed into it. Vasil looked on in amazement as two youths brought in the heavy wooden coffin and fussed about the body. They took away the candles, moved the cross that had been placed at the head of the corpse, removed the sheet that had covered the body, then

lifted it and placed it into the coffin. Until that moment Vasil had been standing quietly by, as if he were not a part of his surroundings, but just then he suddenly felt something stab him right in the heart and he cried:

“Mikhailik, my son!”

The cry that pierced the melancholy silence was so unexpected that immediately the men and women crowded round him, comforting him and pleading with him not to grieve so. Meanwhile, the youths had placed the lid on the coffin. They lifted their former companion and carried him from the house, bowing down with the coffin three times at both thresholds. The coffin made a dull sound, as if it were saying:

“Good luck! Forget about me! May the happy moments of your lives never be clouded by sad memories of me! Good luck to you! Be well and happy.”

The large crowd accompanied Vasil to the cemetery, comforting and cheering him up. But Vasil was not complaining; he neither wept nor said a word, but trudged along stiffly as one in a dream. At times his lips would twitch, the muscles of his face would move, but his expression seemed more like a smile than an expression of sorrow. When the kind folk led him home after the funeral he was still as one in a trance: he neither spoke, nor wept, nor sighed, but his eyes stared straight before him. And when, once home, they told him that his wife had passed away at the very moment they had carried her beloved Mikhailik from the house, he remained as one in a trance, and neither spoke, nor wept, nor sighed, but his eyes stared straight before him.

His friends and neighbours gathered once again to comfort him, talk among themselves, and feast at his expense. Vasil was right there with them, and when the bottle was passed round he took his share. The more he drank, the livelier he became. He was silent no longer. He talked, and wept, and looked round.

Night came. Vasil fell upon his bed with a sob and was soon sound asleep. He awoke the next morning, feeling as if he had been beaten up, and was greatly amazed to find the coffin still on the bench. He had a very vague recollection of the funeral which had already taken place on the previous day. He even felt the same sharp pang of pain in his heart that he had felt the day before, when they had lifted the body from the bench. Or had it all been a dream? Where had this corpse come from?

VII

Once again Vasil's house is crowded, noisy, filled with the sighs and whispering of the womenfolk. And once again the poor man is beset by friends, invited and uninvited, who have come to console him, sympathize, and talk without end. Once again the bottle is passed round and the incantations of the priests and the sextons fill the hut, the passage, and the yard; clouds of smoke rise from the censers and curl beneath the rafters, above the heads of the mourners. Before Vasil could collect himself, the crowd had rolled on and was gone. When he awoke the day after the funeral, looked round the cottage, and saw that he was all alone amidst the dead stillness, his first thought was that it had all been a bad dream. However, pulling himself together, he saw the traces of the previous day's events in every nook and cranny of the house and realized that it was all only too true and that he was now alone.

Alone? But had he not another son, Ivan? Where was he? What was he doing? Why was it that the father, thinking of his solitude, did not once think of him, of his last solace in life?

Strange things happen to people. Parents may have several children, all of them fine, upright, obedient, and hard-working. One would say: what else could these people

wish for? A parent's love is like the sun, it shines equally on all of them. Alas, it is not so! Look around and you will see. The father loves the eldest best, the mother loves the youngest or one of the others, and the middle son lives with them and works alongside them, but neither his father nor his mother ever notices him, or finds a kind word for him, or praises him. He grows up a stranger in his own house, an introvert by nature, and when he passes them, his parents look upon him but see, instead, one of the other children—their favourite one.

Such was the case with Ivan. If someone would ask Vasil about Ivan, he'd say, "Ivan? You mean my boy? He's a quiet lad. But you take Mikhailik, now—what a strong fellow he is! He's worth his weight in gold, he is!" If someone would have asked Vasil's departed wife, "What's your boy Ivan doing?" she would answer, "Why, he's probably pottering about the barn, what else could he be doing? Mikhailik's gone hay-ing and I don't know whether the poor lad will be back in time for dinner or not. What a lovely boy he is! He's the apple of my eye, and the baby of the family." It was always the same story. No matter when the neighbours would ask the mother or the father about Ivan, they would always turn the conversation round to Mikhailik. Ivan was the middle son, and although he was quiet and obedient, and never angered them, they somehow never noticed his presence. Although the three brothers lived in peace and friendship all their lives, the other two involuntarily followed their parents' example and came to look down upon Ivan, to consider him more as a servant than their equal. Many were the times when Ivan would listen bitterly to his younger brother ordering him about, and many were the times when such scenes would even lead to quarrels. But it never once entered the poor boy's head to look deeper into things and discover the reasons for such a state of affairs. Never once did he attempt to understand why his family treated him as they did.

But it would have been wrong to say that they did not love him! God forbid! After all, Ivan was their child, the same as the others. After all, he had never displeased them by word or deed. But still, they loved him less than they did the eldest and the youngest.

Once, they were carting a load of hay down a steep road that ran along a river bank. Mikhailo was leading the oxen and Ivan and Vasil were walking behind, taking care that the cart should not tip over. When they had reached the most dangerous spot, they hit a rut and the cart tipped over towards Ivan's side, right over a terrible precipice. The old father did not wait for Ivan to shout to him, but made a mad dash towards his side. If he had reached it a second later the cart would have tipped over and poor Ivan would have been crushed to death beneath its weight. But they both laid their weight against the cart and shouted to Mikhailik to drive the oxen as fast as he could. In no time they had passed the cliff and come out to the ford. When they stopped there to water the oxen, Ivan took off his shirt and began to bathe his bloody shoulder, for he had scraped it on a jutting pole during the perilous moment back on the road. Vasil spat, took a deep breath, thought of the recent danger, and muttered angrily, "Damn that evil spirit! To hell with the cart and hay—why, I nearly lost my boy there! Damn you!"

See? Can you say that Vasil did not love Ivan?

But now, when both his favourite sons were in their graves, as was his old woman, who had constantly potted around, busy with the housework and livening up the cottage by her presence, Vasil suddenly felt he was all alone in the world. He slept through the night after his wife's funeral in a torpor, and when he awoke the following morning the sun was already high in the heavens. He looked round: there wasn't a soul in the hut. Ivan had got two youths to help him the day before and had long since set out for work. He had to do something about the newly

struck oil in order to make enough money to pay off the mortgage on the field and settle their account for the funerals with the priest. Ivan had never sat idle in his life, he did not wait for his father to instruct him and did not wish to wake him. He arranged everything himself and the speculators were only too happy to grab up the oil he was selling.

They quickly came to terms, and all Vasil had to do when he came to was sign the contract. As soon as Ivan received the down payment he rushed to see the "mechanic" (a plain carpenter from Drogobich who intended to use this loud title to make his fortune here) and bought an air-pump for the well. Then he bought some barrels in which, according to the terms of his contract, he was to deliver the oil to the new oil refinery, and set to bringing up the treasures of the earth.

Work was in full swing. The hired workers talked and joked, but Ivan worked silently. Meanwhile, Vasil was just raising himself from his bed. He stood up in the middle of the hut, and when he saw how deserted it was and the disorder about him, he wept as bitterly as if his house had been burned down. The poor man sat there for a long time on the very same bench beneath the window where he had been so used to seeing his departed wife spinning or doing some other work.

Time dragged on in the old cottage. There was no one to even cook a hot meal. Vasil seemed to have lost his senses completely. He slouched around the house, doing no work, speaking to no one, but thinking and thinking. Ivan shouldered the responsibility of all the household chores. He saw how great his father's grief was, and had not the heart to ask him to do any work. He did not know that work is the best medicine for an aching heart, and thus did he unwittingly cause the ache in the old man's heart to increase still more. However, he would often come home at night and find Vasil unusually talkative and tearful, and

that would mean that the old man had been drinking to drown his grief and sorrow. Ivan had not the courage to reproach his father. He would eat whatever was at hand, go to bed, and instantly fall soundly asleep; he did not hear Vasil go on talking and weeping till midnight.

Vasil's neighbours and kinswomen would often call on him—whether he liked it or not—to annoy him with their clucking and advice and their loud chatter, although occasionally they did help him with the household chores. And often, when they would not find Vasil in the hut, they would go to look for him in the storeroom. The bed his wife had died on stood there untouched; in one of the corners was a tin flask of vodka which poor Vasil thought would dull his grief and anguish. The women often heard his heavy steps as he paced back and forth in the storeroom, sobbing like a child or talking loudly as he stood in a corner, although they could not make out his words through the walls. The neighbours would wag their heads and whisper to each other that it was his wife's "spirit walking around." And then, out of the blue, the rumour spread throughout Borislav that Vasil's wife's spirit came to haunt him at night, because he had wilfully and without cause sent two of his sons to their death.

Vasil, however, had no idea of what people were saying about him in the village.

VIII

When Ivan had drawn up the terms of the contract he had over-estimated the resources of his well. The speculators themselves had been the ones to encourage him in this. They had said that the well was so plentiful that he would have a hard time scooping out the oil during the day that had accumulated there during the night, as the oil would keep on pouring in. Actually, however, by the end of the

first week the well had run dry and no new oil seemed likely to be coming in. According to the contract, there was still quite a lot of oil to be delivered, but there was none forthcoming. Ivan waited a day, then a second and a third, but still there was no oil. He either had to dig deeper or try to think of some other way out, since he would be in real trouble otherwise; the speculators were pressing him, demanding the rest of the oil he owed them. Ivan was up against a wall. Vasil had taken half of the money paid on the contract to settle his debts, and there was not enough left of the other half even to cover expenses connected with the digging work. Ivan realized all this only too well and therefore did not discuss the matter with his father. He was waiting anxiously for oil to reappear in the well.

The oil seemed to be in no hurry at all to do so. Meanwhile, the time for delivering it was nearly up. The poor lad was practically out of his mind with worry and he finally decided to talk the whole matter over with his father.

On a cold evening, when the wind was howling outside and the fine rain lashing, Ivan returned from the barn, hung his hat on a peg, set up a fire in the stove, and placed a pot of potatoes to bake on the hot coals, for that was all they had for supper.

Vasil, his face burning and his legs unsteady from too much drink, sat down silently on the stove-couch and stretched his hands out towards the fire.

"Dad," Ivan said hesitantly, "we're in trouble."

"You're right, son! Things have been bad since Mother died," Vasil blubbered, wiping his tears on his sleeve.

"That's not what I meant. May she rest in peace. What can we do if it was God's will to take her? But we're in real trouble this time. The merchants are demanding more oil, and there's not a drop left in the well."

"Give it to them! Let them have everything! Give them the well and everything else! My poor Mikhailik's blood is on it."

"What will we do then? What shall we live on?"

"What'll we do? Why, we'll praise the Lord," Vasil said in a firm tone and then fell silent again. In vain did Ivan try to get some sense out of him and talk things over. Vasil stubbornly refused to answer. He would snuffle from time to time like a child, although there was no trace of tears on his face.

They heard a splashing sound outside, as if someone was making his way through the deep, oozing mud. The door creaked open, and tall, thin, red-eyed Shmilo entered the hut. The edges of his long, filthy coat were worn and hung round his legs like rags, flapping against his thin, mud-splattered calves. Wisps of red hair protruded from under his wrinkled hat, and his flaming red beard jutted out pugnaciously.

"God bless you," he said, touching his hat with a thin, oil-stained hand.

"God bless you too," Ivan answered glumly. Vasil started at the sight of Shmilo. He turned his drawn face towards him and his unsteady gaze was full of unconscious, childish terror.

"Well?" Shmilo said, walking up to Ivan.

"Well what? We're in trouble!"

"Trouble? What's the matter?"

"There's no more oil coming in. What's to be done? I wanted to go on digging, but there's no money for that now."

"What about us? You know the time limit runs out the day after tomorrow."

"I know it, but what can I do? There is a way out, though. You gave my father half the money coming to us, and that was to be for five hundred buckets—right?"

"Right," Shmilo said and nodded. His long neck was stretched forward, making him for all the world look like a cat about to pounce upon a mouse.

"I've delivered eight hundred buckets to date. Accord-

ing to the contract I only owe you two hundred more. If you pay me for the other three hundred I've already delivered, I can put the money into the well and then deliver the rest."

Shmilo smirked.

"Heh-heh-heh, aren't you a smart fellow now, Ivan, upon my word!" he said, slapping Ivan on the shoulder. "But I'm afraid that won't do! That's not what the contract says. The day after tomorrow you will have to forfeit your three hundred buckets for breach of contract. And then I'll have the authorities come from the city and demand that you deliver the rest. Do you know about that? Eh?"

"You're joking!" Ivan said, trying to force a smile, although actually the words pierced him to the heart, and a shiver ran down his spine, as if he had touched a snake.

"Honestly, I'm not joking! Why should I? I'm losing money on this deal and I don't feel like joking!" Shmilo said.

The poor lad looked intently at the long, lean, sallow face, as if he had not understood the meaning of these words, or was hoping that at any moment kinder thoughts would flash across the faded face that was smirking so ruthlessly.

But Shmilo's expression remained unchanged. Ivan turned to look at his father, who had meanwhile leaned his head against the stove and dozed off, hugging his knees with his arms.

"Dad!" Ivan said, touching his shoulder lightly. "Dad! Can you hear me? Shmilo's here and he wants more oil. What shall I do? Tell me what to do."

"Give him everything—let him take all there is!" Vasil mumbled sleepily. "That damn well! I lost two sons because of it, and my old woman too! There's no happiness to be got there!"

A faint spark of hope lighted up Shmilo's face.

"You see, Ivan, your father is not as stubborn as you

are. I'll tell you what: why be bothered with so many things? Sell me the well! You aren't making any profit on it. If you start digging again you'll sink still more money into it, and who knows whether you'll ever reach oil. It's better this way. I'll give you another hundred guildens for it. Well, what else do you want?"

"No, I'll never agree to that," Ivan said resolutely. "I won't sell you my land, no matter what you do."

"If you won't sell it to me I'll buy it without asking your permission. Do you think the authorities will be on your side? Just you wait and see—you'll forfeit the oil and lose your well to boot. I'm offering you a hundred guildens to be rid of all the bother. What do you say?"

Ivan did not know what to do. He understood only too well that Shmilo had not been exaggerating when he had mentioned the authorities and asked him whose side he thought they would be on. For a long time now, ever since he had been a little boy, he had felt the peasant's terror when confronted with these terrible men, who had the right (and God knows who had given them that right!) to appear at any time, try folks, pass whatever judgement they wished, and no matter how they had wronged the poor muzhik, there was nothing he could do about it. On the other hand, Ivan saw that Shmilo was cheating him ruthlessly, for his land and well were worth ten times what he was offering. What was to be done? Ivan began to shake his father again, and Vasil had a hard time trying to understand what was expected of him. Shmilo did not stand idly by. He would put in a word here and there, pointing out the terrible fate that awaited Vasil at the hands of the authorities and comparing it with the advantages of the deal he was offering. They argued for a long time. Ivan was determined that they keep their land, but Vasil kept spoiling his arguments, until, finally, shrewd Shmilo won the day.

"Vasil, you are a reasonable man, but your son here is so hard-headed I can't even discuss anything with him. Ha, what do I care about him? You're the master here and it's for you to say how things are to be run. I'll meet you at the registrar's place tomorrow and we'll put down the terms of our agreement in writing. I'll pay you cash right there and then. Right?"

"Yes, that's right," Vasil agreed phlegmatically.

"Well, take care of yourself! Good night!"

"Good night!" Vasil said. The doors creaked behind Shmilo as he left the house and was swallowed up by the darkness. A dull sucking sound of splashing mud was the *only indication that he had gone.*

The dying fire flickered faintly in the stove, casting a crimson light on the stove-couch. Ivan was silent. He stood leaning against the stove while Vasil began eating the baked potatoes, without a word to his son. Ivan was lost in unhappy thoughts. Vasil was apparently feeling just as bad, but they were both silent and it was so quiet, so sad, and so dead in the house that it seemed that this was the moment when the spirits of the dead fly unnoticed round the house, causing everything to be still, die down, come to a silent standstill.

IX

Father and son sat in silence for a long while. Ivan was the first to speak.

"Dad, you were wrong in letting him talk you into selling so easily."

Vasil said nothing; his head was bowed and he was staring at the flames.

"You shouldn't have sold the land. Who knows, maybe. . . ."

"Won't you ever shut up?" Vasil shouted. "Or do you

intend to nag me too? Don't you think I've had enough trouble already?"

This was the first time after the double funeral that a coherent thought had awakened in his brain. However, in another second it had vanished, and once again Vasil leaned his forehead against the edge of the stove and silently watched the flickering, dying embers. Ivan was of a different mind. The fact that his father was giving away his property for nothing vexed him. He said nothing for a few minutes and began again in a calm, even voice:

"Don't be angry at me, Dad! I'm telling you the truth. Why hide the truth? Anyone will tell you the same thing. The land and the well are worth at least eight hundred guldens, and you let him have them for a hundred and twenty."

"My, you think you're a splendid valuer, don't you? Then why weren't you able to bring up enough oil from the well to make it unnecessary for us to sell it?"

"I'm not to blame for that. Was it my fault?" Ivan asked.

"Shut up, you fool!" cried Vasil in a rage. "You don't dare tell me what to do and how to do it while I'm alive. When I'm dead you can go choke on the lot of it, but just keep your mouth shut till then!"

"All right," Ivan persisted, "but if you go on as you have all this time, there won't be a damn thing left after you've gone."

"Shut up, you whelp! I've enough troubles without you adding your share."

Vasil looked round menacingly, as if searching for something with which to vent all his anger on Ivan's back. But there was nothing handy lying around. Ivan, meanwhile, stood his ground firmly by the stove, but his face was sad and he seemed not to have noticed his father's threatening glance.

"I know my place, Dad, and I won't say another word

about it, but remember that it's all going to be on your conscience. You'll have to account to God for every inch of our family's land that you are handing over to the heathens!"

With these words Ivan left the hut and went to spend the night in the barn.

Vasil was alone again. As before, he kept staring intently at the embers. The blood was coursing through his veins faster and his eyes were burning with an anger that was just as slow in dying down as the heat of the stove.

Vasil was a strange man. As long as the events of life had seemingly by-passed him and left him alone, he went on living in a fog, grieving in solitude and forgetting about the outside world. But when he became overcome by thoughts of his former happiness and his present state, the horrible deaths of his two favourite sons, he would mitigate the relentless, gnawing anguish within him with the only medicine known to our poor peasant—vodka. But life was beginning to come into its own in him, and today it had struck at his most vulnerable spot: it had brought back memories of Mikhailo and his death. Poor Vasil's soul had been in such a turmoil that he had not even fully realized what he had been saying when he had given in to Shmilo's arguments.

As if that were not enough, Ivan's firm, calm, sad, and—as he himself knew only too well—truthful words wounded him still more and kindled his anger. He did not know whom he was more angry at: Shmilo, Ivan, or himself. What did they want of him? Why couldn't they leave him alone? Was he bothering them or annoying them about anything?

Such and similar importunate thoughts flitted across Vasil's brain and gave him no respite until he had sunk into slumber and darkness fell on the hut.

Various were the thoughts that came into Ivan's mind.

When Vasil sat by the stove, gazing at the embers, he

probably never imagined that his son, too, was having a hard time of it, that Grief, that old tormentor, had come to spend the night with him too. Indeed, Ivan kept tossing fitfully on the straw in the barn. He was shivering from head to foot and could not get warm. His thoughts, meanwhile, were wandering all over his father's property, over the hut, and outbuildings, and the field. Everywhere the first signs of disorder and neglect met his eye. They had not even begun fertilizing the fields, and it was nearly spring already. There was just one strip ploughed up for spring wheat and they had sowed winter wheat on a single tiny plot by the hill. How would they meet the new year? The barn and the storeroom were empty, for they had had a bad year. And now his father was going to sell the land! The land and the well on it! Who knows, perhaps, if they could keep on digging a dozen feet or so, they might strike oil again. Who knows what wealth his father had forfeited for a hundred and twenty guildens. . . . "You foolish old man!" Ivan muttered.

He kept tossing and turning, trying to think of a way to save at least their last remaining field. Finally, he decided to go to the priest the very next day, which was Sunday, tell him the whole story, and ask for his advice. Having taken this decision, he fell asleep.

X

Easter Sunday had come. The little old church in Borislav stood disconsolately on a little hill beyond the village. There were no ancient limes about the church to spread their shade all around, as was usually the case in other villages. The cemetery with its sunken graves was a barren place that could be seen from afar, like the soulless, withered face of Death, boding ill to everything his gaze fell on. A dilapidated mortuary leaned against a broad

willow-tree, and the branches of the tree served it as a roof. There was a steeple-roof of the belfry on the other side, which shook and trembled each time the bells were rung. The bells had a sad and jangling tone, as if they were never called upon to do anything save toll for the dead. They had just stopped ringing for Mass and the streets were full of men and women on their way to church. His Reverence had not come to unlock the church as yet; the villagers had gathered in the cemetery, talking, laughing, or sighing.

Finally the priest and the sexton came down the hill, accompanied by a third man.

"Hey, I wonder why Ivan Pivtorak went to see the priest?" someone in the crowd said.

"His old man probably beat him up in a drunken rage," another answered.

"Neighbour, have you heard—they say that Pivtorak's wife comes to haunt him every night!"

"It's just terrible. Petro Mikitishin saw her there with his own eyes. And Gapa Kalinchina was telling me that her mother had sent her to the river to get some clay, and when she got there she saw. . . ." The staid and impressive-looking housewife was not able to finish her story, as the sexton ran up at that moment, made his way through the crowd, and shouted as he unlocked the church door:

"Be quiet, women! This is a Temple of the Lord, not a tavern!"

His Reverence walked between the two rows of worshippers standing before the church, and each one in turn kissed the hand of the venerable pastor, as "God had willed."

The service began. Ivan was worshipping in a corner, bowing low, knocking his forehead loudly against the floor each time, as if he were trying to dull the ache in his heart. Vasil arrived shortly and found a place beside the choir. His sunken eyes gazed blearily from between his

puffy lids. The deep furrows on his brow were unmistakable evidence of the misfortune which had broken a once strong and stalwart man. He was now bent and silent and seemed much older than his years.

Vasil crossed himself about five times, bowed down to the ground thrice, and began to bow in all directions. He was slightly puzzled by the fact that both verger and sexton seemed not to notice him at all, and the latter even eyed him strangely several times from the side doors of the altar, where he stood swinging the walnut snuffer. When the Gospel-book was brought in the sexton appeared with a bundle of candles for the congregation to hold lighted during the reading. It was thought a disgrace if any of the parishioners was not given a candle to hold, and each worshipper considered that his sin must have been great indeed for the priest to have ordered the sexton not to give him a candle. The thought suddenly flashed across Vasil's mind: would he receive a candle? He watched as the sexton began handing them out from the other side of the aisle. He would press them right into people's hands, hand them to others to be passed on, or reach over the heads and shoulders of those in front to give them to others standing behind. He had already distributed half the candles and was starting on the other half; he was close to Vasil now. Sen Gavpanyuk got one, and Mikita Blagoi, and Oleks Vitishin, and now it was his turn... but no, the sexton turned his back on him and thrust a candle into the deacon's hand, just as the latter was incanting nasally, "Praised be the Lord, praised be He."

Vasil's blood began to boil. "What have I done," he thought, "whom have I murdered and what have I set on fire for them to disgrace me so in the eyes of the whole community?" His anger of the night before revived and God knows what sort of strange thoughts came into his head. "They're angry because they can't reduce me to beggary and get rid of me once and for all. And that's why

they say, 'Let's disgrace him in front of everyone!' " Vasil felt that all eyes were on him, that everyone was wagging his head and whispering, "Oh-ho, Pivtorak really must have done something awful to have had the sexton pass him by." He was so taken up with these thoughts that he heard not a word of the Gospel. When those among the congregation who usually left during the sermon to chat with a friend outside, beneath the belfry, began making their way out and jostled him, he finally came to his senses. He raised his eyes to the altar and his gaze met the priest's—and he was certain that His Reverence was observing him closely. He crossed himself hastily and began listening to what the priest was saying.

As always, the priest began his sermon thus: " 'Let the Lord rise and may his enemies be scattered.' These words were written down by the Holy Apostle . . . hm-m-m. . . " At this point the priest usually had a fit of coughing and then, after such an introduction, would by an amazing jump of reasoning, proceed with the sermon. This time it was devoted to the vice of drunkenness and the backsliding of such parents who were not concerned with their children's present and future life, but who embarked on vice in order to satisfy a low desire. The priest spoke on and on, his voice would often thunder loudly, as if someone had suddenly scattered a whole sackful of rocks on the church roof and they were noisily clattering down it. This was especially noticeable at the words: "Woe to you, miserable drunkards! The hell-fires are burning under your feet, for you do not even remember your duties as Christians—and all because of your baneful inclination for drink. You are not satisfied by the fact that your households are falling apart or that your children are not cared for and have no fear of God. You yourselves fall into bed in a drunken stupor without crossing yourselves, and when you awake in the morning you stretch out your hands for the bottle instead of making the sign of the Holy Cross. Who will

tell me whether such a person" (and here His Reverence pointed to Vasil with vehemence, and all eyes turned to him, as if they were seeing him for the first time in their lives), "whether such a person is worthy of being called a human being? No, he is like an animal; nay, he is worse, for even cattle raise their eyes to the Lord upon awakening, and only then do they turn towards their fodder!"

Vasil felt as if he were standing on hot coals all during the sermon. God alone knows what thoughts were darting through his shamed and miserable head. It was clear to everyone present that the poor wretch had even changed colour and did not know what to do when he saw the merciless eyes of the community on him. Mass was about to end. Vasil had a triple candelabrum which he usually carried in the procession, but today old, white-haired Trokhim Parukha was carrying his candelabrum while Vasil stood helplessly by. He heaved a sigh of relief when Mass ended and was ready to leave, hat in hand, when the sexton touched him on the shoulder and whispered:

"Come with me, friend Vasil. His Reverence wants to see you."

What was he to do? Vasil shuffled along behind the sexton, foreseeing greater shame to come.

For no apparent reason he suddenly remembered the saying: "I'll go to church, Mother, but I'll be damned if I go there to pray!" Vasil did not know why he had thought of it, and kept repeating it unconsciously.

The priest was sitting in an armchair in the vestry, sipping a cup of coffee that had been brought in after the service.

Vasil bowed low and remained standing in the doorway, waiting for the Father to finish his coffee.

"Why have you been behaving so badly, Vasil?" the priest began severely.

Vasil was silent.

"Your son was here to see me this morning. He said you were selling your field, that you didn't care about anything any more except guzzling vodka!"

Vasil was silent.

"You may go, but don't forget that I never want to hear such things about you any more. Shame on you! You're the kind of man who should be an example to the whole community and instead—just look at yourself! It's a shame! A disgrace!"

The priest waved his hand and Vasil left without saying a single word.

"What a rat he is—not a son!" the poor man thought as he walked home through the village. "He went whining to the priest, telling tales about his own father. Just you wait, you whelp, I'll teach you a lesson!"

On the way home Vasil stopped in at Shmilo's tavern, where there were already several men passing the bottle round. Perhaps he went in to forget his disgrace, or to pull himself together for his encounter with his treacherous son, or perhaps for some other reason (who knows, perhaps these peasants are born with these lowly, degenerate habits?).

XI

"So, Your Worship, it was you, was it, who disgraced me in front of the whole village?" a very drunk Vasil said to his son that evening.

"What do you mean?" Ivan asked reluctantly. He did not even want to think about the past two days.

"What do I mean? You damn whelp! As if you don't know what I'm talking about! Was it you who ran to tell the priest a pack of lies about me?"

"I don't know what it was I lied about," Ivan muttered under his breath.

"You damn viper, you rat . . . lying about your own

father who made a man of you? Is this how you repay me in my old age? Why, I'm ashamed to show my face in public now, thanks to you . . . they're all pointing fingers at me now. 'Look at the drunkard, the villain, the rake!' they say. Is this what you're up to now?"

Vasil was lashing himself into a fury as he spoke. His small eyes were glittering more menacingly, his face became flushed, the veins on his forehead were bulging, and he gnashed his teeth in rage. Ivan's silence further increased his anger, for he had been sitting calmly, or perhaps timidly, in the corner all the while.

"I've been harbouring a viper on my breast! What a son—he wants everyone to snub his father, to spit on him, to point at him as if he were a freak or something! What a fine son I have, eh?"

"Dad," Ivan said firmly, his voice, however, shaking a little, "lie down and sleep it off, and tomorrow we'll talk things over soberly. What's true is true, and I'm at fault for that, but you are much more so."

"Why, you snake, how dare you teach me, your father, and blame me for anything?"

Vasil's anger, which had suddenly gushed up and developed during the past two days, was constantly seeking an outlet, something it could fall upon. An opportunity now presented itself: poor, unlucky Ivan was standing there before him. Vasil rushed at him in a rage and dealt him a staggering blow on the ear.

"What are you doing, Dad?" Ivan cried as he jumped to his feet.

"Shut up, you damn idiot! This'll teach you how to respect your father!"

He punched him again, and blood flowed from Ivan's mouth.

"Don't touch me, Dad!" he shouted, shaking himself finally of his assumed indifference. "Don't touch me, or you'll be sorry!"

“What? Are you threatening me? Here, take this!” And he hit him again. Ivan’s face turned blue. He too lost his temper and struck his father in the chest, sending him crashing to the floor.

“You wretch!” Vasil roared in a drunken rage, as he tried to raise himself and reach for the axe. “Are you raising your hand against me already? You’d be glad to send me to my grave to be able to get hold of everything yourself! You’re mistaken, though. You’ll never see any of it, you dog, not a thing!”

All this time Vasil was trying to reach the axe lying under the bench.

“Dad!” Ivan said firmly, though there was a tremor in his voice. “May God forgive you for what you’re saying and for the way you’re treating me! I don’t want you to think that I have my eye on your property and that I’m waiting for your death—and so, good-bye! I don’t want any of it. May you live as long as you are fated to with God’s help. Do whatever you want to with your property, and leave it to anybody you wish after your death, for you’ll never see me in your house again! I’d rather die of starvation or lose an arm at work than know that my own father accuses me, his son, of such things! Farewell!”

The door creaked, Ivan dashed by the windows and was gone. Vasil stood in the middle of the hut, axe in hand, and could not for the world of him understand what had happened. His blind, uncontrollable rage was ebbing, and he was able to view the situation more calmly.

“Damn it, what have I done? Driven my own child out! And for what? Just because the priest said I was not to have a candle in church today? I’ve yielded to an evil temptation. Where did it come from in the first place? The first thing the Lord does when he wants to punish a man is to make him lose his reason! Oh, how I could have used a little bit of common sense!” Vasil sat pondering, and when the night fell he even began to weep, sitting there

in the darkness with his head against the cold stove, for there was no one to light it. Ivan had gone.

In the beginning, Vasil was certain that Ivan would cool off the next day and come home again. He slept fitfully that night and had nightmares until the very morning.

There were moments when he would see all three of his boys drowning in a very deep well full of evil-smelling oil, vainly calling to him for help. Then he dreamt of Ivan, drinking in a tavern with a bunch of filthy, oil-besmeared men that were horrible to look at. Vasil saw Ivan gradually turn into the same kind of a man as they were, brawling, singing, and swearing as they did, drinking and rolling in the mud, and then he saw him pour out a drink of vodka, put some sort of powder into the drink, and hand it to him, as if saying, "Drink up, old man, and here's your health!" But Vasil seemed to know that the drink was poisoned and that Ivan wanted to send him to his grave as soon as he could in order to gain possession of his property. "Away, you wretch!" he shouted in his sleep and flung the glass to the floor. "You won't get a thing from me, not even a crumb! You're not worth the rope to hang you with!"

Such dreams bothered Vasil all night long. Finally, dawn broke. It was one of those grey, cloudy winter days when it snows so hard that even the trees bend under the weight of the snow, and a lonely man feels cold, gloomy, and as sad as could be, as if he were in a coffin, not a cottage. Vasil put on his sheepskin coat and his boots and went to tend to the cattle. Then he returned to the hut; he was displeased and grumbling as he began setting up a fire in the stove to warm up the place a bit and melt the ice on the windows.

"Where could the lad have gone?" Vasil asked himself. "He might lose his mind and decide to work in one of those pits. Damn that kind of work to hell!"

It's a known fact that if an inexperienced man—and one who is feeling vexed to boot, as Vasil was at the time—decides to get a fire going in a stove, he will have noth-

ing but trouble. Everything will go wrong. No matter which way he turns, everything will be in his way. The damp kindling will hiss and smoke and just won't burn. If he needs water, he won't be able to find the yoke; then there will be something else, and this and that and the other, until a person will get mad at the whole world—and if he happens to be an impatient man, he'll chuck it all, spit, and rub the spit out with his boot. That is exactly what Vasil did. He was mad at the whole world and himself too, when he sat down on the bench after having hurled the kindling under the hearth. The hut was full of smoke, and Vasil was chilled to the bone. When the poor wretch could bear it no longer he spat, buttoned up his coat, and set out for the tavern, muttering, "May you get struck by lightning—doing that kind of work!"

Lanky, red-bearded Shmilo and Vasil had signed an agreement the day before, and Vasil had received half the sum due to him. Shmilo was not behind the counter, as usual. When Vasil had crossed the common grazing-ground he had seen him in his fur coat bustling about near his well, unmindful of the blizzard, waving his arms and ordering about the workers he had already hired. No words can describe Vasil's pain at the sight of Shmilo standing on the land of his, Vasil's father; and then he recalled that this had been the reason why he had hurt his son so the previous day. His tired old heart fluttered as Ivan's words came back to him: "Dad, may God forgive you for what you're saying and for the way you're treating me!"

XII

From then on Vasil's days dragged on sadly. Ivan did not return, and there was no one to look after the old man, tidy up the house a bit, comfort him, advise him, or talk with him. Winter days are gloomy, the winter evenings and

mornings are as endless as the sea. . . . His only solace was the tavern—at least there he could chat with one of the oil-workers or drown his deep and constant suffering for an hour or so in a bottle of wine. He was terribly worried about Ivan. What had become of him? Perhaps he had drowned himself or done away with himself in some other manner, for he had not returned as yet. However, Vasil hoped and was nearly certain that Ivan was too sensible and strong-minded to take his own life. That could only mean that he had found work somewhere. “Well,” Vasil thought when he had come to this conclusion, “we’ll see how he makes out among strangers. He’ll have a hard time there and when he returns he won’t be so proud any more.” This thought reassured Vasil, and he did not even inquire about his son after that. The more he drank, the foggier his head became; his thoughts were usually all muddled and he spent his time in the tavern or wandering about the village like a lunatic, falling into the deep snow-drifts.

Shmilo took advantage of Ivan’s absence and knew how to lure Vasil into the tavern. The shrewd innkeeper knew that he had some property left, even though it was neglected, and he fussed around with Vasil, advising, consoling and encouraging him, until eventually he drained every last drop he could out of him. In no time Vasil had spent the money Shmilo had given him for his land, then he sold his cattle and his grain, without even completely realizing what he was doing. Shmilo transacted all his deals with Vasil in the presence of witnesses, he drew up contracts for the two of them to sign, for he was terrified lest Ivan show up and not only forbid his father to further squander his property, but that he might demand that Shmilo return what Vasil had already sold him. However, Shmilo knew that Ivan had not gone far away. He had fallen ill and had been staying at a farmer’s place in Popeli, and when he had recovered he had stayed on to work for him because

he was terribly hurt by the fact that his father had not come to see him once during his illness, and that he had not even sent word to him with anyone, asking him to come back home.

“So, he’s renounced me, has he? Well then, he can go his way and I’ll go mine.”

Winter came to an end. Vasil’s hut was deserted, for he spent his days and nights at Shmilo’s tavern where it was noisy and crowded both weekdays and holidays. There were quite a few Borislav villagers who had reached the end of their rope, as Vasil had. There were many among them, especially those who were childless, who had no land left except a little vegetable garden and the tiny plot their huts stood on. There was a cloud of sadness hanging over Borislav that spring in spite of the animation. A plough or a harrow was a rare sight, indeed, on the fields, but there was no lack of speculators scurrying hither and thither like ants. Everywhere there were great piles of poles and twigs for wattle-work, windlasses, pumps, spades, and picks. There was plenty of bustle near the huts too. Here sawyers were at work, there carpenters were tapping away like woodpeckers, rough-hewing and sawing—building a new storehouse, a wide, squat structure for storing the oil. Coopers were planing staves for the barrels right out in the open. There was movement, noise, shouting, the screeching of saws and the pounding of axes, but this was not the fresh, lively activity of village life in the spring. These were ominous voices, the forerunners of a new way of life, one of filth, misery, and unhappiness which poor Borislav was doomed to from then on. Shmilo too had begun “in a grand manner.” He had hired several workers during the winter to continue digging the well he had bought from Vasil. Ivan’s predictions were incredibly accurate. When Shmilo’s men had dug down about a dozen feet they struck oil, and he made a clear profit of over a hundred and twenty guldens the very first week. With the coming of

spring Shmilo had sunk three new wells on the plot he had bought. In the meantime he kept fussing round Vasil, never giving him a moment's peace or letting him get sober. The shrewd innkeeper wanted to fool him out of his last patch of land. To tell the truth, he was just in time. Vasil was quickly going to the dogs: drink and grief were making short shrift of his health and mind.

Who knows how things might have turned out if poor Vasil had found warm, friendly, understanding hearts and sincere advice among his fellow-men? But such was not the case—and it was not because Vasil never had many friends, and not because the friends he had were wicked or unfaithful. No, our peasants do not know and the people of Borislav did not know what it means to desert a neighbour in distress.

But these poor souls believed every word the priest said to them in church with the same open hearts that sent them rushing to a neighbour's aid in time of disaster. It was not so much that they believed the miracles and dogmas he preached as what he said directly to them after the sermon. Naturally, no priest ever shuns the opportunity to lecture someone privately, feeling it imperative to remind his flock of matters mundane as well as heavenly. His Reverence never let a Sunday pass without hinting openly at Vasil and his sinful and godless way of life, telling them of the hell-fires that awaited him after death, and bemoaning the fact that a man who, until recently, had been the pride of the community, was now such a disgrace to them all. It is not difficult to imagine how poor Vasil felt, being admonished so with the eyes of the parishioners upon him, and knowing that the women were not just whispering among themselves, but were berating him. Eventually, when Vasil saw that the priest did not intend to leave him in peace, he stopped attending church to avoid hearing his name dragged through the mud each time. The attacks upon him became harsher, until finally

the priest openly said that Vasil "was a disgrace to the whole village" and forbade his flock to have anything to do with the unrepentant sinner.

Many were the times that poor Vasil would be sitting in a corner of Shmilo's tavern, timidly watching his neighbours talking and drinking and ignoring him completely.

He saw that they regarded him distrustfully and shied away from him as if he had the plague. If, perchance, someone would say a few words to him, they would be spoken hurriedly and coldly, with no trace of the warmth and sincerity with which good friends exchange opinions over a glass of wine. Vasil was becoming more and more unsociable. He would spend his days sitting quietly in a corner of the tavern, trying to collect his foggy, muddled thoughts.

His face gradually took on a glum and absent-minded expression common to idiots who have slowly lost all human semblance and have retained only their elementary, animal instincts.

XIII

It was evening. The May night was descending upon the earth in a light film of fragrance, freshness, warm mist, and cold dew. Two lamps were flickering in Shmilo's tavern, casting a dim glow over the large crowd gathered there.

Several men in worn, oil-soaked clothes were eating chunks of bread, holding them in hands that were so horribly filthy it was sickening to watch them. These were workers who had been down in the wells all day long, extracting oil. They had just been paid their weekly wages and each was thinking: "I'll make up for everything tonight, for I've had nothing to eat but bread and water all week!"

They were all sitting round quietly as yet; they had ordered bread, meat, and beer, and were gulping down their food as if they wanted to make up for the whole week at one sitting.

A second group of people occupied the main table. They were better dressed and more respectable, they spoke in serious tones among themselves, laughed loudly and seemed to feel quite at home there. They were Borislav residents who had dropped in for a drink and a few words with each other. Most of them were shivering in their boots at the mere thought of the tongue-lashing awaiting them at home when their good women would berate them for squandering their last copper at a time when there was no food in the house for the children—and the new crop was still months away! The poor fellows' knees were shaking, but what could they do? They had to keep up appearances and join the lively conversation, laugh and jest.

Long-legged, red-bearded Shmilo was sitting behind the bar. He had just come out of his cubby-hole, where he had worn a skull-cap and a cord-trimmed vest at his Sabbath meal. He could not seem to sit still by the wall and his knavish eyes darted restlessly back and forth. They did not stop when they came to the group of Borislav men: these were "ragamuffins" and there was not much to be got from them.

His gaze became more intent and his eyes lighted up when they reached the corner the oil-workers occupied. They were finishing their supper. Vodka glasses had appeared on the table, they were talking louder, laughing more frequently, and their jokes were becoming cruder. This was the usual "introduction to the dance." Shmilo knew very well that the young blood would soon begin to course faster beneath the patched and oil-soaked shirts, and then—all restraint would be thrown off. Who cared for money, health, or sleep! Make the most of life and

don't spare the liquor—such was their motto. Shmilo knew the way things were, for this was repeated every Saturday, and he rubbed his hands together contentedly.

Then his eyes sought out Vasil. The old man sat huddled on a bench by the stove, looking as if he expected some terrible blow to fall on his head at many moment. He was staring vacantly at the floor and sucking a short-stemmed pipe.

“Vasil! Hey, Vasil! Come over here!” Shmilo called to him.

At the sound of his voice Vasil rose slowly and walked over to the bar.

“Why are you moping there by yourself? Why don't you order something? Do you want a drink?”

“Ye-e-s,” Vasil said, jerking his shoulders. Shmilo poured him a drink and Vasil swallowed it at a gulp.

“Come here and sit with me, why stay there all by yourself? Do you want another drink?”

Shmilo did not wait for him to answer. He poured out a drink, handed Vasil the glass, and kept on refilling it until he felt assured that it was now safe to talk “business” with Vasil.

“Listen, Vasil, I wanted to tell you something,” Shmilo began in a soft voice that was lost in the general hubbub.

Vasil leaned his cheek on his fist and stared silently at the empty glass. Shmilo filled it up and Vasil lifted it to his lips mechanically. . . .

“You see, I wanted to tell you that . . . who knows, perhaps you'd be better off selling me your last patch. You've no use for it now anyway, because there's no one left to till it. I'll give you enough money for it to last you the rest of your days. Shall we drink to the deal?”

With these words Shmilo took Vasil by the shoulders and shook him roughly, as if he were trying to shake off his sleepiness. God knows whether Vasil had heard anything

Shmilo had said, but at the word "patch" something stirred in his befuddled mind, awakening in him a dark, uncertain, inexplicable fear. He looked at the innkeeper as though he were seeing him for the first time in his life, and, shaking his head, he mumbled:

"No, no! Never! I don't want to, do you hear me? I don't want to!"

A small child will often become obstinate and not know the reason why it keeps on repeating, "I don't want to! I don't want to!" There is no use then asking the child the reason why.

"Whatever you say, I'm not forcing you to! It's all the same to me. Why should I be bothered if your land lies barren?" the innkeeper said shrewdly, pouring Vasil yet another drink. He had already thought of a less dangerous and more certain plan. No sooner had he opened his mouth to resume the conversation than such a commotion arose at the oil-workers' table that Shmilo sprang to his feet and rushed over to restore peace and order.

"What's the matter? What's the matter?" his thin voice squeaked above the din and clamour. The vodka was going to the lads' heads. They had jumped up from their chairs and were waving their arms about and talking loudly. Their jokes had led to an argument and they were ready to start a fight when Shmilo rushed in to separate the half-drunk boys.

"What are you doing? Don't make so much noise! Can't you enjoy yourselves quietly and peaceably? Why do you have to fight and knock each other's teeth out?"

"You keep out of it, you damn bloodsucker!" several husky voices bellowed.

As Shmilo persisted in his efforts the lads yelled louder and banged their fists on the table, sending the bottles crashing to the floor. The noise was indescribable. Shmilo was putting on a good performance, screaming, "You're wrecking the place!" but at heart he was jubilant, for he

was now certain that he would wring the last copper out of the drunken boys.

Unmindful of the uproar, Vasil laid his head on the dirty table and fell as soundly asleep as a babe.

XIV

Time dragged on slowly and monotonously. In Borislav the peaceful orderliness of village life had been disturbed. Night and day the air was filled with the sounds of rumbling, hammering, shouting, quarrelling, and singing. No longer were the fields covered by a sea of corn, swaying and rustling in the warm breeze. The fresh, fragrant verdure had yielded to more and more hills of clay, below which mud- and oil-spattered boys and men toiled in the dark stifling depths; they worked haplessly from morning till night for a quart of vodka, piling up fortunes for their exploiters.

The summer was over and the wheat had been harvested, but that year the event was not marked by happy songs. Beyond the hills in Tustanovichi, Popeli, and other neighbouring villages there were as many haystacks in the fields as stars in the sky, but they were few and far apart on the Borislav fields. The harvest was poor the second year in succession—most certainly punishment sent down by the Will of the Lord!

Shmilo had sown Vasil's mortgaged field. Vasil had not even lifted a finger to help him, but the shrewd innkeeper looked after him as if he were a child; he fed and watched over him, encouraging him to drink, and took great pains to keep Vasil from going about the village. To tell the truth, Vasil himself had no great desire to do so, for whom could he visit there? The villagers all avoided him, although many of them were no better than he.

It was close to Intercession Day. Vasil was sitting mood-

ily by the stove in the tavern. True, his face did not seem sad, it had already lost all expression, but his lips kept whispering, as if he were dreaming, "Mikhailik, my dear lad, where are you? Why don't you come to see me? They're treating me badly here, driving me out of my home, disgracing me in front of everyone—me, the richest man in the village! Do you see, son, do you see what's happened?"

It is horrible to look upon a person who has lost his mind as well as his health. It is awful to hear such an unfortunate person reacting excitedly to some impulse and unconsciously expressing his thoughts in words, for he is no longer responsible for these words. Nevertheless, they echo the strongest impressions left in his memory by experiences of his former life. The words flow from his lips in a steady stream, but his eyes and his attention are far away, pondering over things that are confused and elusive. You cannot help thinking that it is not the man facing us who is speaking, but that another strange, unknown being is speaking for him.

Vasil's words, however, were based on the truth. Apparently as part of his general plan, Shmilo had grown colder towards him. Then he began to treat him as a servant and, finally, as a sponger. Poor Vasil noticed nothing for a long time. He was quite content with a few drinks of vodka and a bench by the stove to sleep on. However, the innkeeper was now sure of his prey and no longer had any intention of taking care of Vasil. He decided to get rid of him as quickly as possible. For instance, when Vasil woke up one morning and silently went over to the bar, stretching out his hand as usual, Shmilo met him with a derisive gesture. Vasil looked at him with his arm outstretched like a child who does not understand what it has been told.

"What do you want, you drunkard?" Shmilo shouted, and turned his back on him.

"Vodka!" Vasil answered.

"I won't give you any more! You can go to hell! I'm tired of having you sponge on me!"

"Come on, come on, let me have it!" Vasil demanded, paying no attention to what Shmilo was saying.

"Leave me alone, you drunken heathen! I don't provide free vodka! Pay me for everything you've eaten and drunk here! Pay up right now!"

Vasil opened his eyes wide and stood there, dumbfounded, staring at Shmilo. Shmilo lost his temper. He leaped out from behind the bar and shoved Vasil towards the stove with all his might. Poor Vasil hit his elbow on the wall and sank down on to the bench helplessly with his head bowed. It was at the very moment, while the innkeeper was muttering all sorts of threats and curses, that Vasil uttered the above plea to Mikhailik. His shaky voice echoed through the empty tavern and it was the voice of a dead man. The words he uttered were so unexpected that even Shmilo was taken aback.

"What's the matter with you? Have you gone out of your mind already?" he whispered.

Just then the door opened and a tall, well-dressed youth with a knapsack on his back appeared on the threshold.

"God grant . . ." he began, pulling off his hat and looking round, but he stopped in the middle of the sentence when he noticed Vasil sitting on the bench.

His eyes pierced the pallid, puffy face, watched the halting, unconscious movements of the hands and head. He stood silent for a while, as if he were trying to recognize in this wreck of a man the Vasil Pivtorak of old.

Shmilo's cunning eyes never left the lad. His face looked anxious for a while, but very soon his green eyes lit up with pleasure. He had recognized Ivan and guessed that the lad had come home after an absence of nine months to save his father, but Shmilo was positive that Ivan had returned too late.

XV

Ivan took his father home to the abandoned hut. Lord, how the poor lad felt when he saw everything so desolate, neglected, and in such a state of ruin; when he saw that there was neither a blade of grass nor a single animal where until recently life had flowed so peacefully, quietly, and contentedly; when he saw that everything was covered with dust and was overgrown with weeds! He shuddered at the sight, but he did not say a word about it to his father. While Ivan was inspecting the farm, Vasil had settled down in his old place on the stove-couch, although there was no fire burning in the stove and the walls gave off an unpleasant chilling cold, so common to all abandoned houses.

It was nearly evening. The sun was hiding behind heavy grey clouds, there was a cold wind from the west, and the weather was taking a turn for the worse; a heavy cloud of choking fumes settled down upon Borislav, as if poverty and misery were pressing down upon it. Ivan was upset by what he found on the farm. He was trying to think where to begin, and meanwhile set out for Kirnitsky's to buy some bread and fried sausage for supper. When he returned he found Vasil still sitting at exactly the same spot, shivering with cold. Ivan started a fire going in the stove and laid the bread and sausage before his father.

"Have a bite to eat, Dad, you've had nothing all day."

Vasil reached for the food, but his movements were awkward. It was as if his hands did not belong to him at all. He cut himself a piece of bread and kept holding it in his shaking hand, stealing glances at his son.

"What's the matter, Dad? Why aren't you eating?" Ivan asked as he was finishing his share.

Vasil said nothing. His eyes roamed strangely around the room, he looked under the bench, raised the bread to his lips, and stole another timid glance at his son, as if he wanted to tell him something, but was ashamed to do

so. With a sensitiveness natural to all poor people, Ivan guessed what it was his father wanted. He was like one who had shouldered a heavy burden, and his face grew sad as he headed towards the door.

"No, no . . . don't go . . . I won't, honestly, never again!" Vasil whispered when he, in turn, had guessed where his son was going, but by then Ivan was in the passage. In another second the outside door creaked and he had left the house.

"What a home-coming!" Ivan thought as he made for the tavern. "I was so sure that I'd find Father working at home, on the farm, and in the best of health, but look what has happened! What shall I do with him now? How can I take care of him and look after him? He'll have a hard time getting rid of the habit if he can't even swallow a mouthful of bread without washing it down with vodka! And on top of that, the whole place is falling apart! I don't know what to do."

Ivan was right in assuming that his father would have a hard time breaking his habit. The only way his old, tortured and broken system, burnt up by the excessive use of alcohol, could function was on the strength the accursed liquid supplied it with. Vasil would have died, had anyone decided to deprive him suddenly of the burning, killing drink.

In no time Ivan had returned with a quart of vodka. He sat down once more to finish his interrupted supper. Vasil's face showed a little life and his eyes lighted up a bit after the second glass, but the conversation flagged; despite Ivan's urging, Vasil merely nibbled at the food.

"Well, Dad, what are we going to do? Where do we begin?" Ivan said as he cleared the table and set the bottle of vodka on the corner shelf. Vasil remained seated on the stove-couch. He was trying not to look at the bottle, he turned the other way, sighed, and did not know what to do with his hands. He looked at it furtively once

and turned away timidly again after Ivan had taken it from the stove-couch and placed it on the shelf. Ivan did not notice this. He was worried about getting the farm going once more.

"I haven't made much—only thirty guldens—but it will be enough for now. I'll have to look around here for a job in the spring, though."

"Yes, yes, my boy," Vasil said.

Ivan talked on for a long while, never once mentioning the fact that his father had let the farm go to rack and ruin; Vasil kept nodding in agreement. He dozed off several times and often raised his eyes to the ceiling casually, then shifted his gaze to the shelf where the bottle of vodka was standing.

"What do you say to going to bed?" Ivan finally said, seeing that he could not get a word out of his father.

"Yes, let's go to bed," Vasil agreed immediately. "You must be tired, lad."

Ivan did not answer. He began the evening prayer, undressing at the same time and hunting round for some rags for his father to lie on.

Ivan could not fall asleep for a long time, either because he was lying on the hard cold stove with nothing but his coat for a cover, or because it was so cold in the hut, or, perhaps, because his keen disappointment at finding his father and their household in such a terrible state, which had given him no peace all through the day, was now driving sleep away. The poor lad had no idea that the actual state of affairs was far worse than it had appeared to him at first glance. Vasil was lying quietly and seemed to have fallen asleep. Around midnight Ivan finally began to doze off. He was suddenly startled into wakefulness by a strange rustling noise, coming from his father's bed. Ivan lay with bated breath. He heard soft steps, as if someone were walking barefoot about the hut, then the rustling of

someone feeling his way along the walls and benches. Ivan's first thought was that the weird rumours about his mother coming to haunt the house at night were true, and his hair bristled from sudden superstitious fear. But then he heard the clang of a pot that was standing on the shelf, and the bench creaked beneath a heavy weight. Ivan strained his eyes in the dark until he was able to make out the dark outline of his father, who was standing on the bench, holding on to the top shelf with one hand and feeling around in the corner with the other. "What's he up to? What is he looking for in the dead of night?" was Ivan's first thought, but a second later a strange gurgling sound made it all only too clear to him. Ivan was both repulsed and enraged. "You old drunkard!" he muttered, and immediately felt great compassion for his father—after all, he had not sunk so low voluntarily. Perhaps Ivan too had added his bit to make him what he now was. Why had he left him at a time when the old man was exhausted, broken and crushed with grief, and could not have reacted differently than he did? Why had he not forgiven his father that moment of rage and held his tongue? "What shall I do with him now? Who will take care of him when I am away at work all day? Oh, Almighty God, why are You punishing me so severely?"

These thoughts drifted through Ivan's head like heavy autumn clouds. The liquid in the bottle kept gurgling until, apparently, there was nothing left in it. Vasil placed the bottle back on the shelf with a shaky hand and crept back quietly along the wall until he reached his bed. He collapsed on it with a deep, heavy sigh and was sound asleep in a moment. He slept the whole night through without once changing his posture; at times asthmatic wheezing escaped his chest, a sound country folk call in a sadly humorous way: "Christ is bubbling in his chest."

XVI

No words can describe Ivan's shame and disappointment the following morning when his eyes met his father's. When Vasil awoke he too seemed ashamed of his lack of will-power. Ivan looked at his father as calmly as he could, but the old man thought there was anger and disapproval in his son's eyes. He trembled like a little child does at the sight of a strap, and mumbled in a barely audible voice:

"Ivanochko, that was the last time . . . I won't do it again, honestly. . . ."

No sooner had Ivan got settled and cleaned up the hut a bit than the sexton came in at a run. He was a small, dry little man with greying temples, but quite active and lively for his age.

"Praised be the Lord!"

"For ever and ever, amen," Ivan answered.

"Oh, Ivan, I'm so glad I've found you at home, son," the old man began hurriedly. "I kept thinking as I was running here: what if he's gone already? But here you are! I'm glad to see you, son, because His Reverence sent me to fetch you right away. He has something to tell you."

"Me?"

"Yes. And he asked Brother Vasil to come along too. Brother Vasil, put on your things, His Reverence wants to see you. Yesterday, when he found out that Ivan had returned, he said, 'Well, I shall have to have a little talk with him.' Hurry up!"

The words tumbled from his lips as he pranced back and forth, turning from Ivan to Vasil, waving his walnut cane like a snuffer. Ivan was surprised at the unexpected invitation. "What does he want to tell me? Perhaps, he'll give me the same kind of advice he gave me last year?" he thought. Vasil sat there, nodding silently, as if in a dream, but his drawn, unhappy old face reflected neither curiosity, surprise, nor any other emotion.

“Well, Dad, we’ll have to go to the priest. Who knows what he wants us for?” Ivan said when the sexton had left.

“Yes, yes, by all means, son,” Vasil replied, rising.

Ivan helped him on with his sheepskin coat, buttoned up his own coat, and the two of them set off through the mud, left by the previous day’s rain.

The Borislav priest was a middle-aged man of medium height, a very ordinary, average sort of person one is likely to meet anywhere. His face did not have a single outstanding feature, his character lacked any striking trait or strong passion. There are many such people among the so-called educated classes of our society. Their cold, calm blood will never—or very rarely—clash with their intellect, therefore, their intellect, never meeting any great opposition, usually never rises above the level of quiet, everyday living. However, once it does rise above that level, it feels rather insecure. Such people do not find it difficult to be decent and honest in the usual, everyday meaning of the word, and if they happen to be in positions of authority, pastors or public leaders, their subordinates are usually satisfied with them, no more. The Borislav priest was an honest man who sincerely wished all his parishioners the best of everything, but he was so taken up with his household affairs and the monotony of his everyday life that he never even had a free moment to consider whether the good he wished them could be achieved, or how it could be done. He merely delivered didactic sermons, that is, he prescribed the set of rules he had been taught at the seminary and never ventured beyond the limits of an abstract teaching of moral behaviour. It would be unfair to say that his words were ever directed against anyone in particular, or that his actions were motivated by profit or anger or any such thing. If, at times, he would demand from a well-to-do person more than was customary for some service rendered, it was not because he was greedy and profit-seeking, but because he

believed in the tenet: "One who has more must give more."

The priest had come to notice that his parishioners were getting poorer, that profiteers kept arriving in the village in ever-increasing numbers and that it was beginning to affect his own income as well. This prompted him to pay more attention to his flock, summoning in his spare time one or another church-goer for a private audience, a fact without precedent in his church. Naturally, he lectured them from a moral and religious—not a practical—point of view. Just such an admonition was in store for Ivan and Vasil.

Vasil appeared before his pastor as frightened and trembling as a peasant lad who has come to school for the first time and meets the bewhiskered school-master, with cane in hand. His faltering, hazy thoughts became hopelessly muddled, he dropped his hat to the floor and stood looking at it for a long time. He bent down and groped around for it, as if he were trying to pick it up, but at that moment the priest began speaking. Vasil raised his eyes to him involuntarily and stood bent over thus, feeling around on the floor for his hat and unable to pick it up.

The priest addressed Ivan first.

For some reason or other he pretended not to have noticed Vasil. Perhaps, he wanted to humiliate and shame the "unrepentant sinner" still more by addressing the younger one first, the son before the father.

"How are things, Ivan? Have you come home for good now?" he asked the lad, sizing him up pompously.

Ivan felt as ill at ease as his father did. He bowed a second time and took a step backwards so as to call the priest's attention to Vasil.

"Yes, I'm home for good, Father. The sexton came by this morning to say that Your Reverence wanted to speak to my father. He's been having some trouble with his legs, and that's why I came along with him."

"Ah, I see you've come too, Vasil!" cried the priest in a surprised voice, as if he had just noticed the old man. "Well, well, we haven't seen each other for quite some time, have we? You must be very angry at me for some reason or other! Eh? You've stopped coming to church altogether. It must be that we've angered you! Perhaps what they say is true: 'You won't get anything in church, but at Shmilo's you get a glass of vodka for a measure of corn.' They might be right!"

Vasil was still gazing at the priest out of bleary eyes as he felt around vainly on the floor for his hat. It was all too apparent from the dull, senseless expression on his face that he had no idea what it was His Reverence wanted of him.

"Tell me how you've been living all this time, Vasil," the priest continued mockingly, but when he saw that Vasil had no intention of answering him, he turned towards Ivan quickly and resumed their conversation, "Ah, yes, I forgot to ask you how things were coming along. Is the farm in good order or not? You know, the elder and others too told me that in your absence Shmilo had free run of the place and took away anything he could lay his hands on."

Ivan was at a loss for words at this unexpected turn of the conversation. The priest had touched his sorest spot, and the lad hesitated, not knowing whether he should tell His Reverence of the true state of affairs or not. Then he decided that there was no use trying to conceal his troubles, especially since his father could neither be left alone in the house nor be given any work to do. What he needed most were peace and good care, but what could he do? Now, if only His Reverence. . . .

A splendid thought flashed through Ivan's head. He asked the priest to permit his father to sit down, and then the two of them went into an adjoining room. Ivan told him of all his troubles, of their ruined farm, and of the

ailment that was sapping his father's strength. When he had finished his story he asked His Reverence to help him.

"Hm-mm . . ." the priest said, shaking his head. "Do you see what all this leads to, my boy? Beware of wine as a fiery Gehenna! You're asking for my help. How can I help you? What can I do? Tell me yourself—what can I do?"

"You know what, Your Reverence? Take my father into your house. Let him stay here with you a while. After all, in your presence . . . he'll feel shy and won't get . . . you know. . . . And we can settle the matter of his room and board later. If only he would improve a bit. In the meantime I'll try to get the farm going, and then, with God's help, we may be able to see the light again!"

When the priest heard this strange proposition, he opened his eyes wide and his jaw fell, as is often the case with us plain folk. He was of an impressionable nature and these words astounded him. He began to consider the matter this way and that, to see whether any good would come of it; and then, who knows, perhaps having such a person in the household would be a burden. But Ivan was convinced that this was the best of all possible solutions, that the priest was the only one to be entrusted with his father's care, and he pleaded so fervently that the priest finally agreed.

Ivan felt pleased, and went to tell his father the news.

"Well, what do you say? His Reverence wants you to stay here in his house under his guidance until the spring. Are you willing?"

It was with difficulty that Vasil finally understood him.

"Did His Reverence say that?" he asked a moment later.

"Yes," Ivan said. "Will you remain here?"

"No," Vasil said, shaking his head emphatically.

"Why not?"

"What will you do?"

"Me? Don't worry about me. I'll be better off if you stay here."

Strangely enough, Vasil immediately grasped the meaning of these words. A deep, burning pain gripped his heart—the last dying embers of a truly paternal feeling. He said nothing, but his mouth puckered up in such a sad, pathetic way, like that of a child that has been punished through no fault of its own. His drawn, sallow face seemed to be saying: "I've lived to see the day when my own son won't have me." Ivan understood this and added quickly:

"Oh no, Dad! Don't think that I don't love you or anything. God forbid! What kind of a son would I be then? What I mean is that I'll be running back and forth to work and different places every day, and what will come of you? You're ill and weak, what will you do all alone in the house? That's why I asked His Reverence. . . . You know, you'll have much better care here. . . ."

"So, *you* asked His Reverence?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Nothing, nothing at all. If that's the case. . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"Then I might as well stay here."

"Do, do stay here, Dad. Just until the spring. Meanwhile, I'll set the place in order, you'll get well, and we'll be together again, just as nice as you please."

Ivan kept on talking, but it was useless, for Vasil was not listening to him. When an old man's feelings are wounded, the pain in his heart does not pass so easily, and especially so if the person is ill. Then any wound, no matter how small, becomes ten times more painful than it would ever seem to a strong and healthy person. Their parting was sad and mournful. Meanwhile, the priest was pacing up and down in the next room, considering the best and quickest method of making the old sinner repent. It must be taken into consideration that the priest believed Vasil's

morbid idiocy to be nothing more than a stubbornness and obduracy common to all hardened sinners, and he therefore decided to spare no effort to cure that stubbornness and thus soften Vasil's sinful heart.

XVII

When Ivan left, Vasil looked around for the first time and, seeing that he was all alone in a strange room, he felt anxious and frightened, as if danger were close at hand. His eyes were startled by the unaccustomed sight of clean, white walls. Through the windows he could see a small orchard; the trees had all turned yellow and the paths were overgrown. Farther on, beyond the narrow mown field, were the sighing dark-green pines, the Carpathian grove the people of Podgorye called Dil. The view seemed so wonderful and breath-taking, so new and fresh after the stale air of Shmilo's tavern that Vasil wanted to go right out and fill his lungs with the cold autumn air. The priest entered.

"Well, Vasil, you're to stay here."

"Yes, Your Reverence," Vasil said, nodding.

"But you'll have to earn your keep and do whatever you can, you know."

"I will, Your Reverence."

"And you'll have to forget all about Shmilo, my friend. I will be very strict on that account."

For no apparent reason Vasil hung his head and said nothing.

"Today you will take a spade and a rake and clear the paths in the orchard. Will you be able to do that?" the priest asked.

"Yes, Your Reverence!"

"Run along to the kitchen now, and they'll give you something to eat first."

At this Vasil finally picked his hat up from the floor and shuffled off into the kitchen.

Grey clouds moved across the sky from behind Dil Forest and sprinkled fine, cold rain upon the valley. The damp wind blowing through the orchard shook the dry leaves from the branches. The world was grey, sad, and dreary. It seemed as though a heavy burden hung over the earth, pressing upon all living creatures, making breathing difficult, hampering all movement, and driving away happy thoughts. It seemed to be hanging over Vasil too as he hobbled along the steep paths in the orchard. He was warmly dressed, but was shivering with cold. The fresh air, far from being invigorating, chilled him to the bone and weighed upon his chest like a stone. The beautiful scene, far from being a pleasure to the eye, cast a gloom over him, once he had got used to it; it awoke a terrible, long-forgotten grief in his heart. In vain did the poor man try to move faster and warm up by working, in vain did his shaking hands reach for the spade or the rake—he had no strength left, his whole body felt suddenly numb. “Ah, I could use a wee drop to warm me up,” Vasil thought, but he put the frightening thought out of his mind, recalling the priest’s words: “I will be very strict on that account.” While he was thinking, the spade and rake fell from his hands, and everything around him seemed to have disappeared. “How cold it is! I just have to warm up. . . . Then I’ll feel much stronger and I’ll really get down to work!”

These thoughts darted back and forth in his head, but meanwhile a strange dark force was urging him on and on into the far corner of the orchard, to the hole in the fence, beyond which was a well-beaten path that led to the village. “No, I won’t go, I won’t be tempted, I have to get control of myself. . . . What will His Reverence say?” flashed through Vasil’s head, but by then he was already climbing through the hole in the fence and hurrying down

the path as fast as his legs could carry him, heading across the field to Borislav.

The priest was busy in the barn and did not notice Vasil's absence till after lunch. He immediately began questioning the servants, but no one had seen him leave. Klimko, an elderly servant, even said, "Who knows, perhaps the poor fellow has fallen into the swamp and died there, because it was plain to see that he didn't have long to live." But Father only waved his hand impatiently at such chatter and objected, "That's what you say! He's a good-for-nothing drunkard and he's crawled back to the tavern! I can tell by his eyes, you know! Someone go down to the village and see whether you can find him in one of the taverns! I want to see him right away!"

With these words His Reverence retired to his room. Old Klimko shook his head, as if he did not want to believe what he had just heard. "What's it to me?" he said a moment later. "Hey, Sen, get dressed and run over there, since His Reverence said so. We'll see. . . ."

Strong, twenty-year-old Sen did not have to be told twice. He put on his cloth jacket in a flash, buckled it with a narrow belt, and set off at a run for the village, his small sheepskin hat pulled down low on his forehead. He was pleased, for he had a sweetheart in the village whom he otherwise would not have seen till Sunday. Besides, he was hankering for a glass of vodka, as the priest could not even stand the sight of it in his house. Needless to say, Sen reached the village in no time, but once there he spent quite a while at widow Gnatikha's house, chatting with the old woman and with his sweetheart Olyona, who was just about to scutch flax in the passage.

He finally recalled why he had been sent to the village.

"What a memory I have, Gnatikha!" he said. "I completely forgot why I came! Have you seen old Pivtorak around?"

“Pivtorak? What do you want him for?”

“His Reverence sent me to fetch him right back to the parsonage.”

“Fetch Pivtorak to the parsonage? What for? Bah! You asked me whether or not I saw him. Indeed I did! He stumbled into the village around noon and headed for Shmilo’s place. I even said to myself, ‘There goes old Pivtorak to sell his last inch of land for a drink!’ Then I heard people shouting near the tavern. I ran out and saw that Shmilo’s wife was beating Pivtorak up right in the middle of the street. She was shouting and screeching, and pounding poor old Pivtorak all over, but he kept his ground and had one eye on the tavern all the while. ‘Goodness, what could have happened?’ I thought. I ran over to them and a whole crowd gathered. ‘What’s the matter? What has happened?’ Shmilo’s wife screeched still louder, ‘I don’t ever want to see this boozer again! Why does he come breaking into my house?’ The people said, ‘Wait a minute, woman, stop hitting him and tell us what’s happened.’ Then she opened her big mouth and shouted. ‘It’s none of your damn business, you muzhiks, you louts! You can all go to hell!’ ‘I hope you drop dead from cholera!’ I thought and asked Vasil, ‘What’s happened?’ He just stood there like a fool, and finally sighed and shuffled over to Moshko’s tavern.”

“What? To Moshko’s tavern?” Sen asked.

“Uh-huh, over there, to red-headed Moshko. He must be there now, because I didn’t see him leave.”

Sen did not stay to hear the end of the sentence. He tore off down the dirty side-streets to Moshko’s tavern.

This is what happened to Vasil. When he had left the priest’s orchard he had started out unsteadily towards Shmilo’s place, muttering, “You’ll have to forget all about Shmilo, my friend,” and telling himself that His Reverence would be very angry if he got drunk, and that Ivan was a bad son and did not love his father, for he wanted to drive

him out of his own house and get rid of him altogether. Despite these thoughts and words, Vasil kept going on and on, without even caring where or why. He was not in the least surprised to find himself standing out in front of Shmilo's tavern and did not hesitate to go in. He walked right up to the bar and stood there silently, his hand stretched towards Shmilo's wife, as he waited for his usual drink of vodka.

Shmilo was not at home. In the spring he had struck oil in Vasil's well and by the summer was extracting it in the three other wells dug on the land he had bought from him. Naturally, Shmilo's capital had grown quite impressive by that time. But it was not enough. It had taken him a long time to increase his holdings, and he had finally attained his goal. He had gone to Drogobich to settle everything with the authorities. His wife, of course, knew nothing of his business affairs, but she did know that there was no reason to be good to Vasil any more. She became enraged when she saw Vasil's outstretched hand and, like a true barmaid, she began to scream, curse, and disgrace him in the eyes of the others. But Vasil paid no heed to her curses and remained standing there silently, his hand stretched across the bar, until the ranting woman sprang at him and shoved him in the chest with all her might. As it was, Vasil was barely able to stand up. He swayed, lost his balance, and tumbled over. Unfortunately, there was a table with empty bottles and glasses directly behind him, and he fell right on it. The table shook, the bottles and glasses fell and crashed and tinkled as they hit the floor, shattering to bits, but Vasil remained unscathed. The barmaid, however, was deafened by the noise of broken glass and flew into a blind rage, screeching to wake the dead, and pushed poor Vasil out into the street.

Once again Vasil found himself in the fresh air. He stood there for a while, his mind a blank, understanding nothing of what was going on between the angry villagers and

Shmilo's wife, and finally walked on down the dirty side-street. Someone hailed him from the window of a hut even dirtier and more dilapidated than the rest. He turned round and stared at it and at the sign over the door that betokened a tavern in our parts, and entered, not knowing who had called to him, nor why. The tavern was called "Red-Headed Moshko's" and was one of the most miserable and loathsome places in the whole world. The rotted floor was thickly covered with slime, bedraggled men in black, oil-soaked rags were sprawling out on the filthy benches and under the tables. Their faces were sallow and horrible and bore the traces of sickness, fatigue, laziness, want, and God knows what other "dreadful sins." Two men were standing in the middle of the room, hoarsely croaking an incoherent song. When Vasil found himself inside the tavern he completely forgot that someone had hailed him and walked straight up to the bar, stretching out his hand as he had at Shmilo's place. Red Moshko knew Vasil well, he knew his circumstances, and was certain he had no money for vodka, but when he saw his stout sheepskin coat he decided it was well worth a quart of vodka, and so he quickly poured out a large drink and handed it to Vasil.

"Ah, Pivtorak! I see you've come in! I saw you plodding along and decided to call you!" Moshko said, but Vasil stood there staring at him and neither recognized the man nor understood what it was he was talking about.

When he had finished his drink he held his glass out, and Moshko filled it up again, and again, and again, until Vasil gradually began to feel a warmth spreading through his chest. He sat down on a bench by the wall and gazed about through bleary eyes as he kept swallowing glass after glass.

.
Sen was in no great hurry to leave Gnatikha's house, but when he heard of what had happened to Vasil he realized it was time they were back at the parsonage and so dashed

over to Moshko's. When he got there he saw Vasil lying unconscious, minus his sheepskin coat. "He has not been losing time!" he thought. "Now, where do we begin? How will I ever drag the poor fellow back to the parsonage? Ah, we'll manage somehow!" he said cheerfully and swallowed a large glass to fortify himself. Then he began to shake Vasil.

"Hey, Pivtorak, old man, get up! Come on now, hurry, old man. Easy does it!"

It took Sen a long time to shake some sense into the old man. Then he quickly raised him and dragged him through the village, sinking up to his knees in the heavy mud. He was half-dead by the time he finally reached the parsonage.

His Reverence was aghast at the sight of Vasil. In the beginning he shouted and reproached him, but soon realized that it was all in vain, as Vasil had understood nothing of what he was saying.

"Just you wait," the priest shouted, "I'll deal differently with you from now on! Put him down on the bench, Sen, and go up to the attic and clear out the closet. Don't worry, he'll be all right there; he'll be fed well and it won't harm him, but if he goes off on another spree like this two or three times more it'll be the end of him!"

Vasil was sitting on a bench in the passage, leaning against the wall. His muscles were flabby and he could hardly keep his head up: it kept dropping on to his chest or wagging from side to side. He could not keep his dull, sunken eyes open, and his blue, parched lips twitched with fever. The priest was striding up and down the passage, his long cassock billowing out behind him. Occasionally he would look at Vasil, and his face either expressed sadness at the sight of the "lost sheep," or rage, or God knows what other righteous feelings.

Sen returned to say the closet was ready. The priest ordered him to get hold of Vasil and help him up to his cubby-hole in the attic. It was no easy job for the lad to

drag the limp, unconscious body up the stairs—the old man kept stumbling and losing his balance, as he could not manage to raise his foot high enough to reach the next step. He was finally made comfortable on an old trestle-bed with clean bedding, a pillow and a blanket. Sen undressed him and put him to bed, and the priest himself brought him a pitcher of water, some bread and other food, and locked the door when he went out. Vasil Pivtorak felt nothing of what was going on; when the priest was locking the door he was already fast asleep, but it was the fretful sleep of a sickly person whose body is burning with fever.

XVIII

Night fell. Vasil's shelter was steeped in darkness. The cold crept in through the chinks in the wall. From the kitchen below came the sound of snoring and an occasional cry. Vasil was lying on his bed like a log, he did not even move a muscle, but his breathing was laboured and uneven and a hollow asthmatic wheeze that resembled the jarring sound of a broken crock escaped from the depths of his chest.

Suddenly, he stirred. The blanket slipped off and fell to the floor; the iron fingers of cold gripped him and he awoke. His hand moved over his body subconsciously, for he had dreamt that he was sinking into the damp earth, that it was pressing upon him and choking him and he was trying helplessly to crawl out of the living grave. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead, he was breathing hard, wheezing louder than ever, and his teeth were chattering uncontrollably—either from fear or cold.

He was straining his eyes in the dark, and he fumbled around, trying to make out where he was, racking his sick brain in an effort to recall what had happened to him. In vain! His fingers felt nothing save the wooden

wall, his eyes saw nothing in the utter darkness, and there was a humming inside his head, as though it were an old windmill, a buzzing and screeching as if someone were scraping a knife across a glass pane; his throat was parched, thirst burned and pressed upon him like a scorching stone, and he was aware of the blood rushing to his eyes, pressing on them from within, as if trying to force them out. In addition, as soon as he stirred, he felt the pangs of hunger, for he had had nothing save vodka in his mouth since the previous day, and had been too embarrassed to eat his fill that morning in the priest's kitchen. Thousands of foggy, jumbled thoughts passed through his brain: "Where am I? What has happened to me? Am I really sinking into the earth?"

He tried to get up from the trestle-bed, but failed. His weakness only served to increase the terrible certainty that he was falling into a bottomless chasm, into the next world. Fever and thirst made the blood pound in his head, his thoughts a jumbled mess. His bulging eyes distinctly saw enormous stone walls which seemed to be flying up past him in the darkness: he was falling into Hell! O Lord, save a poor sinner's soul! He wanted to cry out, but something was gripping his throat, as if he were choking on his own voice. He began to struggle desperately and writhe convulsively until he finally fell exhausted and senseless back upon his bed.

He was unconscious for no more than a moment: the cold and a burning thirst soon brought him back to his senses, brought him back to life to make him suffer still more. His teeth chattered loudly as he tried again and again to rise. His aching, fever-wracked body was more acutely sensitive to any contact and to pain than ever before, the pitch-black darkness which seemed to have blinded him aroused his morbid imagination. He thought he had fallen to the very bottom of Hell, and that horrible, loathsome creatures were springing out upon him,

shaking him, tearing him apart, striking him on the head with iron hammers, gouging his eyes with red-hot irons. He thought he was being tied to a rack and made to swallow boiling tar. All the punishments set aside in the sermons as being meted out to drunkards now appeared most horribly before him. He lay there moaning helplessly for a long time as one who is dying and suffering terribly—if not altogether physically, then from a feverish imagination. There was a raging fire in his throat, the buzzing in his head drowned all thought, turning everything into the most terrible and revoltingly weird voices he had ever heard in his whole life.

There was the sound of a windlass creaking, as on the day Vasil had pulled his son up from the well for the last time, and there was the hollow sound of a falling body which splashed heavily into the deep chasm, and the mother's awful wailing; there was every single thing that had crushed his happiness, shattered his life like a thunderbolt, and had plunged him, a respected and well-to-do villager, so deep into the abyss of misery, illness, and despair.

And then poor Vasil thought he saw the past arise: all the people that had been dear to him rose up from everywhere, their faces livid, their eyes bloodshot, for misery and despair had left their mark on them. His three sons were in front, their mother behind them, then came a whole crowd of friends and neighbours, once wealthy Borislav villagers, as he himself had been, whom he had advised to sink oil wells and who had turned into beggars, as he had, or had lost their lives, as his sons had. They were stretching forth their hands to him from every direction, moaning, crying, screeching, laughing, coming ever closer and closer, treading on his feet, on his chest, pressing upon him and shoving him. Their touch was as cold as ice and chilled him to the bone, pressing on him like a great mountain. His heart stopped beating and a deathly sweat trickled down into his eyes, when suddenly, from the depths of

his tortured soul, there came a terrible cry: "Have mercy on me! Why am I to blame? Do you think I wished misfortune upon you? Am I better off than you are?"

He thrashed about on the bed, exhausting every last ounce of energy he had, and then tumbled off and crashed to the floor, where he lay motionless and lifeless.

When Sen came in the next morning and saw Vasil lying huddled up in his blanket on the floor, he got frightened and decided he had died. But when he heard him breathing, he lifted the old man, laid him on the bed, and fixed the pillow. Sen felt sad just looking at Vasil's parched blue lips, his sunken eyes and his face all covered with blue and yellow blotches. "Oh, he won't be taking up place in this world for long now," the lad thought as he tucked the blanket round him. Vasil opened his eyes and whispered hoarsely:

"Water! Water!"

Sen gave him a drink. Vasil could not tear his parched lips from the crock for a long, long time.

"Would you like something hot to eat?" Sen asked.

Vasil nodded. He was terribly hungry. A few minutes later a servant-girl brought in a plate of good, rich borshch, and Vasil began to eat it with relish.

"Perhaps you've fallen sick, Vasil?" Sen asked.

Vasil did not understand what he had said. Just then someone called Sen and the lad had no time to wait for an answer. He looked around to see whether Vasil needed anything, and when he had made sure that there was some bread and water and hot baked potatoes and salt, he went out quickly and locked the door behind him.

Vasil lay there for a long time, his mind blank, staring at the same spot on the wall by the door. He had a hazy recollection of the previous night and all the horrors and torture he had gone through. He had become so weak and all his bones ached so that he was afraid to stir, lest he feel the pain in his body.

He lay like that the whole day, getting up about two or three times to have a piece of bread, a few potatoes, or a drink of water. He drank a lot, as he had a terrible heart-burn and wanted to drown it with water.

When the priest came to see him about noon he found Vasil lying on the bed.

"Don't get up, stay where you are," the Father said, seeing that he was struggling to rise. "Well, what happened to you yesterday?"

Vasil did not answer. For some reason or other, he felt sad and depressed.

"Well, where in the world were you yesterday?" Father asked ironically. "I see you had more than you could take."

"Forgive me, Your Reverence . . ." Vasil babbled, but stopped when he noticed that His Reverence looked glum.

"Vasil," the priest said severely, "I thought you were an honest man and that I could take you at your word. I thought: 'I'll take him into my house, where he will find peace, where he will be cared for, and, perhaps, the man will get well and cease being a disgrace to the whole parish.' But far from that, my Vasil no sooner puts a foot out of the house than he heads straight for Shmilo's place! If that's the case, we just won't make out. That's not what I expect of you! If I had known how things were going to turn out, I would have thrown you and your son out yesterday! Ah, Vasil, what a shame, what a disgrace! I can't even let you out of the house any more, because I don't want you to hang around with drunkards. You just stay here under lock and key where it's nice and quiet, and they'll bring you your food and everything else. It will be best that way!"

The priest looked around to see if everything was in order in the cubby-hole and locked the door behind him. Vasil was left alone with his muddled thoughts, his aching body, the fever, and a cough. It was bearable until the evening. He did not clearly understand as yet what was

happening, and this state of arrest was still new to him. He was burning and terribly thirsty. He drank the cold water, and while he was drinking he felt that it was cooling him and making him feel better, but a minute would pass, and another, and the internal burning would re-appear. Nevertheless, Vasil felt calm that day and even dozed off towards evening. He had some thin oatmeal with milk for supper and felt much better for a while. Then night came, an endless, sleepless, terrible night. No sooner would Vasil close his eyes than the little room would come alive and fill up with the most repulsive vermin and all sorts of monsters. There were red-bearded innkeepers who crawled around and sucked his blood like gigantic leeches and who threw him into the hell-fires. . . . Vasil felt the unbearable heat within himself, terror gripped his throat and drained his strength, the blood rushed to his eyes, his chest was bursting with coughing. By morning he was completely exhausted.

“Are you ill, Vasil?” Sen asked.

“Ah,” Vasil said, looking at him, and this “ah” could have meant anything at all.

Sen left, and no one else came to look in on Vasil all day long. Towards noon he began to feel much better. He had stopped drinking water and even felt an aversion to it, although he was still burning up inside. He was tired of lying in bed, and despite his weakness he got up and began to walk up and down the room on shaking legs. He scanned the walls, as though seeking something, he knew not what. The monsters did not appear that night, but he was still burning up with the fever. He walked about the next day too. The terrible weakness made him feel that his body was numb. It was a strange, unpleasant feeling, as if he were drying up like a mushroom in a hot oven. It seemed to him that his skin was cleaving to his bones, that his burning blood was rushing to his head without bringing life to his limbs.

Poor Vasil spent two long weeks in the cubby-hole. Boredom and solitude, fever and the horrible hallucinations he began to see even in broad daylight tortured him, burned, devoured, and sapped the remaining strength in the tired old body. He began to scream at night and beat about in the closet, his eyes burnt with a wild, strange fire, and his eyelids became black, as if the fever his eyes exuded had turned them to charcoal. The priest often came to see him, gave him some kind of medicines, and even ordered Sen to sleep with Vasil. But the medicines were of no help, and Sen slept like a log after a day of threshing.

Finally Vasil ceased writhing and screaming. All his strength was gone, and the last sparks of life seemed to be going out. He lay there on the trestle-bed, his yellow face drawn, his feverish head burning, his chest heaving with each breath, his cough choking him ever more. There was a rattle in his throat, and nothing save a deep terrible moan passed his lips.

When the priest saw that Vasil was close to death, he sent Sen to fetch Ivan.

"Let him get the doctor from Drogobich. I would have sent you," the Father said to his worker, "but there's work to be finished. Tomorrow is Sunday."

Sen made straight for the Pivtorak hut, but as he approached the place he gasped with amazement. There was not a trace of it to be seen.

XIX

Ivan hurried home with an easy heart after he left his father at the parsonage. On the way he was thinking of where to begin and how to live through the winter. "First of all," he thought, "I must buy some grain now in order not to be left without any bread during the winter, and then, of course, the main thing is to have enough left to

sow in the spring. There's no sense buying grain in the spring—the price is too high. I'll have to get some clothes for father, some boots and other things." The very next day he set out for Drogobich, where he bought several measures of rye and a coat and a pair of boots for his father. He put all this on a neighbour's cart and set out for home on foot.

As Ivan made his way through the mud along the paths to Borislav his soul was filled with foreboding. On his way to Drogobich he had met Shmilo driving on a cart to Borislav with some officials, and a vague feeling of misfortune, trouble, and impending ruin pierced his soul. He was now hurrying home, out of breath, bespattered with mud and drenched with sweat, running as if he was afraid his house would go up in flames or that thieves might steal God knows what kind of treasures from it.

Ivan's premonition turned out to be true. As he approached his yard he saw Shmilo and some gentlemen outside the hut. During the day they had already gone around his field and were now examining the outbuildings and the garden. They were holding some kind of papers and kept writing something down, speaking German to Shmilo all the while.

"What can it be?" Ivan thought, and timidly came out from behind the hut.

"Praised be the Lord!" he said, bowing low to the gentlemen.

They turned around and sized him up. Shmilo said something to them, pointing to the surprised lad.

"Are you Ivan Pivtorak?" one of the gentlemen asked in broken Ukrainian.

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Where's your father?"

"May it please Your Grace, he's ill in the parsonage."

"Do you know this gentleman?" the stranger said, pointing to Shmilo.

"Yes, I know him, he's Shmilo," Ivan answered, as he fumbled with his hat.

"Do you know what it is he's demanding of your father?"

"No, may it please Your Grace. What does he want?"

"He says that he fed, clothed, and took care of your father for a whole year. Is that true?"

"I don't know, Your Grace. I was working away from home at the time. But the people here told me it was so."

"Mr. Shmilo has produced letters and agreements. He says they show exactly how much money he gave your father, what your father sold him, how much he had eaten and drunk. There are witnesses to all of this. We have questioned them and they have confirmed everything. And now, my good man, you owe Mr. Shmilo three hundred guildens. Do you know that?"

"Three hundred guildens!" Ivan cried in horror. "Merciful God, where can we get three hundred guildens? It's . . . impossible!"

"You see," the gentleman said, "Mr. Shmilo cannot wait, the authorities have ordered that your hut and field be sold to cover the debt. There's nothing more to be said!"

Ivan was dumbfounded. He folded his arms on his chest and now stood silent, miserable, and spattered with mud—the image of hopelessness and despair.

"Have mercy, Your Grace," he finally uttered with great effort, as the hot tears rose to his throat. "What shall I do without the house, without a roof over my head?"

"What do you mean? Find work, find a job. That doesn't concern us!" the gentleman answered.

"But I have an old sick father who cannot work. What will I do with him?"

"No one made the louse drink!" Shmilo muttered.

"That doesn't concern us! The debt has to be paid," the gentleman answered, and they set out to find the

elder, in order to conclude the valuing and transfer the property to the innkeeper.

Ivan remained in the hut. He was broken and crushed, empty of hope or thought. The words that had been spoken were like sharp knives mercilessly piercing his heart. However, as a fatally-wounded person usually feels a lighter wound more than the fatal one, so did Ivan feel shaken most by Shmilo's sarcastic words: "No one made the louse drink!" He could not drive these words from his mind, they writhed in his brain like hissing snakes, worrying and troubling him, robbing him of his peace of mind, devouring all hope, sowing despair and anguish. He stood there in the middle of the yard, looking around with unseeing eyes, and then he went into the hut, fell down upon a bench, and wept bitterly at his unfortunate lot.

The very next day the elder, a witness, and Shmilo arrived at Pivtorak's hut at the break of dawn. The elder stood there a moment, twirling his moustache, and informed Ivan, as he tapped his cherry cane on the bench, that the gentlemen had valued his land and the outbuildings at two hundred and eighty guildens and that Shmilo had the right to take what he could in order to make up the other twenty. Then the extremely pompous elder looked round the room and saw the coat Ivan had bought the day before hanging on a peg, and the grain on the stove-couch. He winked to the witness, who threw the coat over his arm in a second and placed his other hand on a sack, as a sign of his authority. After issuing these orders, the elder turned to Ivan and told him that there was nothing for him to do in the hut any more, and that it was now entirely up to Shmilo whether or not he would permit Ivan to spend the winter there. Of course, Shmilo was against it. "He'll get stuck here," he said to the elder, "and then I'll never be able to drive him away. I have no need of such a guest." Poor Ivan had no choice but to leave his home for ever. The very next day Shmilo sold

it to another profiteer who lost no time in hiring workers to tear down the old Pivtorak home. They carted the logs away and used them to build a storehouse; nothing save the broken stove could prove that there had once been a human dwelling there, and that one of the scenes of the eternal, great drama of life with all its everyday occurrences, with the flashes of happiness and joy, with the clouds of misery, grief and unhappiness, had just taken place.

Widow Gnatikha told the sad tale to Sen when he called on her after seeing the remnants of the Pivtorak farm. He listened, but could not believe his ears.

Then he inquired after Ivan. Gnatikha had not seen him the past two weeks and had not heard a thing about him. "Don't you think people have enough trouble of their own, son?" she said. "It's true . . . the old saying goes: 'If you hear of someone's trouble it's bound to come to you too.' You see, I had no time to inquire about Ivan. He's probably working in some well near by. Look around, you might be able to find him. Today's Saturday and they finish work earlier."

Sen set out to look for Ivan, but it was no easy job to find him among the hundreds of dirty, oil-smearred faces, among the hundreds of workers crowding taverns as filthy as they themselves were, taverns full of smoke, deafening shouting, noise, uproar, curses, and singing. He walked the streets of Borislav all day long, breathing hard from fatigue and churning up the mud, asking around and questioning the workers about the whereabouts of Ivan Pivtorak. Although some actually did know which well he had found work at, they were just as positive that he had not worked that day and that if he had got his wages he was drinking hard, and God knows in which tavern at that. Thus, Sen was forced to return to the parsonage without having found him. The sun had just set beyond Dil Forest when he reached the house.

True enough, Ivan was actually drinking desperately. When he had been driven off his land he had not known what to do. His first thought had been to go and tell his father what had happened. "What's the use? What can I say to him?" was his next thought. "I'll gain nothing by telling him—it's no use crying over spilt milk and the shock of it might kill the old man!" Having decided not to tell him, he set out to find work at the very first place he came to. "Maybe the devil will break my neck there pretty soon and spare me a lot of misery, or maybe I'll make out and earn some money." He was not long looking for work. Sherer hired him to work in his well for a gulden a day, with payday once a week, and an advance for the job. But Ivan's soul was constantly tormented by unbearable anguish, and the very first Saturday he felt his pay in his pocket, his feet took him straight to a tavern. It was an evening of hard drinking. "To hell with everything!" the unfortunate lad would shout from time to time. His companions' laughter, shouting, praise, and back-slapping stunned him, excited his blood, and made his head swim. Towards morning he rolled off the bench in a drunken stupor and slept through the whole day. He awoke Monday morning, counted up what money he had left (there were only two gulden), sighed heavily, and with lowered head set out for work once more.

But Ivan had no desire for drink that day. His young and healthy system rejected the poison. What he wanted was peace and happiness, not mental torpor or momentary forgetfulness. It was past midnight, but he sat there in a corner, lost in thought, the drink on the table before him untouched.

"Hey, Ivan!" a fellow-worker shouted right over his ear. He had just come into the tavern, although it was evident that he had already had quite a bit to drink. "What the hell are you hiding for? They've been asking around for you all over, but no one knew where you were!"

"Who was looking for me?" Ivan asked.

"The priest's worker. He said you were to come to the parsonage I think your father's getting married or something!"

"What?"

"Knucklehead! What's the use of talking to you, if you never understand anyway! Your father's ill, do you understand?"

The man began to make his way through to the bar and was soon lost in the crowd.

Ivan realized that things must indeed be bad if His Reverence had sent a servant to look for him. He wanted to set out immediately for the parsonage and find out what the matter was. "But maybe it's not as bad as all that," he thought, "and I'll get the whole house up. They might even get angry. I'll run over first thing tomorrow morning."

Ivan sat at the table in the corner for a long time, thinking of his life and grieving; there wasn't a soul to say a kind word to him, to console him, to cheer him up, although there were so many human voices humming all around him. But what was the good of that? The voices belonged to the same kind of poor devils without house or home as he himself was, men who were trying to drown the anguish in their hearts and their burning sorrow by frantic shouting and bellowing.

The next morning Ivan slept later than he had expected and upon rising immediately set out for the parsonage. As he was passing the cemetery, he saw a large crowd gathered there. They had surrounded a man in a worn jacket who was waving his arms and telling them something. Driven by curiosity, Ivan came closer to the railing and was dumbfounded by surprise and happiness. The man standing in the crowd of peasants and talking excitedly to them was his father.

XX

It was truly a miracle. The priest and the servants could not cease wondering at the change that had come over Vasil Pivtorak. The previous evening he had been very ill, all night long they had heard his moans and incessant coughing. But Vasil had awakened in the morning apparently in perfect health and had asked the priest to let him go to church. What had happened? How had he got well so quickly? The entire household unanimously decided that there had truly been a miracle.

Actually, there had been no miracle at all, and the priest would have seen it right away if he had taken a closer look at Vasil, and especially noted his eyes. They were burning with a consuming, unnatural fire, his lips never stopped twitching nervously, his arms and legs were trembling so uncontrollably that one had not to be a good doctor to see it was not good health that had got Vasil up from his sick-bed, but a terrible attack of fever, and that this excited state was his system's last effort, the last living spark igniting before the light went out altogether. However, the priest had no time to waste on scrutinizing Vasil. He soon left to conduct Mass and then returned to the house to deliberate on his sermon.

Meanwhile, Vasil had asked Sen to walk to the church with him, as he apparently was not completely well yet and was a bit shaky on his feet. He too believed he had been miraculously cured. A curious crowd of peasants gathered round him at the cemetery, and Vasil began to tell them in great detail of his former sinful life, of his illness, and the terrible hallucinations he had had, of the tortures he had gone through. "But Holy Mary took pity on me. The Lord heard Her prayer and cured me, my good friends. I'll tell you how it happened. This morning I lay there in bed, but I wasn't sleeping. . . . The door opened without a sound, and a woman in white entered with such

a bright halo around her it blinded me. She came up to me as I lay there trembling and saying my prayers. She laid her hand on my chest, my friends, and I felt as if a millstone had been lifted off it. 'Do you feel better?' she asked. 'Yes,' I answered. 'You should never have sinned. The Lord will punish you still more severely if you do. Go along now, my good man, and lie in front of the chancel like a cross for three days, then go to confession and all your sins will be forgiven.'"

Vasil went on talking and talking, the crowd kept growing, his old friends shook his hand, seeing that the Grace of God was indeed with him. The church-bells began to ring mournfully for Mass, and the people headed for the church, crossing themselves piously and kissing Christ's feet that were nailed to a large crucifix before the church doors. Ivan could not make his way to his father through the crowd, although he would have been glad to speak to him. Someone told him what the old man had been talking about, but Ivan did not know what to make of it. He tried hard to believe everything he was told, but something inside him whispered, "No, that's all wrong." However, he decided to speak to his father after Mass, and so entered the church. The service had already begun. There, on the floor, right in front of the chancel lay his father. He had on a dirty shirt, a worn coat, and was dishevelled and pathetic-looking as he lay there, face down, his arms spread far apart—the embodiment of a broken, crushed man, humbled in the presence of his conqueror. From every side curious eyes were on him. Mothers carried their little children over to show them the "strange man on the floor," and if any of the children began to cry, they scared them by telling them that God would make them lie like that too if they were not quiet. The old women whispered and sighed piously, raising their eyes to the heavens and wagging their heads, while the sexton sang on monotonously in his

high-pitched voice, secretly taking a pinch of snuff whenever the priest commenced an especially long prayer.

Vasil Pivtorak lay there motionlessly. It seemed to him that the cold floor beneath him was breathing, that it rose and fell like a giant's chest. It seemed to him that the cold floor was draining off the unbearable heat of his body, soothing his fever with its coolness, dulling his choking cough—he felt better, and better, and better. He could not seem to remember any prayers, but he did not feel like praying anyway. His whole life flashed by him—but not life as a collection of chance incidents, misfortunes, and worries—he thought of his life as a purely vegetable phenomenon. It seemed to him that his body was a heavy burden to him, a rock, iron shackles that had pressed upon him and hindered him from as far back as he could remember. Even now he felt it still pressing upon him with some of its weight, constricting him with the last link of the chain. Onward! Throw off the rest of the burden! Hurry, onward! Tear off the last link in the chain! Freedom! Freedom! No words were needed. How light-hearted and happy he felt! How light and bright the world could be when there was no stone pressing upon his chest! Onward! Hurry onward!

Meanwhile, Mass was progressing along slowly. His Reverence began his sermon after the Gospel. His face was lit up. After the invocation—today, however, it was intoned more loudly than usual and, apparently, quite sincerely—“Let us rejoice this day, granted us by God!”—the priest began his sermon, the story of the Prodigal Son. He explained at great length and quite eloquently that there was more rejoicing in Heaven at the sight of one penitent sinner than of many righteous souls. “Fellow-Christians,” he concluded, “you see such a wastrel and sinner here before you now. He has been brought back upon the right path by the Grace of God's Saints. There is great rejoicing in Heaven today, for today the Lord has found a lost sheep and returned the honest parishioner to the fold. May we

rejoice and find consolation, fellow-Christians, for there can be no greater joy than to see one's neighbour returned from the path of sin to the road of eternal salvation!"

Meanwhile, the penitent sinner, the Prodigal Son, the lost sheep, was lying quietly and motionlessly on the floor. He had not stirred once during the sermon. When the parishioners wanted to lift him up and help him out of the church after the service, they were shocked to see that they had lifted the cold, stiff, lifeless form of the "repentant sinner."



THE POLUIKA

(An Old Oil-Worker's Story)

I

Ah, our old Borislav isn't the town it used to be! The bosses squabble now, and so do the workers. No one is well off. Men work like horses in harness, digging into the earth, extracting oil and paraffin wax. One might say: all this is the gift of God! It's gold! It's wealth! But if you look closer you'll see it all disappearing some-

where without leaving the least trace behind it. It's as if the devil had swallowed all of it. The more they extract "God's gift," the poorer the people become. I can't seem to understand how this comes about, but it's the truth nonetheless. The wages are not what they used to be, there's no merriment or drinking like in the old days, and a man goes to Borislav like an ox to the slaughter, as if saying, "It's my turn now! If I survive, I'll never earn good money, and I'll be glad just to be able to keep body and soul together." There's no sense nowadays in thinking about a poor man scraping enough together from his pay to buy something for his household, or of his becoming independent and changing from worker into boss as was sometimes the case in the old days. There's nothing but poverty on all sides!

Things were different when I was a young man. You should have seen Borislav about thirty years ago! There was a lot to see and hear in those days. This miserable so-called town did not even exist and there were nothing but shallow wells along the stream. They never dreamed of the kind of hundred- or hundred-and-fifty-yard shafts you see now. I remember, we'd dig about thirty-five or forty feet down—sometimes seventy or eighty feet, but that was a great day indeed!—and you'd feel the choke damp coming up, bubbles would rise from the bottom, you could hear a hissing and a gurgling—oho! that meant it was time to cover over the well! We'd board it up for the night, and the next morning we'd tear the boards off and find a well full of oil waiting for the buckets.

You should have seen the bosses hopping around such a well, smacking their lips, dancing round us workers! They all but kissed our hands! And how they stood us all to drinks, saying:

"Ivan, man, here's to your health! The drinks are on me! What do you say, can we board the well up today?"

"No, we'll have to dig deeper."

"Maybe we can board it up today though, eh?"

"Do as you wish, but you'll be wasting your time."

And it was just as the worker said. Oh, they tiptoed round us in those days and treated us quite differently than now, because they were still small themselves and were just beginning to dip their spoons in the honey.

What workers there used to be then! What a fine set of lads they were! Not at all like the present-day trash coming to Borislav. The pick of the lot came here in those days, some were even rich farmers' sons, but the majority were poor—they were farm labourers or orphans, people who had spent all their days working for someone else in the sweat of their brow, who had never in their lives had a gulden in their pockets, and had never tasted anything except borshech, sauerkraut, and vodka. And here they were, being offered a gulden a day! And it was all yours: you didn't have to account to anyone for it, you didn't have to split it with anyone, you didn't have to worry about anyone! No one paid any attention to you, or knew you, or looked to see how much you had. You were one of a gang of fellow-creatures just like yourself—you were your own master and could live as you liked. Ah, how we lived! We worked honestly, but after the day's work was done, how the wine would flow! You'd have got an eyeful then! There's no sense even in thinking about such merriment now. There was shouting, and singing, and drinking, and brawling, and joking, and all sorts of tomfoolery, all just to get the money out of our pockets. A real oil-worker would have been ashamed not to drink up his week's earnings of a Sunday. It mattered not whether he had paid for his board or not, or whether he had put a little something away for a rainy day or not—in the tavern, among his friends, he was a lord. Vodka, beer, roast meat—he'd order them all.

"To hell with everything! Who knows but that the devil

might come for me tomorrow or the next day? Drink and be merry, lads, while the drinking's good."

On Sundays, aye, and on Mondays too, there would be such a racket and commotion in Borislav, you'd think a hundred synagogues had been thrown together. We drank and had a fine time, and then we'd join hands and start off down the road between the barracks. That's what old Borislav was like: the village was a bit off to the side and there was a road right here, on the site of the town now, bordered on both sides by barracks, with just a few houses going up here and there. Well, sir, there we were, stumbling down the road, bellowing at the top of our voices:

*Don't wail, dearie,
When I drink,
You'll do that, dearie,
When I'm dead!*

If the boss would come up to us and say, "Hey, Ivan, it's time to start work!" oh-ho! would he ever be sorry he said it! We'd all close in around him, as if we were the best of chums. One of the boys would stick his hand in a barrel of oil and smack the whole mess on his back! Another would stick his hand in and let him have a beardful; a third would put his hands on the man's shoulders and say:

"What's your hurry, Moshka? The devil will come for you the same as he'll come for us. We'll die oil-workers and you'll die a rich man. Don't worry, it'll all be there for you. Come on, let's have a drink! Ah, what a pretty sight you are! Ai-ai, your own dear Sura wouldn't recognize you now!"

The boss would try to put a smiling face on things, but he was really ready to burst from rage.

But what could he do? The muzhiks were like bears, and drunk to boot. There were neither policemen nor

gendarmes in Borislav then, and the bosses didn't dare get too uppish.

Ah, but they learned soon enough!

II

Now, what was it I was going to tell you about? Oh yes, about the *poluika*! There are not many men alive today who remember it, but in those days the oil-workers looked forward to it as a child looks forward to a sweet its mother brings home from the town.

You see, it was the custom then that the first barrel of oil from a new well went to the workers of that well. They could sell it to whomever they wanted to or else the boss could buy it from them. Not that there was big money in it—it was ten and later fifteen guildens altogether—but for the four men working the well it was a tidy sum. As soon as the word would spread around that they were nearing oil in one or another of the wells, they'd raise up a shout all over the fields:

"There'll be a *poluika* there the day after tomorrow for sure!"

There's no need for me to explain what that meant. It meant there would be such drinking there that the last copper would be finished off on the spot. That's why the workers flocked to the *poluika* like matchmakers to a wedding.

I don't know who got that custom started, but you can be sure it wasn't the bosses. They didn't like it at all, but there wasn't a thing they could do about it. Since that was the custom, the workers would have wrecked a boss's diggings and would have shoved him head first into a barrel of oil if he had refused to give them their free barrel. While the bosses were still poor they gave it willingly, then they became a bit richer and frowned upon

the custom, then they began to argue about it, and finally, after the big fire of 1874, they did away with it altogether.

I'll tell you about one such *poluika* I witnessed.

There were three of us working a well for Iona: Grits Khomik, who's an elder in Zapaly now, Ivan Karapuz—he's dead—and myself. Iona had a funny surname, but we all called him "three-bearded Iona" because his beard was divided into three parts; the sides were grey and the middle was black. He looked exactly like a dark-plumed gander. He's been pushing up daisies a long time, and he died all because of this *poluika* I want to tell you about. His son Borukh is really down and out, he's a carrier in Drogobich now.

Iona came to Borislav from the mountains. Some said he had made a bit of money selling cattle and that he now wanted to get rich in Borislav. The first thing he did was to get a plot of land from a peasant woman. I can't say that he bought it cheaply, for that would mean that he gave her something for it. No, he got it for nothing: all he gave her was two quarts of sweet vodka. She was a lonely old woman and she had a hut and a small plot of land far out beyond the village, near the swamp. Before he died, her husband had sold some of his land to booze on, and she was only too glad to get rid of the rest of it. She drank up the sweet liquor, slept off the effects, then sewed herself a knapsack and some bags, crossed herself, and set out to beg her way in the world. Iona lost no time in sinking two wells on that plot of earth.

For some reason or other, he had no luck at all. Everything about him showed his eagerness to make a pile of money: he kept running back and forth, sniffing around, urging on the workers, peering down the wells, and trembling from head to toe in his impatience. Our boys hated that kind of thing and used to play tricks on him. For instance, they'd haul in a bucketful of oil from somewhere and in the evening they'd pour it out into the well. Next

morning, when they'd pull up the tub filled with clay, Iona would really do a jig.

"Oh-ho, there it is, there it is! There's oil in my well! Ivan, is there a lot of it there?" he'd shout down to the man in the well.

"There's so much of it that I can't even see any."

"What? What do you mean? But there's oil on the clay."

"Ah, Iona, don't you know that that's the earth dribbling!" Ivan would shout back from the well.

"How can it dribble? I never heard anything about the earth dribbling."

"That means the oil is much deeper, and this is just the froth."

"Will we hit oil soon, Ivan? Will we hit it soon?"

"It said it would be around, but meantime wait a while," the worker would answer angrily and whack his pickaxe against the hard soil with all his might.

"Good luck then!" Iona would say and trot off towards the other well, to hear "the earth dribbling" and the oil saying, "Wait a while."

Many's the time the boys fooled Iona like that; they'd be all doubled up, bursting with laughter. However, while they were busy laughing, Iona was beginning to lose his patience. Actually, it wasn't so much that he was running out of patience, as he was running out of money. He didn't have too much put away to begin with, and each day brought new expenses, for he was sinking two wells at once and putting up the framework at the same time. His wells were milking him dry, but they weren't bringing in any money. Once, on a Friday afternoon, apparently after he had counted up his capital, he came over to his plot, walked around, peered down the wells, smacking his lips, snapping his fingers, and smoothing out his three beards all the while, and finally came over to me—I was working the pump that shift.

"Listen, Ivan, do you think we'll hit oil soon?"

"Who knows?" I answered.

"Is the earth dribbling on the bottom of the shaft?"

"It seems to have stopped."

"Can you smell the gas?"

"No, I can't."

"Maybe we're not digging in the right place?"

"Everything is possible."

"Maybe we should start in another place?"

"How do I know?"

"I was thinking about that little hollow over there. What do you think, Ivan? Do you think we'd strike it sooner there?"

"Who knows?"

"I think we'd strike it at thirty-five or forty feet at the most."

"What makes you think that?"

"You see, Nuta Grauberg is digging right near there in the same hollow."

"So what if he is? He hasn't dug down to anything as yet."

"There is ooze on the bottom."

"Well, if there is ooze there, that means the oil is close to the surface."

"Then maybe we should start a well there too?"

"Whatever you say."

"It's a shame to abandon these."

"Yes, it is."

"If only one could tell what will come!"

"Yes, if we only knew!"

That was how Iona discussed the matter with me. God forbid that I tried to influence him one way or another!

I knew as much about where we should dig and where we shouldn't as he did.

Iona kept pacing back and forth, mumbling something, making mental calculations, talking it over with the other workers for a few more days, and finally he said:

“Start boarding up the wells, boys! We’ll start new ones in a different place.”

It was all the same to us. If he wanted to start new wells, that was all right with us. In fact, it was even better as far as we were concerned, because it was easier to work on the surface.

III

Nuta Grauberg was Iona’s closest neighbour and worst enemy. Perhaps it was only his imagination, but he was positive that everything Nuta did was just to spite him. He bought a plot next to Iona’s to spite him, and got it practically for nothing, as Iona had. To spite him, he started digging two wells too, but he was a more cautious man, and so started one well on the hill next to Iona’s two, and another in the hollow, where Iona was now going to start his wells. The neighbours hated each other’s guts. If Iona chanced to meet Nuta of a morning he would turn and spit after him, and if Nuta met him, Nuta would never miss the chance to wish him most heartily, “The devil take your father!”

Iona was greedy, fussy, and cringing. He had a bad temper, whereas Nuta was calm, enjoyed a good joke, and treated his workers like good neighbours. Sometimes he would stop for a while near his shed, watch Iona bustling about his wells, and knowing that the workers were making a fool of him, he too would join in.

“Hey, Iona!” he’d shout.

“What?”

“Is your well dribbling?”

“I hope you bust a gut!” Iona would answer and walk off towards his well. He would potter around there for a while, as if he had forgotten something, and then walk away. A few seconds later we’d hear him say:

"Nuta!"

"What?"

"Tell your men not to dump your dirt on my plot."

"Fence off your plot then," Nuta would answer.

"I'll fence off your mouth first."

"Are you crazy? What do you want?" Nuta would shout.

"You're crazy yourself! It's you who are bothering me!"

These quarrels kept getting worse with each passing day, until both enemies finally agreed jointly to build a high fence between their plots. However, the fence did not bring them peace. Iona watched Nuta with envious eyes, praying each day that Nuta's wells would cave in, that he would "bust a gut," and that he would never have to look upon him again. Nuta seemed to be paying Iona in kind. The day black ooze smelling of oil appeared on the bottom of Nuta's well in the hollow Iona was beside himself, he could not eat or sleep before he had his two wells on the hill boarded up and two new ones started in the hollow—although the black ooze could not be refined and could be marketed only as lubricating grease.

"Hey, Iona!" Nuta jeered from behind the fence. "Are your wells dribbling?"

"Just as much as yours are."

"When's the *poluika*?"

"We'll celebrate together."

"Have you got the oil barrels ready?"

"I'll have them when the time comes."

"Was it your cooper who went to the forest today for hoops?"

"He is as much mine as yours."

"You know, I'm really indebted to you, Iona."

"What for?"

"For letting me have the hill."

"I let you have it?"

"Sure. You dug down sixty feet and so did I. Now I'll

dig another fifteen feet and all the oil from your wells will flow into mine."

"You're welcome to it! I hope you have as much all your life as there is in my well!"

Nuta was only joking, but Iona really wished him everything he had said. Meanwhile, fate played a different trick on both of them. About two days later Nuta's well on the hill filled up with oil. Nuta was the first to celebrate the *poluika*, and he invited us to join in the merriment. Iona nearly had a stroke.

"Ai-ai, what have I done! Why did I have to board up my wells!" he wailed and tore his hair. "I would have reached oil by now, but instead this pork-eater will get it all! His well is deeper, and everything on my plot will run downwards towards it."

"Don't worry, Iona," I said. "If there's oil in Nuta's well there'll be oil in yours too. He dug eighty feet, and you dig ninety-five, then all the oil from his well will run down into yours."

"You're so right, Ivan! You're so right!" Iona shouted. "Come on, boys, stop everything on the new wells, we're going back to the old ones!"

"Wait a minute, Iona," I said. "That's not the way to do it. Leave one team here to dig one well, and the other can return to the hill."

"You're right, Ivan, you're absolutely right," he babbled. "I'll repay you for your good advice. The minute we hit oil I'll get you up such a *poluika*, the likes of which you've never seen!"

"We're counting on you for that and hope you aren't the kind to back out. Did you see how they celebrated over at Nuta's?"

"What do I care about Nuta? Who's Nuta? A nobody, a swine! What does he know about anything? He'll soon be setting off to beg alms, you just wait!"

In the meantime Nuta was drawing up bucket after bucket of oil from his well, carting off twenty barrels a day to the refinery, while Iona stood by his shed counting Nuta's barrels, gnashing his teeth, and choking with rage and envy. There were carts and horses, noise and commotion on Nuta's plot, but it was quiet and empty on Iona's; the silence was broken only by the squeaking of the windlass pulling up a tubful of earth and the screeching of the pump used to ventilate the shaft.

"Hey, Iona!" Nuta would shout from beyond the fence.

"What do you want?"

"Is it true that you're getting ready to board up your well tomorrow?"

"I hope God makes your words come true."

"I wanted to tell you something."

"What?"

"If you don't board up tomorrow, sell it to me."

"Go choke on your own well."

"Now why are you getting mad? I'll pay you back all the money you laid out, plus five shistkas smart money."

"May your tongue wither in your godless mouth!"

"You know what, Iona?"

"I don't want to know."

"I can see you're a good-natured man. So as soon as you sink all your money in the earth, come and be my foreman."

"And as soon as you become a beggar, you can come to see me twice a week and you'll get a pfennig each time."

"All right, Iona. I'll remember that, and you remember what I told you. And don't forget, when you're ready to sell your wells, come to me first. After all, I'm your neighbour, and I'll pay you well!"

"May you never live to see the day!" yelled the furious Iona and retreated to his shed.

IV

Every word that Nuta said in jest was fated to come true.

This last clash had taken place on a Thursday. On Friday afternoon I was working my shift in the well. I could feel the gas coming up stronger and stronger, making me dizzy. I rang my bell to signal the lad at the top to pump as hard as he could.

"What's up, Ivan?" Iona shouted down. "Is that gas?"

"Yes."

"Is the well dribbling?"

"Can't see anything yet."

"Is it gurgling?"

"Can't hear anything yet."

No sooner were the words out of my mouth than—would you believe it!—all I had to do was touch the clay with my pickaxe and something would go *hiss-ss-ss* wherever I did! It was as if there were a bellows blowing out the gas. Then something like froth or bubbles appeared on the bottom.

"Aha!" I said to myself, "there'll be a *poluika* tomorrow! Or even today. But Iona's not one to let us celebrate. Thank God his Sabbath is about to begin! We'll celebrate our own *poluika* and have one we'll long remember!"

Such were my thoughts, but all the while I kept listening to the sounds. It was as if there were something moving in the earth underfoot, gurgling and ready to burst forth and drown me. I was choking from the gas, although the lad at the pump was doing his very best.

I stopped for a moment and tried to decide what to do, but the moment I stopped Iona shouted:

"Hey, Ivan, why did you stop?"

"I'm all in and the gas is choking me."

"Maybe it's dribbling?"

"It's a long way off yet!"

"Maybe it's gurgling?"

"Yes it is, it's gurgling."

"Oi, really? Ivan, tell me the truth!"

"It's gurgling in my stomach—I had a late lunch today."

"May you always jest and never be sick. Well, keep at it."

"Blast you!" I said to myself. I knew that if I swung hard just once more the oil would come gushing up. Then the boss would see it, he'd make a fuss, leave a watchman at the well, and that would take care of our *poluika*—at best we'd get a wee drop. The idea didn't appeal to me at all. That's why I went on banging away, but at the sides of the well instead of at the bottom. No matter where I struck the earth it would hiss and wheeze—*shhhh-s-s-s*! It was unheard of, as though there were tons of oil rushing in from somewhere. You could actually hear it pressing onwards. I did everything I could to stretch the minutes out till evening. I twisted and turned, scraped and fussed, but I kept sending up tubs of dry clay without a trace of oil in it. Then my lamp began to flicker. There was too much gas in the well. I've a strong head, but even it was beginning to let me down. Everything was spinning round, and there were green and red circles whirling before my eyes. I felt nauseous, as if someone had stuck a dry spoon down my throat—I just couldn't take it any longer! I rang my bell for them to haul me up.

"Ivan," Iona shouted from above, "what's the matter?"

"Pull me up, I can't take it!" I shouted. Then I swung my pickaxe with both hands and sunk it as deep as I could into the bottom of the well, where the clay was already all slippery with oil; I had a thin, strong emergency cord with me and I tied it to the end of the handle.

"Start pulling!" I yelled.

They began pulling me up. As they were pulling I kept unravelling the cord and fastened the end to a knot on the framework right near the top of the shaft. It was dark in

the well and from above they couldn't see me, but I knew my business.

The minute my feet touched the ground I fell over in a heap.

"Oi-oi," Iona cried, "he's been poisoned by gas! Ivan! Ivan! What happened? Can you hear me?"

I heard him well enough, but I was playing dead. I held my breath and turned blue. The boss was really scared.

"Ai-ai! Help! Water! Revive him!"

"Get some vodka!" the lad at the pump shouted.

Iona rushed to get some vodka from his bag. By the time they had rubbed me, revived me, and given me a bit to restore me the sun had gone down. That was what I was waiting for.

"Ivan," Iona wheedled, bending over me with the bottle of vodka, "is there anything in the well?"

"There's a horned devil there! Nothing but choke damp."

"No sight of oil?"

"May it all burn up there and you together with it!"

"Well, you mustn't say such things! After all, it's God's gift."

"You mean the devil's, not God's! I saw no signs of oil, but I nearly left my soul down below."

"Do you think we'll strike anything?"

"Sure we will, but I can't tell when. There's a lot of gas, but no sign of oil."

"It'll come, it'll come, Ivan," the boss cried happily.

"It won't come by itself. We'll have to dig another eight feet or so, and then it might come in."

"Oi," Iona cried as if he'd been stung. "Another eight feet? I thought we could board it over tonight."

"You can do what you like. But the only profit you'll get from it will be so much gas in the shaft that tomorrow we'll have to have two pumps working till noon to clear it enough for anyone to stick his head down the well."

Iona couldn't make up his mind. He was trembling with

impatience, but, on the other hand, he knew that I wasn't one to throw my words to the wind. He made a last attempt at arguing.

"Eh, Ivan, you're not fooling me, are you?"

"Go down the shaft yourself if you don't believe me!"

"All right, don't get angry! Let it be as you say. So, you don't think we can cover it over this evening?"

"Just the other way around: we'll have to leave it open to let the gas escape. It's quite a way to the oil yet."

"Stay here tonight, though. What if there's a gusher tonight? If anything happens, Ivan, I want you to let me know right away, hear?"

"Don't worry, Iona," the lads said. "Even if Ivan wanted to leave, he couldn't, he's too weak."

"Don't leave him here by himself, boys."

"Do you mean you expect us all to spend the night beside your well? To hell with it! Who ever heard of an oil-worker with money in his pocket not spending it? Can you hear the music over at Mendel's place? Let's have our pay!"

"No," Iona said. "You know what, my good fellows? You spend the night here! I'll pay you tomorrow, even though it's the Sabbath. But I won't give you anything now, so that you won't be tempted to go and spend it all on drink. You'll have some bread, vodka, and sausages here. I'll tell Mendel to attend to it and let you have a lot of everything, but I don't want you to go anywhere. Just this night, do it as a favour to me. Keep an eye on the well! I've got a feeling that something's going to happen tonight. And if, God grant it, something does happen, even if it's late at night, please come and tell me right away."

He didn't stop talking for a second, trying to get on the right side of us, he'd walk off and come back again, wheedling and fawning. We could see he hated to leave

the well. He kept walking up to the shaft, sticking his head down the yawning hole, sniffing the heavy gas that was pouring out of the well, and listening for anything that might be gurgling down there. He was dying to hold a lighted lantern over the shaft and look down, but it was a dangerous trick, as the whole place might blow up. I was still playing sick and was lying in a corner of the shed on a pallet of straw used by whoever remained to watch the well at night. I was lying there on pins and needles: what if that damn oil would gush out that very second, what if it began to hiss and bubble and gurgle! I thought I could hear it gurgling several times, but it was just my imagination. Iona finally took himself off. The first star had appeared in the sky and it was time for him to sit down to his Sabbath eve supper. I raised myself from the straw and watched Iona until he was a small spot in the distance. He lived a good quarter of a mile away in the village with his wife and children.

"Well, he's gone at last! He certainly won't come back now!"

V

"Hey, lads!" I called to my friends. "Come here!"

"What's the matter?"

"We'll have our *poluika!*"

"When?"

"Now."

"What do you mean—now? Is there oil there?"

"Not yet, but it's there waiting for my signal. Someone go get Nuta. I think he's still on his plot."

"I heard him and his foreman having a row," one of the boys said.

"Run over and get him, tell him to come here, but do it in such a way that no one will suspect anything."

One of the fellows cleared the fence like a cat and was

off to find Nuta. Meanwhile, I felt my way towards the well.

"Hey, two of you come here! Hold on to my feet—but don't let go!"

Without a word they grabbed me by the legs. I crawled over the edge of the shaft and down the framework until just my feet were above ground; then I found the knot with the cord I had fastened to it earlier. The gas was choking me, but I didn't care. I wound the end tightly around my hand and cried:

"Haul away!"

As they pulled, I yanked the cord, and that dislodged the pickaxe in the bottom of the well. I could feel the tip pulling up a big clod of clay. At that very second something in the well whistled, rustled, hissed like three dozen vicious snakes, and then gurgled and bubbled like boiling water in a huge pot. My friends knew what it was.

"Oil!"

Just then Nuta came rushing into the shed.

"Well, what do you want?"

"Listen to that, Nuta!"

He didn't have to listen for long.

"Good luck, good luck to you!" he said in such a way that it sounded as if he had a sour taste in his mouth.

"Why did you call me over here?"

"Don't you know why? This is our *poluika*. Buy it."

"Ah!" He sounded as happy as if he had found a hundred guildens in the street. "All right."

"How much will you give us for it?"

"The usual price: ten guildens a barrel."

"How many empty barrels have you got?"

"All twenty on the carts are empty. My well ran dry, and I boarded it up."

"Fine. Get the money ready. Come on, lads, all together now!"

In no time we had pulled apart a stretch of the fence,

rolled up a cart and barrel, put a heavy stone in a bucket and lowered it into the well. And it was not a long time going down either! A minute later we were pulling up a full bucket of oil. Then we got three more buckets from Nuta, tied all four of them to two ropes and from that moment on we couldn't work fast enough! We filled the barrel in half an hour, got it to Nuta's place, then brought another. Half an hour later this one was full, taken away, and we got busy on the third.

We kept it up till morning. Nuta wasn't around, but his foreman had let his watchman off and was sitting in Nuta's shed himself all night. Just before dawn we filled the last of Nuta's twenty barrels. Then we fixed the fence, covered up our traces, and put things in order on our side of the fence. There were eight of us and after we had each been paid twenty-five guildens, plus ten for vodka for the lot of us, we calmly went to sleep.

We didn't even have time to doze off before Iona came running up. His first words were:

"Did anything happen?"

Without waiting for an answer he rushed towards the well, but he didn't have to look down the shaft: the windlass, the ropes, and the framework were black and dripping wet with oil.

"Ivan! Ivan!" he shouted hysterically, shaking me.

"What's the matter?" I mumbled, as if still half-asleep, although I was really wide awake.

"What happened?"

"Can't you see?"

"Is there oil there?"

"Sure!"

"Why's the windlass wet? Why's the framework wet?"

"It was a gusher."

"Oi-oi! A gusher! Such a gusher!"

"See, it even got us all wet."

"All of you? How come?"

"It was like this: as soon as we heard the hissing and whistling in the well we woke up and rushed over to it. Just then she blew, and we got soaked."

"No, Ivan, that's impossible! You're fooling me!"

"Well take a good look at me then!"

And true enough, I looked like the devil himself, smeared all over with oil. We hadn't realized how we'd look in the daylight, and now we had to lie our way out of it. In the evening Iona had been like a man possessed, but this morning he was sure of success and had his wits about him, as if he'd been doused with cold water.

"Eh, Ivan, I don't believe you! I've never heard of such a gusher."

"But I did, and I saw it with my own eyes."

It kept getting lighter all the while, and we could clearly see the freshly-turned, oil-drenched earth and the cart tracks leading right up to the fence. Iona couldn't take his eyes off those tracks.

"Ivan, how did these tracks get here?"

"Which tracks?"

"These. It looks as if carts were driving up and going back across the lot."

"Look closer, you might see hoof-marks too. It must have been the devil in his chariot who stopped by to toss such a treasure down your well."

"Don't joke, Ivan! Where'd the tracks come from?"

"Ah, that's only from our wheelbarrows. We were carting the clay out of the shed in the evening."

"So! Then why is everything covered with oil?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. What do you want from me? Everything is spattered with oil because there was a gusher and everything got wet. We didn't steal your oil. You can have it! Go on, there's probably a wellful of it over there."

"Ivan, maybe you stole some, eh? I don't want to say anything, but I think you've drawn up some already."

"So that's it!" the boys in the shed all shouted. They had been lying there quietly, listening to our conversation. "Now we know what you're getting at, Iona! You're saying that to get out of giving us our *poluika*!"

"I don't intend to let you have it!" Iona shouted, and he was really jumping mad. "Why should I? You celebrated it already and didn't bother to let me know about it! Help! Police! I've been robbed! What'll I do now?"

Iona began rushing back and forth in the shed like a madman.

"Take it easy, Iona," we said quietly, but firmly. "Calm down, or you'll be sorry. Do you have a single witness to what you're saying?"

"I'll find them!"

"When you do, then you can say what you like. Go to court. But meanwhile, just take it easy! And pay us our wages."

"Pay you? For what? You've robbed me, cleaned me out, and I'm supposed to pay you for it!"

That was going too far. The lads were clenching their teeth and that was a bad omen. If a man clenches his teeth on an empty stomach there's bound to be trouble.

"Lads!" I said. "Ease up, Iona's only joking."

But this was no laughing matter to him. His eyes were like mice, scurrying along the wheel tracks from the shed to the fence and back again. Then he could take it no longer. He dashed out of the shed, scaled the fence, and looked over on Nuta's side.

"Ai-ai! My God! My God!" he screamed, and immediately tumbled off the fence.

"What do you see there, Iona?"

"I'm going straight to Drogobich! I'll sue you! I'll have you arrested. This is robbery! Highway robbery! It's as clear as day where my oil is. There are whole puddles of it there!"

"Don't be a fool, Iona! You saw Nuta carting oil yes-

terday, and it was his, not yours. One of the barrels split right near the fence. You saw it yourself, and you even laughed when it happened!" the men said. But Iona couldn't come to his senses.

"Look here, Iona," I said to him when he walked back into the shed, "we're not going to lose through you. Pay us what you owe us, give us the *poluika* money that's coming to us, and we'll part friends."

"We'll part?"

"What do you think?" the lads shouted. "If you go around calling us a bunch of thieves for nothing, we won't work for you any more! Go find some other workers."

"I'll be damned if I don't!" he cried.

He paid us our wages with an ache in his heart, and we haggled about the *poluika* for another half-hour. We had to tear it from him, like a bone from a dog, and then we left.

"Good-bye, Iona! I hope the well is as generous to you as you've been to us!" one of the lads shouted.

"And that you don't live to see the day you'll have to give anyone else their *poluika*!" another added.

Iona was still standing in the shed, bemoaning his fate, still looking with fright and curiosity at the wheel marks leading from his shed to the fence.

VI

It had to happen that things turned out exactly as the boys had wished!

All Saturday Iona was scurrying back and forth on his lot, muttering, clucking, and sighing, until he finally decided to go and see the rabbi to complain about Nuta. I went to work for Nuta, and he's the one who told me what happened. Iona said that Nuta had robbed him, but Nuta was not worried. He just laughed. What could the rabbi

do to him? He had made five hundred guildens on our *poluika*, and he didn't have a care in the world!

Iona wouldn't let Nuta pass him in the street without launching out against him as if he had lost his mind. There was no doubt about it, he really was going out of his mind. And he kept insisting, "I've been robbed, I've been cleaned out!"

The well we'd struck oil in was ruining him. Iona hired new men who began bringing up the oil, but when they'd filled about five barrels the well ran dry. Iona boarded it over and waited a day. It was still dry. He waited another day, but there was no change. Nuta's well was not as deep as Iona's, but the oil kept pouring in. While I was working on Nuta's lot on the hill, I could see Iona circling round his shed, shrugging his shoulders, mumbling something. He'd stop for a moment and run off again to look down the shaft. He didn't know what to do. Many's the time I was itching to play a trick on him, but then again, I felt sorry for him. To tell the truth, we played a dirty trick on him, but how were we to know the well would run dry so soon?

"Hey, Iona," I called once from the other side of the fence.

He jumped at the sound of my voice, as if he'd been awakened by a pistol shot.

"It's all right! It's me—Ivan!"

"What do you want?"

"Listen to me, Iona," I said and really meant it, "forget about this well. Why don't you start one in the hollow?"

He made no reply, but he did listen to what I had said. The very next day his workers boarded up the unlucky well and went off to the one we had started in the hollow.

They were digging there a couple of days, and it seemed as if Iona had calmed down a bit. His eyes had a mad glint to them, though, and he didn't recognize the people he met in the street.

Once we heard shouting on Iona's lot. The men had stopped working and were calling him. He, meanwhile, was sitting or dozing in the very same shed where we had celebrated our *poluika*.

"Hey, boss! Boss! Come here!" the men in the hollow shouted.

It was just noon. We were resting and there wasn't anyone in our well. We all ran out to see what had happened when we heard the shouting.

"Oho!" I said, "there'll be a *poluika* over at Iona's today!"

That was when Iona came running out of his shed. He must have heard what I said, because he shouted as he ran:

"What you'll get won't be a *poluika*!"

We laughed at that one and climbed up on the fence to see what would happen. Iona was still a good ways from the well when he shouted:

"Is there oil there?"

"Yes!"

"Is it a gusher?"

"No."

"Is there a lot of it?"

"The well's about half full."

"Oh, we'll have a fine *poluika*!" one of the workers added happily.

At these words Iona went out of his mind. He rushed at the poor man and whacked him right across the face!

"There's your *poluika*! Beggars! Thieves! So you want to rob me too? I won't let you! I won't let you! I won't let you have any of it!"

He rushed towards the well in a frenzy and fell upon it with outstretched arms in order to cover the source of his wealth with his own body. The pit-mouth was rather narrow, so that by kneeling right over the framework and clutching the edges with his hands, Iona covered it com-

pletely, protecting it, as if someone wanted to take it away from him. He kept on screaming:

"I won't let you have it! I won't let you have anything! Help! Robbers! Police!"

People gathered at the noise. They saw Iona hanging over the well, and not understanding what he was shouting about, they thought there had been an accident and that someone had fallen down the well or been suffocated. My blood froze.

"Hey, boys!" I shouted to the workers standing around the well. "He's raving mad! Get him away from there! Hurry!"

"To hell with him," said the fellow who'd got a blow on the face. Just then Iona clutched his chest, for he had become poisoned by the gas from the well and was choking. He lost his balance and his shoes flashed by as he hurtled down like a plummet. The oil that was to make him rich killed him.

His workers never did get their *poluika*.

There was so much gas in the well that they couldn't come near it for three days, and only then did they fish him out.