



*Andriy Holovko*

# THE WEEDS



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**THE  
WEEDS**

A NOVEL

*DNIPRO PUBLISHERS · 1976*

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АНДРІЙ ГОЛОВКО  
*БУР'ЯН*  
Роман

Translated from the Ukrainian  
by Anatole Bilenko

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Andriy Holovko is a well known Soviet Ukrainian author. Ever since he published his first stories and the novel *The Weeds* back in the 1920s his popularity with the readers has been unfading.

Andriy Holovko was born on December 4, 1897, into a peasant family in the village of Yurki, Poltava Province. After village school, he enrolled in a non-classical secondary school in Kremenchuk in 1908, from which he was expelled six years later for belonging to an illegal literary circle. In 1915 he was called up for front-line service in the First World War. The "schooling of the trenches," as he later wrote, made him understand the tragedy of the workers and peasants whom the bourgeois governments had sent to the battlefields to suffer, fight and die for causes and interests totally alien to them. With the outbreak of the 1917 Revolution in Russia Holovko left the army and returned to Ukraine where he taught at schools. In 1918 he worked on a newspaper in Kremenchuk. In 1920 he enlisted in the Red Army and took part in the engagements with the forces of counterrevolution. With the end of the Civil War he again took up his teaching career and became interested in writing.

Holovko started his literary career as a poet. His first collection of stories, *Girl from the Road*, appeared in 1923. In 1926 he published his second collection, which became a significant landmark in Soviet Ukrainian literature, especially as regards the stories *Red Kerchief* and *Pilipko*. Yet his greatest success of this period was the novel *The Weeds* (1926), which was the first large realistic novel about the class struggle in the countryside after the October Socialist Revolution of 1917. The novel treats a wide range of important problems, such as the assertion of the young Soviet power in the countryside, the struggle against the rich peasants who lived off the sweat of their poorer fellow villagers, the education of group awareness in the new village, and the emergence of new human relations under the Soviet social system. The novel gained immediate popularity.

Inspired by this success, Holovko wrote his second novel *Mother* (1934) which skilfully describes the events preceding the Revolution of 1905—1907 and the period of reaction following its defeat. The novel reflects the upsurge of revolutionary forces in the countryside and the growing role of the workers in the rural movement of those days.

During the Great Patriotic War of 1941—1945 Holovko was a front-line correspondent. After the war he worked on his epic novel *Artem Harmash*, a sequel of *Mother*. The three parts of the novel were published in 1951, 1960 and 1970 respectively, winning him the Shevchenko Prize for Literature. *Artem Harmash* is probably the best novel in Soviet Ukrainian literature about the Civil War.

Holovko was also a playwright, script writer, and prolific translator of Russian literature.

"The profound lyricism of his prose," wrote the noted Soviet Ukrainian novelist Oles Honchar, "his sincere concern for the destiny of the common man, and his organic identification with the life of the people... are projected in every line of his best works which have won him genuine love and recognition in our country."

Andriy Holovko died on December 5, 1972.

## I

Several stages before Hanivka railway station, David Motuzka was suddenly made aware of the steppe for the first time since he had left town and the military barracks, when a strong smell of earth and the freshness of a sunny autumn morning hit his face.

At a little station a whole crowd of girls, their cheeks ruddy from the frost, tumbled into the car. They were probably returning from sugar-beet harvesting. Through the window David saw mountains of beet heaped up at the station, with more cartloads arriving and being unloaded. Every one of the girls carried a bundle. They wore old black coats, dirty coarse linen skirts, and were barefoot.

Their faces were weather-beaten and tanned, their lips chapped from the wind.

With tickets clutched in hands they shyly huddled in the corridor.

David felt a surge of happiness, as if he had spotted his sister among them. He moved over and made room for one of the girls, and then asked a man, who lay on the opposite bench, to sit up. After all, this was not a sleeper, and the girls probably found it hard-going standing on their feet. Reluctantly, the man swung his legs down from the bench. The girls sat down, and though it was quite a tight squeeze they all found room to sit. Only one of them remained standing in the corridor, dreamily gazing out of the window.

The train pulled out of the station. The girl pressed her face to the window. The pumping station, telegraph poles, carts loaded with beet flashed past her eyes.

David took out his tobacco pouch, rolled himself a cigarette and lit it.

"Where're you going from, girls?" he asked.

"We've been harvesting sugar beets, here on the state farm." It was the snub-nosed, the liveliest of the girls speaking. Her eyes jumped from the young man's face to his Budyonnovka cap, then back to his face, as she added, "We're going back home. It was still warm when we went away for the threshing. After the threshing was done we started digging beets, and here we are — yesterday we thought it'd be the end of us: God, was it cold, and we're barefoot!"

David took a look at their red feet, shook his head and remained silent. After a while he asked if home was far to go.

Oh no, they were from Zachevilivka in Shcherbanivka District. Why, they were almost from the same parts: his home was in Shcherbanivka District, too, in Obukhivka.

"There were some of your people from Obukhivka digging beets," one of the girls said reflectively, turning her eyes on David. "Maybe you know Yakim who plays the accordion, and then there was a pock-marked fellow and a couple of girls, Halka and Khristya. The rest I don't know."

"You mean the Khristya who sings so well? She isn't from Obukhivka at all!" another girl rejoined.

David instantly pricked up his ears: Khristya?

"What do you mean she's not from Obukhivka," said the first girl with a shrug. "As if I didn't know. It was the same Khristya who told us about the horse thieves. In a single night they stole seven horses from the pasture, and took their horse too. She wept about it — I remember."

"A very fair girl? And rather short?" David asked excitedly.

"Yes, rather short. She had a scar across her neck: a whip mark from the times when Denikin's troops were still around."

He started, and a look of pain came into his face.

Silence. Somewhere from behind the partition of the next compartment came the sound of muffled voices. And beneath, the wheels went rhythmically — thump-thump, thump-thump.

Yes. A scar across the neck — that was her, his sister Khristya.

"Did they find the horses?"

"Some hope! The seven of them just vanished into thin air. One of the thieves was caught with a horse at a fair right near Poltava. He was from the Ohirivka farmsteads. They wanted to lynch him. But he started to beg and to plead: I'll give away the whole gang, he said, only don't kill me. Well, the militia came along and arrested him. He's in jail now."

"Maybe he is, and maybe he isn't... Jails aren't what they used

to be. They'll keep him for a month or so and then let him loose," another girl added.

David:

"Anyway, the horses are gone."

He grew silent and dropped his head. His glance fell on the girls' feet — dirty and red. And the thought slowly came home to him: maybe she, too, is barefoot like that in the cold. Then he thought of his parents. How did they manage without a horse? Probably father had turned grayer still and mother had become even more bent in the back. A farmer without a horse is like a man without hands. And their plot of land was far off, more than ten *versts* \*. What could you grow on it with your bare hands? In early spring he had received a letter from home. Petrik had written it in awkward scribbles, and father must have dictated the happy news to his son: they had sold the old horse and bought a young one. They'd be real farmers now. The news made David happy, and his father seemed to have looked at him out of the letter as large as life; always gloomy, a smile now flickered across his face and squinting an eye, he seemed to say: "That's how it is, son. If you don't have a good horse you're not a farmer at all." No, his father would not squint his eye so merrily now, nor would he speak to his son with such a light heart. Probably now he was gloomier than before, and had turned grayer.

Somewhere from far away came the hollow voice of the conductor collecting the tickets to Verbivka. The girls got up.

David started:

"Are you getting off here?"

"You see, we've only got the tickets as far as Verbivka, it was so expensive all the way to Hanivka. Besides, we're almost home — we'll go on foot. We'll make it by evening. So long!"

"Good luck!"

The train slowed down and stopped. David went up to the window and looked indifferently outside: yellow leaves were falling from the poplars onto the platform, a man in a red cap rang the bell twice, the crowd of girls walked down the platform toward the station. He saw them start along the road lined with telegraph poles running to the horizon.

When the train started off, David was still standing by the window, and watching the girls footing it into the steppe. In the

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\* *verst* — unit of distance equal to 0.6629 miles — Tr.

distance a reddish village clung to the slope of a gully. Wherever you looked there were patches of green and black earth... patch upon patch — black, green, black, green...

And how are father and the other six doing? David thought.

## II

Obukhivka was twenty-five *versts* from Hanivka railway station. The steppe was all around. The deeply rutted road meandered through black plowed land and patches of green winter wheat. Telegraph poles ran along the side of the road, and the autumn wind hummed mournfully in the wires overhead. A flock of jackdaws was driven along by the wind like a handful of grain scattered in the air, and wherever you looked there was the empty steppe. Here and there farmsteads stood out against the skyline. David walked down the road in broad strides. Delightedly, he inhaled the autumnal steppe air which was bitter as green blackthorn. The air intoxicated him: his chapped lips parted, and a mist rose in his eyes. He set his Budyonovka cap at a jaunty angle and tossed his head.

It was good to be home!

Only the other day he was in Asia — a demobilized Red Army soldier standing in queue for a ticket together with the Uzbeks at the railway station in Tashkent, and here he was walking along the road to Obukhivka. Was he really there, or was it a dream? A smile touched his lips. The vastness of the steppe stared into his face, as if it wanted to ask him: "Well, David, did your heart miss a beat?" The steppe was mute, of course, but David heard the question, he understood its speech. He smiled again: "Need you ask? How can I not love you when, looking into your vastness, I see in it a whole new world. A world which for centuries was only dreamed of, a world which has never been before. Unless on another planet in the great starry spaces somewhere. Do I love you!"

Beyond the farmsteads, the road made a sharp bend and snaked toward Schcherbanivka. On either side of it wires spanned the poles. A little footpath weaved in and out of the farmsteads. That was David's footpath. Well, he would walk it only to the end cottage over there, and then cut across the field toward the former Hanivka manor.



It was beyond the farmsteads that he caught his first sight of plowmen.

These were the holdings of the farmsteads, and as soon as he had crossed a ditch he entered the land of the former manor, which now belonged to Obukhivka. Here and there plowmen were breaking up the fallow. They were far away — he was loath to turn off the road, the more so since he was already tired. There was a plowman working nearer the manor. David decided to join him, have a smoke and rest for a while.

The earth here was great! It was so black and greasy. And the smell of freshly broken fallow was so familiar. It had smelled just like that in those days of long ago when, only a youngster, he was hired by the landowner as an oxen driver for the autumn.

*...He was hired for three autumns in a row before the German war broke out. He was a small, grimy boy, with dark eyes like a pair of ripe cherries shining from under a shock of black curly hair. Everyone liked him at the manor, both the farmhands and the Austrian prisoners of war (there were about twenty of them). And they were always asking him for a song, for David was quite a singer. Plowing the whole day long, he would drive on the oxen and sing. He even made up his own songs — one about an orphan working as a servant boy, another about a wounded soldier in the trenches, then about the Austrians whom fate had brought to a foreign land so far from home. The farmhands would get together on a Saturday after work and sing: "Hark, My Brother..." David listened spellbound. Tears rose to his eyes, and his young heart ached. And there, high up in the sky, the cranes would cry their plaintive cru-u-u, cru-u-u...*

*It was this shared mood which brought together David and one of the Austrians by the name of Stakh who loved the boy's heart-felt songs.*

*"Sing, laddie, sing," he would say. "Let your heart ache for the wrongs people are suffering. When you grow up, you'll be a rebel!"*

*They went into the steppe to plow together. David drove on the oxen, while Stakh came behind the plow and talked — about his family, about his country, about his past. (Back home, in Galicia, he was a teacher, then he was drafted into the army and during action he let himself be taken prisoner). Stakh was such a good, kind man. He knew everything David asked him about: how the world came to be — and he told it not like the priest taught them*

at school, and why some people were poor and others rich, and what the future would be like... He would squint to see that no one was within earshot and say: "Some day the landlord's manor won't be his anymore, because you'll drive the landowner out. And you, the farmhands, will be the masters. The land will be yours, and the cattle and the house, and you'll build more houses and plant an even larger orchard."

"But the landowner won't let us!" said David, taken aback.

"Sure, the landowner won't let you, he'll call in the soldiers to defend his land and his nest. But standing together you're a great force. And aren't the soldiers themselves village folk? The men seizing the manor will be their own, won't they? And who'll fire at his own brother or father?"

Stakh's eyes burned with passion and so did David's, for all that he was only a small and grimy kid.

"Comrade, can you spare a smoke?"

David started from surprise.

"If you've got something to smoke that is!"

The young plowman stopped the oxen, left the furrow and stood on the unbroken land. By the ragged looks of him he was certainly a farmhand. David strode over to him. They greeted each other and David produced his pouch. The oxen could rest in the meanwhile.

"Sit down, comrade. Homeward bound I see. Drafted with those born in 1901 I suppose?"

"Right you are. Are you from Obukhivka by any chance?"

"No, I'm from the farmsteads over there." He pointed with his whip handle at the gully behind the tilth where green rooves showed above a cherry orchard as red as a large bunch of guelder-rose berries.

Had David heard of Ohir? Well, that's the farmer the plowman worked for. The land he was plowing now formally belonged to Obukhivka, but only when it came to delivering the tax in kind: actually, it belonged to the farmsteads. Since it was all of ten *versts* away from the village — too hard to cover there and back either by horse or on foot — it was leased. And if some poor peasant did not have a horse it was the end of him, which made it all the merrier for the farmsteaders! For all those Ohirs, Khomenkos and Kipshars... They certainly need to be reminded of 1918, they sure do! Some have as many as twenty-five *dessiatines* \* of land under

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\* *dessiatine* — unit of land area equal to 2.7 acres

crop, apart from pasture and a large number of cattle. You can't graze them on a little patch, you know. So all in all they've got a good thirty *dessiatines* each. That's the norm. Over a half of it is leased. So when a poor peasant reaps his crop he won't know what to do with it anyway: he can't haul the sheaves on his back for ten *versts*. So either he must lug it or leave it there on the stubble. That's the chance the *kurkuls* \* grab. For the price of the tax in kind or for a sack of grain the poor beggar will surrender his whole harvest. Now figure it out for yourself — the same eighth or tenth sheave of the yield just like sharecropping in olden times...

At this point the young plowman greedily drew on his cigarette which had burned down to a tiny smouldering butt that it hissed on his wet lips. He spit on the ground and asked for another cigarette. He had gone without all day, because he did not get home from the field until late in the night and there was no time to dry his tobacco. David gave him enough for another cigarette and rolled one for himself.

"Those are bad things I hear, friend," he said.

"If I told you everything about the way we live you'd see it isn't worth a damn, brother!" He spat through his teeth and lapsed into silence. After a while he raised his head and narrowing his eyes looked intently at David.

"How're things at the front?" he asked in a whisper for some reason. David said that the front did not exist any longer. The young man said nothing in response. Suddenly he tore away his gaze from David's face and dropped his head.

"My master is some grasper, a *kurkul* if there ever was one, believe me," he spoke after a while. "He owns seventy *dessiatines* of land, and now he's expecting his daughter from Obukhivka, who married Matyukha, the chairman of the village Soviet, last year.."

"You mean Korniy Matyukha who was the *volost* \*\* military commissar?" The news gave David an unpleasant start.

"Right. She married a communist. It's he who snatched the prize — Ohir's daughter. The wedding was something, too. Big district bosses were invited, and flares were fired."

The lips of the young man curled in a smile that was both scornful and painful, and again he spat through his teeth. He grew

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\* *kurkul* — Ukrainian equivalent of the Russian *kulak* — a prosperous or wealthy peasant living off the sweat of others — Tr.

\*\* *volost* — smallest administrative division in Ukraine including several villages

thoughtful, remembering perhaps. Then he raised his eyes, looked straight at David and continued:

"I haven't told you everything yet. He would come to pay a call on his father-in-law and begin telling him that Mikola Mikolaiovich \* was preparing an offensive or something of that sort. The old man would swear and rant. What the hell did they want here? To start the blood flowing again? Things were well in hand, weren't they? You bet: he had registered a pair of oxen and a pair of horses in his son's name, they have two huge shares of land for the taking. He's all for Soviet power, you see..." — and again his lips curled in a smile. "Well, that's how it is, comrade."

"Nice doings..."

David once read a book titled *The New Village*. At the time he did not quite see living people behind those statistics on land-hungry, horseless, poor peasants. But this young man here was not inventing anything: "for the price of the tax in kind the poor beggar will surrender his whole harvest," and some of those *kurkuls* had "a good thirty *dessiatines* each." And then the startling news — Matyukha and Ohir's daughter. Had they all gone off their heads around here? Or couldn't they see straight from too much moonshine?

David threw away his cigarette which had gone out, rose to his feet and flung his knapsack over his shoulder.

"So long, comrade," he said to the plowman. "Might as well tell me your name."

"Ilko. And what's yours?"

"David Motuzka."

"So now we know each other."

The young man took the oxen by the halter, swung his whip in the air and whistled. The oxen moved on. David started on his way across the stubble. For a long time he heard Ilko's whistle behind him. It sounded like the sad cry of a gull circling over the steppe.

### III

When David passed the pond, which had formerly belonged to the manor, the willows rustled in a doleful female chorus over the water. One weeping willow was bent low over the edge near the

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\* Mikola Mikolaiovich — Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolayevich, uncle of Nicholas II

water mill, its tresses loosened in utter despair and drooping motionless into the water.

Who would fathom this tragedy? Who had seen it?

*...Denikin's Cossacks had dragged Kattrya, the beautiful daughter of the smith who lived at the manor, into the stable. They pounced like curs upon her young body. All night long they drank moonshine and hollered songs at the top of their voices to drown the screams of the girl. And in the morning, mauled and debased, she was kicked out into the yard...*

*Dawn was just breaking when she came like a shadow to the partisans in the forest, and said, "Tonight." After that no one saw her again. It was a dark night, the last one in her life. The Cossacks slept soundly in the barn and at headquarters. She made her stealthy way in the quiet of the night, moving like a wraith. The world was sunk in silence. Only on the bank someone was walking about, calling out her name — her mother, probably. All at once everything burst into flames: barns and stables. Those who were inside rushed to the doors, but they were bolted from outside, and the walls were of stone: screams, yells, blazing flames. From the steppe the partisans closed on the manor and surrounded it. David and the boys were running past the pond when something flashed over the edge near the water mill... Oh, if he had only known. They rushed on into the yard, took the headquarters in stride, shot its occupants and seized two machine guns and the horses. Then they looked for Kattrya till morning in the orchard, by the pond — and all in vain... Only some days after, when they were back in the forest, David brought the sad news (during the night he went to the farmstead while on a scouting mission): Kattrya had drowned herself in the pond...*

The weeping willow near the water mill was wringing its hands, sorrowfully shaking its head as if it were reproaching someone. And the other willows joined their brokenhearted murmur in a doleful female chorus...

David walked across the dam past the water mill. The red-brick building showing through the leafless trees in the orchard seemed to be veiled in a gray haze. At the edge of the orchard stood a white cottage, the former servants quarters, and a small yellow stack of straw. Nearer, there was the smithy. Thin, blue smoke spurted from the chimney, then it stopped abruptly and the air resounded with the loud clink-clank, clink-clank of the hammer striking the anvil.

The manor seemed to be inhabited.

From the dam David turned to the smithy, walking along the pond and trampling on the reddish nettle and weeds. He rounded a little gully overgrown with bramble and young shrubbery, and came up to the smithy. The wheezing of the bellows and the sound of low voices came from inside.

David went down the steps. He flushed with joy when he saw the smith by the forge.

"Hello, uncle Petro!"

"Hello, comrade!" replied the gray-haired smith, peering at the soldier. It was obvious that he did not recognize David.

The other two people there were strangers to David. One was a boy pumping the bellows, and the other — a stocky, red-bearded man sitting by the wall in a quilted military jacket and shaggy Siberian cap. He was probably the smith's assistant and was now taking a rest, rolling himself a large cigarette. As he raised it to his mouth to lick the edge of the paper, he gazed at the soldier out of the corner of his eye. The others, too, surveyed David in silence.

All this made David smile.

"I'm David, your apprentice, don't you know me, uncle Petro?"

"Of all people!" exclaimed the smith, spreading out his hands in glad surprise. "I'd never have recognized you even if I stared my eyes out. True, it's been a long time. You were only a kid, in Denikin's times, when you were apprenticed to the smithy. My, was he a daredevil!" he said to the Siberian. "The partisans sent him here. I guess you've been demobilized?"

"Yes, straight from the railroad station. I saw smoke coming from the smithy. So you decided to stay here after all?"

The bellows wheezed and the fire crackled. The smith sprinkled water on the coals, and said:

"I've spent my whole life in this smithy — from the age of twelve I've put all of my strength bit by bit on this anvil and flattened it out with the hammer, forging colters and plowshares for the landowners. And here, I guess, I'll die. I'm grateful I've got this cottage and smithy anyway. So I'm hammering away. And when I die — oh, there's someone to take the place of the old smith." And he smiled at the grimy boy at the forge, beckoning to him with the kindness of a father. Presently he pulled a red chunk of iron out of the forge, threw it on the anvil, and the red-bearded assistant went into action with his hammer.

Sparks sprayed in all directions, and the rusty pieces of iron on the racks came to life with a jingle.



David watched the large and little hammer knead the red chunk of iron on the anvil. It had already become beet-red and darker in color. Then the smith pushed it back into the forge and the bellows started to wheeze.

Now the smith also decided to treat himself to a cigarette, and as he rolled it, he talked about his second son:

"It's time Stepan came home: boys born in 1902 are being drafted already, and he hasn't come back yet for some reason. Now if Zinka were to finish her term as a domestic, we'd all be together, the whole family. I don't suppose you remember her, David, do you?"

"Oh yes, I do!"

"She was a little girl then, but now she's grown up."

David's cheeks colored and he wanted to ask something, but the smith continued:

"We managed to pull through till spring, then our own flour was gone and I had no choice but to hire out the child to work for five *poods* \* of rye and a pair of old boots. Hope they perish in hell for such wages!"

Then his bearded assistant cut in:

"It's a shame. What grain we have hardly lasts us the winter and come spring we're lucky if we can hire out our kids if only for their keep. That's how we live. No sooner do you pull your head above the water your rear goes down, and when you pull up the rear down goes your head. Our poverty sucks us under like a quag. You kick and you struggle, but it pulls you down just the same — up to the chest, then up to your neck."

When they came from Siberia, they did keep cows at first. But it happened to be a famine year and they ate up all the cattle. They were left high and dry, living at other people's homes. There were seven families who came back from Siberia where they'd gone to settle: two hailed from Shcherbanivka and the rest from Obukhivka. They were allotted some land, true enough, but what could they do with it with bare hands, the more so since it was more than ten *versts* to go from where they lived.

"I said to people: 'Let's form a coop and we'll have at least a pair of horses for common use. And let's insist we get moved to the farmsteads to be closer to the land. We'd live in dugouts, but we'd have the land close to hand, always before our eyes.' But nothing doing, no one went for the idea of a coop! Take a look at the other

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\* *pood* — measure of weight = 16.38 kg or approximately 36 lb — Tr.

Siberians. I met one of them in town. They live in a coop — 'Beacon,' near Sorochintsi, and they are well off. But we were slow to start, so here we are..."

The Siberian's words excited David: that was his own dream — to set up a coop at the manor.

"Is it too late now, or what?" David asked. "Once the distribution of the land has been put through we'll get together and resettle into a new village."

The Siberian dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand, while the smith added dejectedly:

"Eh, son, did some of our people here get it hot for that land distribution business... Tikhin Kozhushny is still coughing up blood. What d'ye want, son, if the peasants are ignorant and cowed, and those who rule the roost are sons of bitches and drunkards?"

"Yes, there's something wrong around here," David said. "Take Matyukha, for one..."

At this everyone fell silent in the smithy. Only the bellows wheezed and the coals crackled. When talk was resumed, the men asked David what was new in the world, what his military service had been like in Tashkent, what the newspapers wrote about, carefully skirting the subject of their lives. He'd live and see.

David understood the reason: "Matyukha" was a frightening name to them. He did not want to pry; they'd be afraid to tell him anyway. True, uncle Petro knew him well, but he hadn't seen him for four years. Anything could have happened in the time... Matyukha, too, was a partisan once, and now...

David rose to his feet, flipped away his cigarette, and strongly shaking first the hand of the smith and then the Siberian's, said cheerfully:

"So it's a deal, uncle Klim? Our wanting it is all that counts, and the fact that you have sons of bitches and drunkards ruling the roost here is a small matter, nothing can stop us!"

The smith's assistant looked searchingly at David from under his shaggy cap. But the grip of his hand was strong.

Coming out into the frosty autumnal air from the smoky smithy made the color flood into David's cheeks. A smell of dry weeds reminded him of some forgotten dreams of long ago. Before his eyes, just to the left, was the pond framed by the willows, and on either side of it the green of the winter wheat. That's where the village would be — further down from the manor orchard and

the pond where the smith's house stood. David narrowed his eyes and looked, and in his imagination he saw little huts and saplings planted around them on that green patch. It looked like a settlement of moles, marooned in the middle of the black tilth that spread like a spring flood. That's when the villagers had just settled in. David narrowed his eyes even more and did not recognize their new village. White houses stood in the large orchard that had grown from the saplings. And where the milldam had been there was an electric power station. Poles carried the transmission lines through the settlement, above the houses, into the manor, to the cattle enclosures, to the club house... and along the highway — to Shcherbanivka, Obukhivka... in all directions...

Beyond the willows a steppe gull cried. David started. Maybe it was Ilko whistling and not a gull at all? He plodded through the weeds to the manor yard, making for the brick buildings there. Burrs stuck to his greatcoat. A smell of yellow maple leaves and weeds hung in the air. The yard was densely overgrown with weeds. Even in the house where the servants had once lived the weeds showed through the window openings. But the walls were sturdy. They would stand for a good hundred years, provided the barns and stables were covered with roofs. There were the storehouses too. If only they had a crop to store... And here were more sheds and stables...

David walked through the manor, inspected the walls, making some calculations in his mind. Anyone seeing him would have thought he was an engineer making an inspection tour to estimate repair costs.

"Yes, the buildings are still good," he said aloud. He gave them one more glance and went on past the cattle enclosures.

He came upon a ruined wall running from the orchard. As his eyes fell on a bullet-riddled board, he suddenly recalled the roaring rifle volleys in the dark of that terrible summer night when they set the manor on fire: here by the wall they executed the Cossacks. From behind the wall the rays of the sinking sun tinted the weeds red. Something rustled behind the wall. Then suddenly a year-old calf darted through the gap in the wall and trotted out into the weeds, trampling them in its flight. Its tail was stiff and upright, its hide shone in the sunlight. Suddenly its high plaintive call broke the silence in the weeds, echoing through the building, from the wall, and the orchard.

A smile formed on David's lips — he was so happy to hear the mooing of a calf with all these ruins about. In the orchard, from

behind the wall, he heard the rustle of leaves — someone was approaching. As he made for the wall, a girl in a gray skirt came through the gap and almost bumped into him.

"Oh!" she gave a slight start and drew back to let him pass. He must have looked a little strange, standing there, his eyes fixed on her. And she... Then she flashed her deep dark eyes, turned sharply round on her heel and ran off through the weeds. As she ran she turned round to look at him.

David stood frozen to the ground.

The rustle of leaves and the footsteps died away. Somewhere from behind the manor came the mooing of the calf. Then he was left with silence and the weeds. He raised his hand to wipe his forehead — it was hot.

And no doubt she, too, is hired out to someone..., the thought flashed through his mind.

## IV

It was almost dark as David approached the village.

By the cemetery, in the pasture on the edge of the village, the windmills were turning. Only one standing in the distance was motionless, its sails broken. The pasture was empty. On his way he came across a woman and a girl pushing a handcart with a sack from the mill. On passing, he greeted her, and the woman replied, "Good evening." David did not recognize the woman in the dusk. Here and there lights flashed on in the houses. The little windows flared up as matches were struck inside, then the lights paled and the bright eyes of the windows gazed unblinkingly into the darkness.

Passing the church, David was unpleasantly surprised: the building smelled of fresh paint. In the poplars lining the hedgerows the rooks were settling for the night. No glass in the school windows, that's a fact, he thought. On the corner stood the school with its yawning, empty windows. Only two of the windows giving on the road shone palely, and every now and then somebody's shadow showed behind the white curtains.

By the school David turned into a side street. It was quiet and empty. The wind howled through the wattle fences, across the little orchards, past the houses, sweeping up the yellowed leaves so that they fluttered up in the air and fell silently onto the street and into the yards. Somewhere on the other side of the village

two youngish voices hoarsely bawled out a song. And below, somewhere behind the gardens by the bridge, the steam mill thumped heavily. Its breath came uneven and broken through the windy night: thump... thump... thump. Beyond the gardens, on the opposite bank of the River Psel, stretched the black belt of the wood. The autumn wind howled through the treetops.

And David recalled the events of the past — bright, spring memories.

*...Back in the time when Denikin's troops held the area, the partisans lived in the forest gullies right through summer and autumn. The wood was full of them. And whenever a landowner's farmstead went up in flames in the night, whenever a White Guard outpost was neutralized in the dark, everyone knew that this was the partisans' doing.*

*...In the autumn cold winds began sweeping through the forest. The leaves fell, rain and cold weather set in. The men died like flies of typhus. That was when a regiment of Denikin's troops arrived in Obukhivka. Another regiment was quartered in Shcherbanivka, and on the opposite shore of the Psel, troops were posted in neighboring villages. They'd been sent to round up the partisans...*

*The wind swept through the forest. The night was dark and stormy. The partisans were constantly exposed to the rain, they were chilled to the marrow and in despair — the time had come for an all-out attack on Obukhivka. What a night that had been! They scattered the regiment, seized the arms, three machine guns, and horses. Those partisans without horses and the wounded were placed in wagons and — off they went into the night. In the forest there had been three hundred of them; by the time they broke through the front line and reached the Red Army, sixty-three remained, seven of whom were wounded.*

How long ago that was!

He passed the former *volost* offices... Now it housed the village Soviet; Shcherbanivka was the district center. The building was dark, the windows black. Back in those days a machine gun set up in the yard had sprayed the partisans with bullets. David had silenced it with a grenade. How long ago that was! The broken wattle fences still stood around the dilapidated, thatched and silent houses. Only the vacant plot of land by the meadow, where the

summer villa of the general's widow had been, showed some signs of habitation: wooden plows stuck in the ground, probably on the land of the widow's burned out estate, a large cottage with a stoop and brightly lit windows, a tiled barn, and a log storehouse. On the side of the street ran a new wattle fence interrupted by a new wooden gate standing out white against the black of the hearts cut out in it.

That's some house, David thought.

He could not guess whose it was. Maybe some *kurkul's* — but he would hardly have had the courage to put up a house in the widow's orchard, although she had gone and had left nothing behind. Whose house was it then? It must have cost over a thousand rubles to build. David just couldn't work it out. As he was trying to bring to mind all the inhabitants of Obukhivka who could be potential owners of the house, he did not notice that he had reached his own yard. He put one foot on the stile, and a tightness came into his chest: the little yard had been levelled into a threshing floor, near the old cattle shed stood a newly started straw stack. A pale light shone out of the window, and from inside came a noise — probably of a loom.

In some trepidation David pulled the door string and the door greeted him with the familiar and sorrowful creak.

As he stepped over the threshold everything fell silent. Father banged the loom lathe then turned his gloomy face toward the door. Mother, old and serene, raised her head from behind the spinning wheel. Petrik wound thread on a bobbin, sitting on the bed while little Dokiya wound hemp on a distaff.

Thus they froze, each one at his own work. Their eyes turned toward the door and stared at the soldier in the greatcoat and pointed cap.

David pulled the cap off his head.

"Good evening!" he said, the corners of his mouth twitching in a smile.

His mother could not get up from her stool. Her eyes roved over his face — was it really David? Then her brows lifted in recognition. She pulled out the comb from the tow, put it on the stool, and rose up to greet her son.

"David! Where did you come from?"

"Well, here I am in any case!"

He kissed his mother. Her face was wizzened and furrowed with wrinkles. Her eyes looked lovingly at her son with an expression of both joy and sorrow. Then her eyelids trembled and the muscles



around her mouth tightened to make her face look sad. She raised the apron to her eyes and gently started to sob.

"We've lost hope of ever seeing you again."

"But I wrote to you."

He embraced his father. The frown on his face disappeared, but not for long.

"Even if you did write, son," he said, "it wasn't us who read your letters. In the last one we received you wrote about land distribution and whom to appeal to on this subject. And I, fool that I am, went and showed it at a meeting. Someone told on me to the chairman. Since then we haven't had a single letter from you."

Mother:

"We thought you were no longer among the living."

And father:

"Oh, come on. I can see through their politics all right. That's why I gave Khristya my last letter to drop into the mailbox on her way to the state farm."

"And, David, we don't have the horse any more. Bandits stole it," said mother and started to weep again. One of father's brows jumped up as he said, "They took it, the sons of bitches. They stole seven horses, making us beggars."

Yes, this certainly was a misfortune. He had heard all about it on the train. Then he had been somehow reluctant to believe it, and all the way home he was not sure whether it was true or not. But when he saw the straw had not been stacked, he felt a sudden twinge in his chest. He had noticed, on coming in, that Khristya was not there.

"Khristya's left. She joined a group of villagers to work in Karpivka. Maybe she'll earn a ruble or two. But how many rubles do we need to buy a horse! And they don't come our way easily, beggars that we are..."

Father rose from behind the loom and asked whether David had come for long.

"For good this time. I've served my term, there's no war any more, so I'll stay."

He took off his coat and hung it up on the rack along with the Budyonnovka cap. He looked more like David to mother now. And this made her feel more secure — the coat and the cap on the hook: he'd stay. Then she remembered he had come all the way from the railroad station and probably had not eaten anything.

"How about having supper now?" she asked.

To which father replied:

"Its all right with me. David and I will have a smoke, while you get everything ready. Sit down, David. My God, how many years is it since we sat in this way, or even seen each other. Just think of it: five years!"

He looked quietly at his son for a long time, and a warm, paternal expression showed in his gloomy eyes.

"Now, tell me, son, you've been in the war, you've seen more of the world than I; what has happened to the Revolution? Where's that Soviet power for which we laid down our lives, where is that justice? We've got a village Soviet and Lenin's portraits hang there too, but to tell you the truth, son," — he dropped his voice to a confidential whisper — "life's lousy! What are you looking at me like that for? You think your old man's stirring up counter-revolution or what? Now take the seven of us whose horses have been stolen. Without horses you might as well sit and yell for help, there's nothing else you can do. Now if we'd been given at least some sort of loan from the authorities, or had our tax in kind lifted, that'd already be something to keep us on our feet. But no. We handed in an application, but the village Soviet didn't accept it. When we went to the district authorities, we got the line: 'Oh, so you're from Obukhivka, we know your sort. Bandits and moonshiners, that's what you are. You steal from each other and then pretend to be innocent orphans. You don't support Soviet power, that's all your trouble!' As for the real thieves, one of them has been caught — Kushnirenko from the Ohirivka farmsteads. He's now in the town jail. I hear he's going to be let scotfree without any trial. Now, where's that promised justice? So you steal horses from others and make them beggars and proletarians so they have to apply for work in a collective farm. By all events that's how it all looks like to me."

And mother put in a word:

"During the Revolution they burned manors, saying there'd be no landowners anymore. The Revolution chased them away and put others in their place. That's where Khristya went to work for a certain *sovkhos*. That's the master there, a communist."

"Mother, *sovkhos* isn't a master, it's a short form for Soviet farm, that is a farm belonging to the people."

"Who knows, son, who knows."

Father continued in a serious manner:

"Some land policy they have, I tell you. Now, all the farmsteads' land lies on this side of the farmsteads, while Obukhivka land is on the grounds of the former manor beyond the farmsteads.

Wouldn't it be better to give them their holdings over there, and have Obukhivka land on this side of the farmsteads. That'd be the peasant way. But the authorities won't even listen. The communist chairman Matyukha simply laughs in our faces: 'If you were given the land near the village you couldn't be dragged away from it by your ears; what kind of farmers are you anyway — your plows are held together with strings! If you had your way the Republic would die of hunger.' Only those who provide bread for the country are real farmers, that's what he wants to say. But we all know who they are — the farmsteaders and the *kurkuls*. Maybe you've heard that Matyukha sold out to them — he married Ohir's daughter. On the way you've probably seen the house he built for himself. Well, that's what the Revolution gave him as a reward: timber — free of charge, manpower — free of charge, and he organized some sort of *subotniks* \*. He's living in a way some landowners never dreamed of: every day carousing and drinking, and if you meet him when he's drunk it's best to make yourself scarce, as he waves a revolver around his head all the time."

"But why do you put up with it? Yov've got a district executive committee, a Party committee."

"Son, who do you appeal to when they're all like that. They're hand in glove and do whatever they like. Now the artel wrested the steam mill from the CPP.\*\* And who do you think is on the artel: Matyukha, the committee chairman, Hnida and Knish. You try and appeal to the district authorities — 'bandits, moonshiners!' — that's all you'll get from them. Of course, there are also people of another sort in Obukhivka, but they're all Matyukha's best friends anyway. When they go on a drinking spree, it's best to turn off the lights straight away and sit quiet. They've drowned the Revolution in moonshine!"

"Help!" Bang! — the sound of something heavy, perhaps a stick hitting the gate.

Everyone in the house started. A clamor and sound of running feet came from outside. A screaming woman ran through the yard toward the garden, followed by the heavy clumping of boots. "Hold her...! Ah...! Give it to her...!"

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\* *subotnik* — voluntary unpaid work of the Soviet people on days off for the public good, originally esp. on Saturdays — Tr.

\*\* CPP — abbr. Committee of Poor Peasants — organized in 1920 for the consolidation of Soviet power in the countryside, and to effect its agricultural policies — Tr.

"What's that?" David asked, as he jumped on his feet and snatched the Budyonnovka cap from the hook on his way to the door. On the threshold mother spread out her arms and barred his way.

"David, for God's sake! They'll beat your head in."

Father would not let him out of the house either.

"It's just a row, son. The boys are settling their accounts. It's the same thing every night — you quickly shut your windows and don't stick your nose outside."

Pale and trembling, David wiped his forehead with his hand. His head ached terribly, as if he were suffocating from charcoal fumes.

Mother put supper on the table.

"All right, son, sit down."

But the food would not go down his throat. He sat at the table, slurped a spoonful of cold *borshch*, bit into a piece of stale bread — he chewed and he chewed till he made himself swallow the food. He looked at his old, wizened, gloomy parents sitting at the table slurping from their spoons. There was little pale Petrik and Dokiya, each holding a piece of bread under their spoons to stop the *borshch* spilling on the tablecloth, and cautiously nibbling at the bread so as not to spill crumbs. He recalled a long past time: just like that, during supper, in this poor hut, he used to sit at Petrik's place at the table and opposite him was Khristya holding a piece of bread under her spoon. Father was gloomy and mother was sad: they were poor, they had no horse, in the yard lay a little stack of unthreshed wheat. On the rack hung his army coat and Budyonnovka cap.

...After supper they did not go to bed at once. Mother made David a bed by the oven right by the fireplace. Then she brought him a white shirt from her chest. She sat down at the spinning wheel to finish her work, and father took his place behind the loom. Tired from the journey, David went to bed. The children came and squatted down by his head...

"Don't pester him now," said mother, "He's tired."

"It's all right, mama," David said, "let them."

Petrik and Dokiya had bent down close to his face. In a whisper they told him all the latest news — they had not seen each other for so long — then about themselves: they did not go to school any more, for they had nothing to pull on. Dokiya scutched tow, and in summer both of them worked as hands on the farmsteads.

David's eyelids became leaden — he was extremely tired. As he sunk into sleep he saw himself lying in a furrow on the edge of a

highway, and above him, at the edge of the fallow ground, the grass swayed with a gentle rustle. Gradually everything calmed down. The plow crawled past the furrow, the plowshare cut off a slice of black sweet smelling soil and buried him under its weight.

## V

The autumnal nights brought gray dawns. It had started to rain while the new crop was being sown, and now — at least for an hour or so — it was quiet and sunny. The winds had died down — on the common the windmills stood like crucifixes. And by the pond the steam mill snorted evenly, uninterruptedly. Somewhere beyond the village, crows circled over the tilth, and their cries were so loud it seemed they were overhead flying over the gardens.

Autumn. It was so quiet, so gentle. But who could really know its mood? Any minute it might lose its strength and fall head first down on its writhing hands, shedding gray braids of rain and mist onto the earth. That is why those sunny days were worth their weight in gold.

Flails thumped at the poorest households; winnows and scutchers rattled gayly at the rest of the farms — bang... clop-clop... bang... clop-clop...

The scutch fell to the ground. Under the hemp-brakes there were great heaps of it. Near the cattle barn there were also piles of fimble hemp and flax — Matyukha's wife was very conscientious about amassing things, and with good reason, for there were enough hands to work two swingles and a scutcher rattling from morn till night without a minute's rest. That scutch, that irritating scutch!

"Oh, blast the bourgeoisiel!"

Bang... clop-clop... bang... clop-clop... Oniska swingled a handful of flax, tied it neatly around a bunch of yarn, and shook her head with a gesture of both malice and bitterness.

"Yes, a fine heap she's got. Now what the hell is she going to do with it all?"

"Don't you worry," Seredikha responded from her hatchel, "people will weave it into cloth, it won't go to waste. By spring she'll have quite a few fine lengths of cloth, and Zinka over there, God help her, will do a nice job bleaching them."

Zinka merely frowned. Then she bent up from the scutcher and said:

"Bad luck. As far as I'm concerned it'll remain unbleached. All I want is to get through my term at this place."

Bang... clop-clop... bang... clop-clop...

She had worked as a hand since Easter, but that seemed such a long time ago. She had enough of it, doing practically everything around the house, because the master was always away on business or getting drunk, while the mistress spent her time twiddling her thumbs. Zinka was not so much annoyed by the amount of work as by the unruly life in the household: she wouldn't get a good night's sleep for weeks on end. When they got drinking, she would be made to set the samovar to boil at all hours of the night or run somewhere or other to get moonshine. And in summer, she had to hurry off at the crack of dawn to work in the fields. She found the company that gathered in the house nauseating. When they got drunk and their tongues got loose it made her shudder. And all this took place in the presence of the local authorities — the master of the house, Hnida, and now even the chief of the *volost* militia had started frequenting the house.

Bang... clop-clop... The clatter of the scutcher died down. The girl stared into the scutch and said ruminatively:

"I did leave once."

The other women remained silent, only the scutchers rattled on, and from behind the cattle barn, beyond the gardens, came the convulsive snorting of the steam mill.

All of a sudden Oniska looked up at her friend.

"You're a fool, Zinka," she said. "If you left you shouldn't have come back. Don't you know what he's like? Wasn't it because of him that Odarka hanged herself?" And she added in a whisper, "You know, he's infected."

"That doesn't affect me!"

"Oh sure... but with Odarka — it wasn't because she loved him. Simply, he took a fancy to her and started pestering her. Once he met her in the field behind the village, when there was no one around...!"

Zinka raised her head, and scowling, said through set teeth:

"That's all rubbish! Although he's the boss around here and carries a gun, he'd hardly use it. Nothing would stop me — anything at hand I'd send flying at his head. He'd only have himself to blame! Then, whatever happens..."

Her eyes burned angrily in her pretty face, while her lips were tightly pressed together. She returned to her swingling and added reflectively:





"That's what made me leave in the first place, to keep out of harm's way. When I came home, mother cried and father was downcast. They were afraid we'd be chased out of our house if I didn't work the full term. For three days I stayed at home. I had no intention of returning. And then..." — she added sadly after a pause — "it became so depressing on the farmsteads! Whatever I was doing, my thoughts returned to the village."

"That's it!"

Zinka looked askance at Oniska and flushed. She bent over the scutcher and diligently dressed the flax, chiding herself: What a fool, what a fool I am! And why am I so simpleminded? I should have known better picking myself such friends as Oniska and old Seredikha. The thought of them made her smile, but the color was still in her face.

She calmed down and went on dressing the flax in silence.

Oniska quietly started a sad song, and Zinka followed it in her mind, and the song filled her whole body, her eyes misted — she forgot she was dressing flax in somebody else's barn, oblivious to the scutch whirling before her unseeing eyes. She heard something rustling under her feet — it was dry weeds.

*She was walking through the weeds, and then a calf skipped by — the naughty creature! — and with switch in hand she ran off after the calf into the yard. And there by the wall — she bumped into him — he stood in his army coat and Budyonnovka cap. They did not recognize each other.*

*Back home she said to her mother:*

*"Some Red Army soldier was in our manor yard."*

*"Maybe they want to do something with it," mother said in alarm.*

*Silence. Then she started turning her spinning wheel, and its whirl was soon followed by that of her mother's wheel.*

*Father and Serhiy came home from the smithy. As the old man washed his hands over the tub, mother stopped the wheel and said:*

*"Did you hear, old man? Some Red Army man was in our manor yard. Do you think it was one of Matyukha's errand boys?"*

*"No, that was David Motuzka coming home from the railway station."*

*Zinka's spinning wheel stopped whirring, as if its driving strings had fallen off. It was quiet and dark in the room and no one noticed that the girl's hands were trembling.*

*...After that it got depressingly lonely on the farmsteads. Whatever she was doing her thoughts wandered off to the village. One day passed, then another, and on the third day, early in the morning, she prepared to leave.*

*"Where are you going, child?" mother asked.*

*"Back to Matyukha to finish my term of service," she said, blushing. Then she added with a smile:*

*"You were afraid he'd evict us from the house if I didn't work my term."*

*Her eyes sparkled. Mother was glad; however, a sigh of ill foreboding escaped her lips:*

*"Take care of yourself over there, daughter."*

*"Pah!" She replied cheerfully. "So long!" She slammed the door.*

*...The sun was barely visible above the horizon when she arrived in Obukhivka. She walked quickly down the street. Two houses away she heard the thump of flails in Motuzka's yard — the old man and David were threshing. As the excited girl was passing the yard she glanced at the two men. Her "Hello!" sounded a bit strange, as though it wasn't her own voice.*

*"Hello!" the two men responded without interrupting their work — thump-thump, thump-thump... She went on.*

*Her joy vanished. She had so hoped and expected to hear at least a familiar "Hey, Zinka!" What a fool I am, Zinka thought. Maybe he didn't recognize me at all?*

The wicket behind the heaps of fimble swung closed with a crash. The dog, chained to a wire stretching across the yard, dashed from the cottage toward the barn, barking at the gate. Zinka started. Oniska looked out from behind the heaps to see who had arrived, and turned to the other women in mock solemnity:

"Mother-in-law's coming!"

"In person?"

"Dead right, and she's got a hand with her."

Bang... clop-clop...

"Looks like there'll be a merry time tomorrow," Oniska said to Zinka.

"That's why Khoma was making three tubs of homebrew yesterday," Seredikha cut in. "He told me they were going to buy the chairman's boy."

"Do you think Khoma was the only one who was busy? The Ohirs have been brewing for a whole week on the farmsteads. That's not a feast for a day or two, they'll be boozing for a whole week."

Bang... clop-clop...

"Hey" — that was Oniska speaking — "the mother-in-law's brought a whole wagon along."

A large wagon drawn by a pair of husky horses rolled into the yard. Perched up at the front was Ohir's wife — a little old woman, and behind her there was something covered with an embroidered cloth.

Ilko closed the gate and took the horses by the halter, guiding the wagon to the porch. The chained dog was literally demented, running up and down the wire. The master of the house, wearing a waistcoat, appeared on the porch.

"Get off with you!" he yelled at the dog. But the dog would not calm down. So he picked up a chunk of brick lying by the fence and hurled it at the dog. Bang! — the brick slammed against the log barn. Then he came up to the wagon and helped "mama" get down. When they reached the porch, he shouted to Ilko:

"Take the horses to the stalls and get those things into the house."

Matyukha led his guest into the house. Ilko, without unhitching the horses, led them to the stalls built by the gate in the yard.

He greeted the women, took some bundles from the wagon and carried them into the house. Soon he was back to fetch a keg and a carboy lying in the wagon.

"All right, take it easy!" Oniska shouted cheerfully.

He turned to her, adjusted his cap at a rakish angle and said:

"Let them drink!" And, looking around furtively, he added a bit quieter:

"Hope they puke their guts out!"

"It's all the same to them..."

Ilko adjusted the girth strap on the gray mare, went over to the wicket, greeted everyone and said, "God help!" with a smile.

"Why God and not you? You could give us a hand," said Zinka teasingly.

"All right, I'll just have a smoke."

Ilko sat down a couple of paces from Zinka's scutcher, took out a tobacco pouch from his pocket and rolled himself a cigarette. Zinka noticed it was a tobacco sold at the store and the paper he rolled his cigarette with was good. At first she wanted to crack a joke about it, but checked herself, asking instead whether he had seen her old man, since Ilko plowed in that part of the farmsteads and watered his oxen there. Yes, Ilko had seen him. Her parents were all right, he told her. Father and Serhiy worked in the smithy as before, mother spinned. After she left, Ilko came looking for her, but she was not around, so he asked her father where she had gone, and he told him she had left to finish her term of work at Matyukha's place. Uncle Klim was sorry he hadn't been at home at the time — on no account would he have let her go. "For God's sake," he had said, "do you want to destroy the girl?"

He fell silent. The scutchers clattered, sending the scutch whirling to the ground, and light white bits of it fell on Ilko. He took another drag on the cigarette and then touched the girl's hand, saying, "It's good you're around."

Zinka looked at the young man incomprehensively. So he said in a whisper:

"Tomorrow there'll probably be an interesting get-together. In case you hear something, you know... Prick up your ears and let me know what they are jabbering about."

Zinka bent her head close to his.

"What's up?"

"Oh, nothing much... You better not stop beating the hemp, see those four snoopy ears over there."

"They won't hear anything."

Bang... clop-clop... bang... Ilko was referring to Oniska and Seredikha. The latter had stopped talking. As she beat a handful of hemp, she said to them:

"What are you young ones whispering about?"

"What else are we supposed to do?" Ilko responded cheerfully. "To have a nice chat is like eating your fill. But you seem not to let us have the fun. Why don't you concentrate on your work!"

Again the two scutchers started to clatter: Ilko and Zinka bent their heads together and talked in whispers, giving sidelong glances at the women.

"Now listen: Kushnirenko sent a letter from jail. My God, the things it said!"

"But how did you —"

"Hush...!"

*Yesterday while plowing he took a break for a smoke. He tore off a piece of paper he had, rolled himself a cigarette, and lay down to have a good smoke. Whatever he rolled his cigarette from, an old newspaper or whatever, he had the habit of reading it. In this case he did the same, and saw it was a letter. "Dear Danyusha" — it was addressed to Ohir who had been with Khristoviy's band — "Here I am suffering behind bars, while you're still free, and doing nothing to help me. Tell Kornyusha — he's a big shot now, isn't he — that he should do something for me: after all he took his share of the deal with the inspector of finance and with the horses? For if I'm going to be put against the wall alone, I'll frame the lot of you, including Sakhnovsky for his hand in the deal with the registration cards..." There were a couple of lines more, but Ilko had torn off the end of the letter with the sender's name.*

Now he regretted it.

"What're you worrying about," said Zinka, "Isn't it clear enough whom he was writing to: Danyusha, Kornyusha?" \*

"Oh sure. The day before that Kushnirenko's wife passed through the farmsteads on her way from town. She had a talk with Danyusha and probably passed the letter on to him. And he — well, he must have lost it or something like that. Today, when he was about to leave, he started looking for it and got in a real state, turning everything upside down, but there was no letter. So he

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\* Diminutives for Danilo (Ohir) and Korniy (Matyukha) — Tr.

asks me whether I hadn't found by any chance a little scrap of paper. God no, I says. 'In case you do, don't use it for rolling cigarettes, the paper's too thick for a fag,' he said with a smile, as though it didn't matter. But I knew what was what. All right, I says, if it's too thick for a fag I'm hardly likely to use it."

"After that he gave me one twenty-kopecck piece so I get myself some good paper," Ilko said with a laugh.

"So that's how you got it..."

"How else?"

He took a last drag on the cigarette till the stub hissed against his lips, and threw it away. He got up and shook his finger at the girl with a warning gesture.

"Mind you, it's no joke: if they find out I've got the letter they'll kill me, those sons of bitches, and I won't even have a chance to give a squeak... Don't breathe a word about it."

"What do you think I am, a little kid or something?" Zinka said and began thinking. She resumed her work. Ilko was called for from the porch. He looked from behind the wicket and once again said to Zinka:

"Not a word, mind!"

On the porch Ohir's wife spent a long time giving him instructions, then she gave him something and told him to go. A minute later Ilko was sitting on the wagon and driving out of the courtyard. Zinka ran ahead to open the gate.

As he passed her he said, "Goodbye" and winked at her slyly. She nodded understandingly and quietly closed the gate with the cut-out hearts.

## VI

Beyond the village, the sun was setting onto distant fields. Shadows crept out of the orchards and from under the haystacks and from behind the wickets, crawling under the fences along the streets, shrouding the village in a light mist. The last rays of the sun glistened on the chimneys and treetops. On the other side of the river the colors of the yellowish autumnal forest died away, the top branches flickered red. They flickered for a while and disappeared. On the belfry the bell rang for vespers — once, then again... It seemed as though someone was setting a whole lot of yellow birds free one by one; they flew one after another over the houses and the wood, where they probably flocked together. From the steppe the crows flew over the houses into the wood to spend

the night. They settled down noisily in the oak trees. From the undergrowth the shadows came out to the edge of the wood like a herd of black oxen and spread along the river bank.

On this side of the river, near the bridge, the steam mill breathed heavily. A chain of wagons stood round it like at a fair. The oxen chewed their cuds at their yokes. Collared horses stood harnessed to the wagons. People scurried to and fro, gathered into little groups, or sat on the sacks stacked around the mill, exchanging gossip. On a loft by the granary the scales were set up, and around them people and sacks. A red-haired, lively little old man wrote out the receipts. The darkness helped pounds of hard-earned farmers' bread to be indiscriminately levied for the artel's granary. One of the poor souls in the line could only scratch his pate in dismay.

Eight fifteen. Down goes the sack, old Hnida writes out a receipt: eight fifteen — he calculates — that comes out to thirty-five pounds of service tax — on goes the weight — it's three pounds so he readjusts the scales to make it the desired five. It's a bit more, a pound or so, but what difference does the odd pound make?

"Come on, who's next?"

David Motuzka placed two sacks on the scales and watched. Now, with this man you've got to play fair, Hnida thought, being all too well aware whom he could and whom he could not cheat: he even reminded David of the weight of the sack and deducted six pounds.

"So we're grinding the grain of the new harvest, David?" said Ohir with a foxlike obligingness.

"Of course, not last year's. How much do I owe you?" David asked, taking the sacks off the scales.

"Twenty-four pounds." Hnida did not say another word. He must be a serious man by the way he talks, Hnida thought. Oh well, he's of no consequence as far as we're concerned, so to speak.

David poured out the bucket measure. Then he helped Tikhin, with whom he had come to the mill, to weigh his sacks.

"I reckon it'll be ready late tonight."

"Yes."

Tikhin went to his wagon to tell Petrik to drive home. David came up to the hopper to watch the grain being ground.

"Come over here, David, let's have a smoke," Ohtiz called over to him from a pile of sacks.

David came over and greeted him. They began smoking the old man's strong brand of shag.

"Well, how're things at home, David?"

"I'm just taking a look around."

"Have you threshed your grain?"

"Finished it yesterday."

From behind the door, where a whole crowd of men had gathered outside, sitting on sacks, came the low and firm voice of Hordiy, David's neighbor:

"No, there're various people among the communists as well.... (David pricked up his ears). There are, of course, more of those who wear riding-breeches or whatever they are called...."

"That's so their pockets don't bulge!" someone joked.

"Could be, or it could be simply to show off among that dull bunch of muzhiks: there, take a look — it's me. A bird like that carries a Party card in his pocket, and under his jacket, his precious hide — and that's all!"

"They're all the same, their own hides always come first. Take a look at that Motuzka boy — a week or two and he'll be living off the fat of the land — either at the expense of the coop store or the artel. He's got no horse now, but pretty soon he'll have that too!"

Ohtiz gave David a light push with his elbow.

"How do you like our folks. They think you suffered at the fronts and spilled your blood all in vain?" He drew on his cigarette and added secretively under his breath:

"Hnida once said that there's a job with a guaranteed salary at the artel, or some executive post. Wouldn't be bad for... We're poor as it is and your father works like a slave."

David looked intently at Ohtiz, drew on his cigarette — its smoke spread in a thin wisp toward his left eye, making him squint — then he spat on the ground, and again looked straight into Ohtiz' eyes, shaking his head slightly from side to side. There was only a hint of disapproval, but Ohtiz got the message.

"David, but why?"

"Ohtiz, let's drop this subject."

From outside came the voice of Hordiy again:

"You see, I'm their neighbor. I knew him when he was still a boy and afterward when he was with the partisans. Even then, although he was young, he was quite politically minded. Then all of a sudden he disappeared — joined the Red Army, and later he wrote in his letters that he'd joined the Party. The parents didn't say a thing about it, kept it quiet for about six months or so. I found out from the daughter. So I asks the old man whether it's



true. True, he says, they've spoiled the boy. I thought the same. Once I come out of my house early in the morning, and I hear two flails banging away on their threshing floor. One of the men is in an army coat — David! He came home in the night, and with the crack of dawn off he went with the flail to the threshing floor. I stick up for that. Communist or not he still goes around in an old army coat, sold his worsted tunic so that his brother could have a pair of boots to go to school."

"If your tales are true, Hordiy, he doesn't seem like a Party member at all," someone said from the crowd.

"He's got a membership card which says he's a member of the Communist Party. He's also got various Party books: the agrarian code and others about Soviet power. We found the place in it about the distribution of land — it puts it quite nicely: all you have to do is organize a farming collective and draw up a contract, then they'll send out a surveyor and he'll measure you out a plot which every collective sets up for itself."

"Last spring we wrote a petition, didn't we, and it disappeared into thin air."

"Oh no, it didn't. Just yesterday old man Yavtukh who works in the *volost* asked me, in his malicious voice, for a smoke. I gave him my shag and he got out his paper, and what do I see? — it's our petition."

"Oh, come on!"

"Why should I bother making it up. He gave me that bit where we put our signatures — mine, yours and Hordiy's — they all just burned away like that.... You can believe me. What did you expect anyway...."

"It's the same with others, isn't it? Isn't power the same everywhere? Take Nedrihailivka, for instance, the only difference is that it's in another district."

"Oh, what's the use..., " someone rejoined.

Then after a pause an unfamiliar voice, probably someone from Nedrihailivka, said:

"What are you on about? We got our plots without any delay. The surveyors have already arrived and are drawing up maps. By spring they'll have finished dividing the land."

"And what's the system with you, the same small holdings as everywhere else?"

"No, it depends," said the man, apparently getting a light from someone. David got up from his sack and went outside where the figures of the men sitting on the sacks looked like black shadows

and the lights of their cigarettes glowed in the dark. The previous speaker was just lighting his cigarette, and as he inhaled the smoke his mustache and beard turned red.

"Small holdings — of course, everyone was fed up with all those patches and strips of land scattered all over the district. Now, I, for one, have seven such patches which add up to six *dessiatines*. Then there's a scrap of a quarter of a *dessiatine* five *versts* away. It's not so much the work you spend on those patches as the time you kill getting there. With the other villagers it's the same. At first everyone was all for the idea of distributing the land equally. But you can't please everyone. Land is not like a roll of cloth you take from the shelf — here you are, take as much as you need. Besides, what land have we got: salt marshes, sands and bogs — some two hundred *dessiatines* in all. Now how can you go about distributing all that? Who's supposed to get what? And again the same old problem: one plot right by the village and the other ten *versts* away or even more."

"It's the same with us."

"So what we do, we divide it all into four fields. And the rest beyond them will go for a new settlement."

The figures stirred, the lights flared up with greater frequency, everyone started talking all at once.

"See, that's how people do it! Isn't the power there the same?"

"Because they're people, and we are sheep!" said Tikhin Kozhushny, breaking into a cough.

"So you say the surveyors have already arrived?" the men asked of one accord.

"Sure, they're already making up maps."

"Strange! But here —" somebody cursed maliciously and spat onto the ground behind the speaker's back. David bent over into the circle of men and spoke quietly, but what he said had the effect of a plowshare slicing through the fallow:

"Want to know what's going on around here? Yesterday I was at the district land department, and they told me they hadn't seen anything of our application, neither in the incoming nor outgoing papers. Do you understand what that means?"

Silence. Thump-thump... the artel's steam mill seemed to be mocking the peasants' stupidity. On the loft a lamp had been lit. "Now, who's next?" Hnida called out.

Eventually somebody from the group asked quietly:

"How come? They've already collected the seed grain we contributed for common use — ten pounds from every *dessiatine*."

"Those pounds aren't pounds any longer," David said. "It became 'too hot' for them in the granary. You wouldn't let them get spoiled, would you? Some artel member wanted to hear waltzes, so he bought himself a gramophone. Hnida has built a house for two of his sons, so what about the third? Doesn't he need a house, too? Maybe he'll get married some day. Knish's got a daughter studying in Kharkiv — those pounds are needed for that, too. Now, I won't say anything about the chairman." Somebody nudged him in the back. David turned round — it was Tikhin, warning him to be more careful.

"So what of it? As I said, I'm not going to say anything about Matyukha, am I? He's got a new britzka with springs and when he drives through the whole village it shouts out about those public pounds of grain, and his gramophone blares out about those pounds in the evenings. What else is there to say? The men are talking sense. The only thing left now is to go at the distribution of the land."

He left the circle of men, and sat down on a sack to have a smoke with Tikhin. The men seemed to be engrossed in solving a riddle: heads bent low, silent, deep in thought. Some time passed before Hordiy raised his head and shook it in disbelief.

"How come, we've got no contract yet. Why, we signed it and elected our representatives and gave away those pounds of grain. Well, there's no use talking about them — they must have been used for some fishy deal. But we gave it to the artel as a loan until we need it."

"How many pounds and for what price?" David asked.

Silence. Then someone inquired:

"What do you mean 'for what price'?"

"Just what you heard."

"The representatives have a paper which says how much we've loaned. Hey, Tikhin!" the man shouted into the darkness.

Tikhin Kozhushny replied from behind David's back:

"I wasn't home at that time, I was plowing. When I got back from the field, I saw them hauling the grain to the mill from the storehouse. I ran up to ask what it was all about. It's a loan to the artel, I was told.... And what about the general meeting? I asked. What do you need a meeting for when the grain's going to ruin in any case, and, besides, we're loaning it till first notice. And all this takes place at a time when grain's precious as gold. We elected them as our representatives, but they're just bastards, that's what they are. I started to argue, but as tough luck would have

it, Kovtun wasn't yet back from the field. What could I do all by myself? They drew up a document, but I didn't sign it since they wouldn't give it to me, and I still don't know what's written in it."

David:

"They wouldn't do that because we know what it's all about. They'll probably show it to us when they find it necessary, in a year or so. By then no one will remember whether the grain was precious as gold or whether half of it went to the dogs."

"Too right!"

A clamor of indignant voices:

"What do you think of that? They're robbing us in broad daylight!"

"Hush!" someone said from behind. It grew silent. Matyukha and Hnida appeared on their way from the granary toward the mill. The silence was cut short by David's voice. Taking no notice of Matyukha, he said:

"So tomorrow during the meeting we'll ask them and make them tell us how things are with the contract and with the grain and the document about the loan. This sort of secretive gossiping will get us nowhere. Hnida and Matyukha run things the way they want. Take Hnida, for instance, there's a fine spokesman for you: his whole family's got their tracts of land right in front of their thresholds, and what land! And all of them, poor souls, screaming as loud as they can — divide the land!"

He drew on his cigarette, its light revealing his dark eyes for a moment and his lips twisted in a cheerless smile.

"Things are in a mess here. Looking at Matyukha you'd think that's what Soviet power is supposed to be. But that's for those who haven't been anywhere outside Shcherbanivka, anyone who knows that this isn't Soviet power at all. Obukhivka is an out-of-the-way village, in which the Hnidas, Ohirs and Matyukhas thrive like pikes."

Silence. A deep voice shouted rudely from behind:

"Hey you, make way!"

The crowd started, letting Matyukha through into the circle. He wore a shaggy fur cap and held a thick knotted flail in his hand.

"Who's that?" he demanded, coming up to David in the dark.

A cigarette glowed from the sacks, illuminating David's face.

"It's me," he said quietly, but resolutely.

For a moment Matyukha stood still, gauging David with his eyes. All of a sudden they flared up and he yelled into the crowd:

"Break up and get moving! Have you come to mill grain or to

hold meetings?" He raised his flail menacingly. "Get moving, right away...!"

The crowd dispersed — some through the gaps between the wagons, others toward the mill. Only David and Hordiy remained, sitting on sacks. Tikhin Kozhushny stood nearby, one hand pressed to his chest to hold back his whooping cough. David flicked away his cigarette and rose to his feet. Matyukha took the flail in his left hand, with his right he took David's arm and said through set teeth:

"All right, comrade, let's go and have a talk."

He led him aside. For a long time their silhouettes stood out black against the horizon. Judging by their gestures they were engaged in a heated argument.

Then they went further off into the dusk — the outlines of their figures could be seen on the sandy bank of the river.

It was silent in the mill. Only the grinding stones rumbled, and people scurried about in the white flour dust. Behind the wall the steam mill continued its tired snorting.

After about ten minutes David came into the mill. His face was a little pale. Matyukha pushed through the door after him. Under the shaggy cap his face looked like a big purple eggplant. He passed through the peasants, surveying everyone with a sharp gaze. They all seemed to wilt under his gaze; they would drop their heads and fussily thrust their hands into the pockets for tobacco pouches, or would reach out to the nearest sack to retie the strings which seemed to have somehow got undone. Matyukha said something to the miller and then went out through an opening leading to the steam engine.

Tikhin met David with a question in his eyes.

"I told you to be careful," he admonished him. "See what happened. Now you'll get what's coming for you."

"The hell I will! Sooner or later we had to talk it out: each of us has got to know sometime who he has to deal with. In any case, we had a 'heart-to-heart talk.' All right, how long do we have to wait before our turn?" Intentionally he changed the subject.

"Quite a while, yet," Tikhin said, and coughed. It was really bad, coming from deep down in his chest. It must have hurt a great deal; he pressed his hand to his chest and his face contorted with pain. After he had finished coughing he was silent for a while and then said:

"His way of talking to people is well known: if you disagree with him he immediately accuses you of counterrevolution. Mind

you, David, next time don't be so careless, be on your guard. They've ruined my liver all right. It's their dirty work, it is....," and again he broke out coughing, a look of pain on his face.

David took him by the shoulder.

"You take better care of yourself, button up that chest of yours. My God, your face has gone quite yellow. You feel lousy, Tikhin?"

He only nodded in response: really bad! David told him to go home, promising he would do everything for him at the mill. He asked him to send the wagon with someone later on.

"Maybe I'll send Maria," Tikhin said. He raised his collar and quietly left.

The last of the peasants from Nedrihailivka was finishing milling his grain. They hauled the sacks to their wagons and prepared to leave. Hordiy was the next in line, which meant that David would be the fifth after him — about another hour to wait. He went outdoors.

It was cold outside. Against the dark sky the stars looked like millet which somebody had generously strewn for chicken. But they would not come to the feast. Only one of them appeared from behind the meadows — it was the moon. It lit up the landscape. When it was dark one could only hear the general commotion and voices of men urging on their horses. But now the outlines of the yoked horses appeared as well as the figures of men — all in sharp contrast — black and white. The shadows spread along the ground like pools of black ink. There was a pungent smell of horse manure. In the frosty resilient air the husky voices of the drovers boomed.

"Ivan!"

"What you want?"

"Get moving, will you! What are you fussing around there?"

"I'm fixing the wheel hoop!"

"Oh, you useless bum! Didn't you have time for that earlier?"

While Ivan somehow fixed the wheel in the dark, the men had a smoke.

"I'm ready, boys!"

Everyone went to the wagons and the long caravan set off along the sandy terrain. After a while you could hear the caravan rumbling on the bridge. Across the bridge they entered the forest and the iron hoops merrily clanked on the cobbles.

David followed them up to the river. He stopped on the bridge, and the wind wafted a smell of yellow oak leaves from the forest, bringing back memories of long, long ago.

*There were many of them hiding in the autumn forest. They huddled around bonfires in the gullies, suffering from cold and diseases....*

No, today he was not in the mood for recollections. He had a bit of a headache.

Wagon wheels clattered in the distant forest.

As he bent over the bridge railing, David spat his cigarette into the water and it hissed out below.

He suddenly recalled Matyukha's words on the sandy bank. "I'll crush you like I'm crushing this here cigarette," he had said, throwing the cigarette on the ground and stubbing it out with his foot. "You mark my words, I won't tolerate any counterrevolution. I'll sort you out so fast you won't have a chance to utter a squeak!" To which David said: "All right, Matyukha, enough of that. I'm not like Tikhin who's being throwing up blood from his liver for the last two months. We'll have a chat about counterrevolution later on." With that he had walked off.

David spat into the water from the bridge. He raised his head, the moon smiled into his face and winking, it seemed to say: "Come on, get that Matyukha out of your head. All right, he's a scoundrel, and tomorrow at the meeting you'll get even with him. But now — hush...." The moon seemed all ears as a blissful smile spread across its round face: the sounds of girlish voices floated across from the village: how beautiful was their song! Even the dogs had quietened down, even the shadows had risen up on the meadows, linked their arms and, bewitched by the moonlight, meandered through the trees in a round dance. Way off yonder on a bluff overlooking the Psel, where the boat was moored, stood the weeping willow, wringing its hands and bending its loose braids to touch the water.

David's heart missed a beat. He felt gloomy. Again he thought of Matyukha. But now he had become a slippery image, eluding his attempts to concentrate on him. No sooner had he called him to mind, when he would disappear, and again David was left alone on the bridge listening to the girls singing.

He still felt dejected. Then, for some reason, he recalled the sight of Tikhin breaking into fits of coughing. When he was with the partisans hiding in the woods he was as strong as an ox. When they were only kids working as farmhands on the manor, Tikhin would go about barefoot and in rags in the frost — it was all the same to him.

*...He got home, quietly hung up his cap on the hook, took off his coat and sat down on the bench without saying a word. After a while he said to his wife:*

*"Go down to the mill, Maria." He broke into another fit of coughing. "I'm feeling pretty lousy! David will take care of everything at the mill."*

*Maria's nostrils twitched nervously. Taking the kerchief from the clothes-rack, she arched her sleek, full-bosomed body, and stammered:*

*"You'd better put on a sheepskin."*

*"Where's the horse collar, in the entrance hall?" she asked, pulling on an overcoat without buttoning it up.*

*"Yes, I'll get it."*

*"No, I will!" She briskly left the room.*

David was depressed. He felt the same as that day when he visited Tikhin's home for the first time after his homecoming.

*Their reunion had been full of warm feeling. At that time they still were neighbors. They had talked the whole evening. Maria and Hordiy's daughter-in-law had been sitting on a bench spinning yarn, and the men had sat around the table listening to David reading the newspaper. He had told them about his life in Turkestan, about his journey, how people lived in other parts of the world, and what he had seen. They had also talked about life in Obukhivka. The spinning wheels had whirled, but the women hadn't missed a word of the conversation. Presently the men had started talking about life as it would be some twenty years from then: how would their children live? probably quite differently from their fathers; David had given vent to his dreams: coops, tractors — like something out of a fairy tale. The men's eyes, dreamy and childlike, had been fixed on the speaker who was so skilfully "making up stories". When he had calmed down, Maria, who had been sitting by the spinning wheel with head bent low, had looked up and said as if in jest:*

*"Tikhin, David here has been telling us such fantastic things about our future lives, about children that... well whether you like it or not, we really must...." She stopped abruptly, turning red in the face and her black brows quivering. She had turned toward David — their eyes met. The men had started to laugh and joke.*

*"Seems as though we'll have to find out which of us is to blame," Tikhin said.*



*Maria had stood up from her spinning wheel, drunk some water from a cup which she had then placed on the table. She had bent her lithe body over the table toward her husband and tousled his hair. Then she had flashed her black eyes at David.*

On the face of it it was a trifle, but it made David feel pretty awkward then just as he was now.

He pulled out his tobacco pouch and rolled himself a cigarette. The moon looked down on him, now unsmiling. On the bluff over the moonlit Psel where the boat was moored, there was no one wringing his hands anymore — it was only the willow tree bent over the water. In the village the girls had stopped singing. In the frosty air David could hear gales of laughter. From the street came the clatter of hooves approaching the steam mill. Again David's heart missed a beat.

Approaching the mill, he saw among the few scattered wagons Tikhin's gray mare tied to an acacia tree. Loud noise and laughter came from the mill. The first thing he heard on entering the mill was Maria laughing. She wore a little white kerchief tied over the forehead. Her overcoat was unbuttoned, her eyes burned, and her face was flushed with mirth. At the slightest excuse the old men, even those with large families, simply love to while away their time in the company of a woman, especially if she is merry, mischievous and witty.

"So you say he can't even stuff a sack. Now that old man over there could do it."

"No, not anymore," said a gray-haired old-timer sitting near the hopper. "All I can do now is stuff my pipe with my finger."

"Ha-ha-ha-hal!"

"Maria!"

The young woman sharply turned on her heel, looked toward the door, raising her brows in surprise. She made a step toward him, stopped, her eyes laughing.

"Why, my dear miller, where have you been all this time?"

"It's our turn now," he said all too seriously.

"Oh, I see!" She looked at him intently: it was hard to tell whether she was melancholy or pensive.

"Catch, Karpo!" the old man threw him an empty sack from the hopper. Karpo was preoccupied with twisting a string, so Maria caught the sack, hung it on the box under the grinders and started

filling the sack with a scoop. Outwardly she was as gay as before, but her mood must have changed, because from time to time she would cast a sidelong glance at David.

Ostap brought the sacks closer to the hopper and sat down on them, his head supported in his hands as he watched the flour falling into the sack.

"David, get ready."

David untied Tikhin's sacks of wheat. When Ostap's sack was full he got up, poured the grain into the hopper, and went to the box with his empty sacks to scoop in the flour. Maria went to the hopper as well. The grinders turned with a grating noise. The peasants chatted softly with each other, some of them dosed. Suddenly Karpo burst into the mill from outside.

"Right, boys, who's the joker that pinched the front shaft of my wagon pole?"

All the men burst into laughter.

"That really is a bad joke!"

"What you do is find a wagon with two shafts," someone suggested in jest, "and do the dirty trick on somebody else!"

"Tie the bridles together and you'll get home somehow," Ostap advised.

"Oh, what a bunch of dumheads you are!"

Karpo left. The grinders rumbled, the peasants conversed quietly as before, some of them dosed.

With a worried look David kept on filling the sacks: now he would take the scoop, pack the sack tight, and again reach for the scoop. He tried not to look at Maria, feeling she was watching his every movement. He seemed to feel her burning gaze through his eyelids. Oh, what the hell! he thought with a frown. Then his thoughts turned to tomorrow's meeting. After so many years this would be the first time he would see all his fellow villagers together in one group. What were they like at a meeting? Could it really be true that whatever Matyuka put to the vote was met with "unanimous" approval? It was true that the peasants were ignorant and intimidated, but when they were made to realize that there was justice, the justice of the poor.... Like hell you'll have it your way, Matyukha! David thought. He recalled the manor in the steppe and old man Klim. Beyond the orchard he envisaged the new settlement, and in the yard, the collective-farm office. The harvesters hummed as they reaped the grain. Tikhin's machine was in the lead, Klim's behind him.... On the stubble there were young women bent over the sheaves, in red or white kerchiefs... and one

of them, dark-haired and merry, had her kerchief tied on the forehead...

And there she stood by the hopper, looking at him pensively. No, I must stop that! Maria thought. I have to live with Tikhin, I must work with him. Who is dearer? Who is more faithful than he?

David packed the sack, his lips pressed tight. His high forehead was furrowed between the brows. He was so sun-tanned... and so good looking!

"David!" she said to make him look her way. He raised his head.

"Should I pour in some more?"

"Yes, go ahead."

She filled a box with rye and stood holding it in her hands. She arched her body, looked into the hopper, then at the young man, and remained standing in that pose, waiting, forgetting herself. David's voice from below cut short her reverie and she rushed to the hopper to pour in the rye.

At long last they ground the grain. David packed the last sack, tied it tightly and hauled it on his back. A little earlier she had hoisted a sack onto her shoulders without anybody's assistance and carried it to the wagon. Just as David arrived she threw it onto the wagon, sharply turned round, and — dark as it was — bumped her breast right into the young man.

He took her by the shoulders.

"Take it easy, woman!"

Despite the dark she noticed — yes, she was positive — that he had smiled.

Maria immediately became cheerful and carried on deftly hauling the sacks. On their way back home David drove the horses, his legs dangling over the ladderbeam, while she lay on her back on the sacks behind him. Her head almost touched David's elbow, her eyes looking up at his, and when he turned round, they seemed to appeal: come on, bend down!

"David, why are you so unfriendly today?"

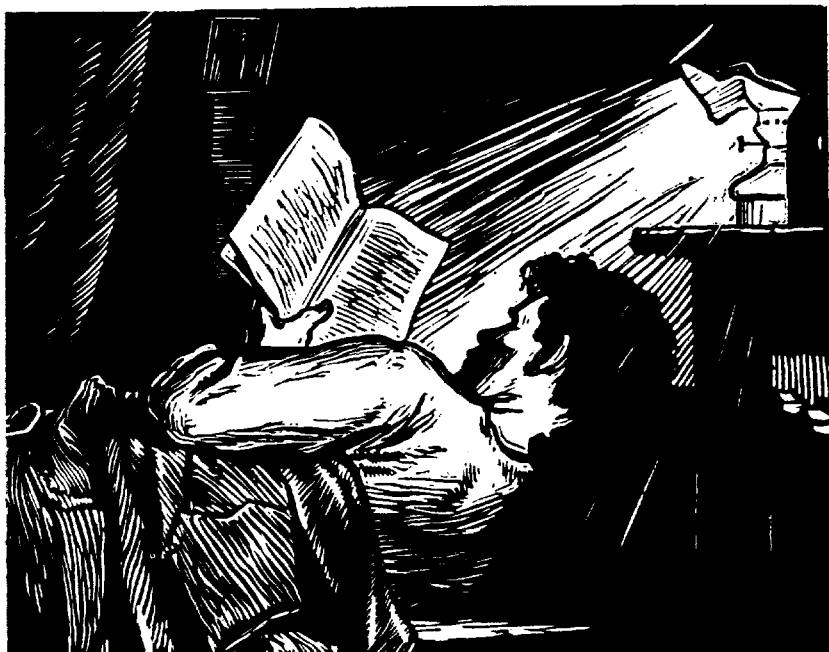
He jerked at the reins.

"What makes you think that? I'm the same as usual."

"Oh no, you're not!" she said thoughtfully.

They remained silent throughout the journey. Again David recalled Tikhin and his bad coughing. Maria, too, was engrossed in thought — who knows what she was thinking about. Maybe also about Tikhin — and his coughing.

It was quiet in the streets and the houses were dark. Only Matyukha's windows were lit up. When they passed his house they



could make out the voice of a woman singing a romance from the gramophone.

"Well, we're home."

David turned round. She was lying on her back as before. The moon shone in her eyes — black and glimmering like still glass beads. David quickly turned his eyes from her and jumped to the ground. Maria sat up. David threw off a sack, stood it against the wattle fence, then hoisted another sack onto his back. Maria took hold of the reins.

"Now, before I go," David said, "tell Tikhin not to be a fool and to take care of his health. It's no good him begrudging the grain to pay for his treatment, because grain's something you can earn."

The woman replied sorrowfully and pensively:

"We're not miserly about grain, and, besides, I've got some length of cloths to sell if need be!"

She drove away. The moment David stepped on the stile she turned round and said something to him quietly. David did not catch what it was.

"What did you say?"

Silence. Then she laughed.

"Never mind, you should have listened!"

Silence. Cocks crowed in the village.

David carried the sacks into the barn, went into the house and lighted a lamp on the table. Mother got up to give him something to eat.

"Must be late," she said.

"Yes, it's past midnight."

After supper he took a lampshade made of newspaper, placed the lamp at the end of the table and started undressing. His bed was laid out on a bench opposite the window, over which hung a portrait of Lenin.

At the head of his bed was a pile of books and he took one of them. He gazed dreamily out of the window into the moonlit, frosty night. Then he turned away from the window, dismissing the thoughts that roved in his head. He opened the book, found the folded page and fixed his eyes on the miniscule print.

## VII

Matyukha hiccupped. His eyes still closed, he smacked his lips, a bad taste in his mouth. "Ugh!" He opened his sleepy eyes. Over his head rose the shining knobs of the bedstead, on the carpet running from the wall he saw one of his woolen slippers of blue and yellow — Liza's handiwork. "Hic" — he bent over the pot and spit into it. On the white pillow and sheet there was a brown stain. So he must have.... What a skinful he must have downed the night before! Or, maybe, something had "disagreed" with his innards?

Somewhere behind the wall in the dining room the seconds trickled away like raindrops running down from the eaves. The silence was broken by the sound of something crackling and spitting from behind the door. There was a smell of roast which made him want to puke.

"Zinka!"

His voice was hoarse from the hangover. On the chest of drawers a glass vase tinkled delicately like a fly's wing brushing against a string. The door squeaked, one half of it opened into the bedroom, and Zinka appeared on the threshold.

"What's up?"

Matyukha yawned and stretched so that his joints crackled. He looked fixedly at the domestic and asked after a while:

"Have they come back from church?"

"Not yet."

His eyes roamed across her face and down her slim figure to her feet. And from the feet upward. What made Lyonka fall for that skinny creature? he thought. Zinka interrupted his thoughts:

"Anything else you want?"

"Wait a minute! Er... has anyone arrived yet?"

"The Bezpalkos have come. All the rest went to church."

So the Ohirs must have gone straight to the church, he thought. Now, why hasn't anyone from Shcherbanivka arrived? Lyonka should certainly be here. Or, maybe, he's got some urgent business to attend to. Whether it's the militia or the fire-brigade, it's all the same — he waived the point and again bent over the pot.

"Take this away. What have you got burning there? It stinks and suffocates me. Get me some pickles, no — make that crab apples. Not soured apples, but the stuff that's in that keg, and bring me some *kvass*. Bring me some water as well, I'll wash."

Zinka closed the door and went into the kitchen. The heat and smell made her head ache. An infernal sizzling and hissing noise came from the oven. Sekleta, Hnida's mother, was cooking today. A strand of gray hair had escaped from under her cap, she was flushed from the heat of the oven, her forehead glistening with sweat.

"Where you going?" she asked, seeing Zinka throwing the kerchief on her shoulders.

"To get some *kvass*."

"Oh dear, I need some straw for the fire, the patties haven't browned yet, and there's no telling when they'll come back from church. The *kvass* can wait, go and get me an armful of straw."

Zinka left, while Sekleta heaved a deep sigh as she straightened her back, and then went to the oven again. Today she was expecting lots of people who were strangers to these parts, and she did not want to bungle the food. "Who's been doing the cooking?"

they'd ask. "Sekleta" — the thought of failure made her uneasy. When she had worked as a domestic for the landowners she had been in charge of the cooking at all the weddings and dinners. At the Ohirs she cooked for all their children's weddings. Now it was just like before the Revolution when she had been such a big shot: though they were landowners she had been regarded as one of the family. Because she served landowners since girlhood, she was intimate with their manners. She pushed a big pot aside, stirred its contents with a spoon and tasted it carefully; the *borshch* was as good as at any restaurant.

She pushed the pot back into the oven.

Zinka came in.

"They're coming back from church."

"Oh heavens!" Sekleta started. Quickly she twisted some wisps of straw into a little bundle, put it on the coals and started to fan the flame, almost shoving her head into the oven. Zinka went to the cellar in the yard. On the oven a child started to whimper, eventually breaking into a wail.

"Oh, poor me!"

The master of the house came in from the living room. He had pulled on his boots and was wearing breeches and a shirt with a dicky embroidered with black vines covering the whole of his chest. His hair was disheveled like a haystack. He started washing in a blue basin. Presently Zinka came in, bringing a full pitcher of *kvass* and a plate of crab apples. His face and hands still wet and his neck and ears still smeared with soap, he grabbed the pitcher and greedily emptied about a half of it. Then he spat on the floor and started drying himself with a towel.

At that moment the wicket gate shut with a bang and the dog started to bark, trying to break loose from his chain — first pulling toward the gate, then the porch. "Out of the way, you fool!" Liza shouted. There was a trample of feet through the porch. At last the door burst open and a large group of guests came into the house with Liza in the lead.

"Phew, it's stuffy in here! Please, come in, auntie Olya, Nina!"

Ohir's wife took off her sheepskin jacket right away and went to her nephew who was sitting on the oven. Matyukha bowed courteously to the ladies, his haystack bobbing up and down in the process, and chatted and shook hands with the men — Bezpalko and father-in-law.

"Where's Danyusha?"

"Unharnessing the horses."

"Well, well!" he turned his sullen eyes toward the domestic, who was busying herself around a slop pail preparing pigfeed, and shouted at her:

"Anybody'd think you were new here: if someone arrives you're supposed to unharness the horses!"

Zinka took a cup of water, washed the slop off her hands and said over her shoulder:

"I'm not exactly twiddling my thumbs, am I?"

"You better keep quiet, you!" He looked sullenly at the domestic, and when she had left he seemed to see her figure through the door, as she said over her shoulder: "I'm not exactly twiddling my thumbs, am I?" What a louse! he thought. And she's still got the nerve to blab!

"Come into the dining room, please," he addressed his guests.

The spacious room, with large windows veiled with muslin curtains, was decorated not in country style. Near the place of honor stood a large cloth-covered table with cutlery and decanters. There was a sofa covered with a runner. A bed stood by the wall adjoining the bedroom. It was rather a decorative piece of furniture with snow-white pillows piled up almost to the ceiling. A "gorgeous" cheval glass stood next to the door. Standing in front of it was Natalia, Danyusha's wife, tidying her hair. In the mirror she saw the kitchen door open and the men entering the room: Matyukha went straight to the bedroom, and the heavysset, short-winded father-in-law plumped onto the first chair he came across. Bezpalko crossed the room and stopped in front of a gramophone with a large horn standing on a little table in the corner.

"That's really something! Cost a whole fifty rubles!" he said, shaking his head in awe.

The heavysset Ohir breathed noisily through his nose. All were silent. Nina sitting on a chair opposite the window with hands folded in her lap and holding a scented kerchief, turned her head indifferently toward father, then away from him and stiffened. Her eyes were fixed on the kitchen door, as if she expected a photographer coming from that direction, who would say his usual "Attention, please, watch the camera!" Liza came in from the bedroom, wearing a blue dressing gown. She took the child from her mother's arms and shouted to Sekleta in the kitchen to serve up. After a pause the first to speak was Bezpalko's wife. As seemed fitting after church and before a hearty meal, she said:

"Your priest Eulampiy is very old now, old and gray."

"Yes, he's a senile old man," Ohir said, breathing heavily. "It's



not just his age — it's the life he's had that's crushed him: those bandits did their bit, make no mistake! I've suffered with him in the cellars of the Cheka!"

"My God, what horrible times those were! Did we ever think that —"

"Things are well in hand now," Ohir said, running his short plump fingers across his knees. "They're sobering up a bit. Those who burned and plundered are with the church again now."

"Yes, you've certainly got quite a priest; quite long in the tooth he is," Bezpalko rejoined, as he looked through the gramophone records.

"Oh, Nikanor Ivanovich, how well you put it!" Natalia said from the cheval glass and raised her brows in an affected manner.

"Yes, exactly. Now, if you'd had our Father Simon for a month at least, you wouldn't be able to drag yourself away from church."

The remark made Bezpalko's wife squirm: that fool was making so much of his Father Simon. Ohir asked what he really was like, to which Bezpalko's wife answered:

"You see, we've got an Autocephalous Church."

Ohir turned on his sister with his whole body rather than with his face.

"A real Autocephalous Church?"

"Yes, a real one. They managed to occupy the churches in two parishes. Anything went at the beginning — some had their heads bashed in and the churches were under lock and key. Then the autocephaly got the better of them all as well as our parish of the Dormition Church. So now I have to walk a good *verst* to get to church."

"Serves you right, 'cause you've never been there once, but keep blabbing so much about it," said her husband. "God's word is the same in all languages, be it Chinese or African, it's God's word after all," he argued with feigned seriousness, although it was plain that he himself did not believe in God's word in any language. "Once it was spoken in old Slavonic, while now it's in the native language... and when the choir bursts in 'Glory to God on high!' it really plucks your heart strings. Some of the women break into tears. Our priest made the church look so grand with wreaths and *rushniks*\* hung all over the iconostasis. Then he organized a Society of Holy Women. And you should hear him celebrate a

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\* *rushnik* — embroidered towel used practically in every folk rite in Ukraine — Tr.

mass — he's a real artist, he is! No wonder. He's got such a mighty bass and is so imposing. When he walks through the church with the censer, the people, especially the womenfolk, fall down on their knees before him. You should hear him deliver a sermon, and, besides, he's good at politics as well!"

Presently Danyusha crossed the threshold. He was a sturdy man with a light-colored mustache pointing downward and eyebrows bristling low over his eyes. He wore a khaki army tunic with traces of two shoulder-strap holes. His exact replica, Matyukha, appeared at the door of the bedroom. But the latter was red-faced and wore a jacket; the red tip of a Party membership card showed from its side pocket — a habit he had picked up from a very famous Party functionary at a Party Congress.

They greeted each other. The voices in the room became rather subdued. Matyukha and Danyusha sat down side by side on the sofa which had once belonged to the general's widow. Ohir crossed his legs, took out a pack of cigarettes, offered it to Matyukha and took one himself. Nikanor Ivanovich wound up the gramophone and put on a record — *Oh, Didn't Mother Tell Me!* This made everyone feel relaxed, for relatives as they were, Ohir could not free his mind of depressing memories.

*...Scared, he stood there, bareheaded, as Matyukha brandished a gun in his face (that was in 1918).*

*"Come on, show me where you hid the money!"*

*Ohir, pale with fright, dug with the shovel in the orchard, while Matyukha kept poking the gun in his ribs.*

*"Make it quick, you fat-bellied son of a bitch!"*

*Then he chased after Natalia on horseback through the farmsteads. Of course, that was a long time ago, when Liza was still studying at the Gymnasium... Now he was their man. But how could Ohir wipe these memories out of his mind?*

Ohir breathed heavily through his nose, thoughtfully stroking his knees with his plump fingers. He glanced at his son-in-law, and the latter glowered at him as their eyes met and turned away. Breathing heavily, Ohir again ran his fingers across his knees. But then... did Matyukha really forget all that? Somewhere deep inside a worm of conscience kept eating away at his peace of mind. Not without reason. Once when he was drunk he took his father-in-law's

hand and hit himself in the face with it, hollering, "I'm a bastard!" and hit himself over and over again.

These recollections swarmed round the old man's mind. Matyukha, however, was thinking about other things as he bent over to Danyusha and muttered gloomily:

"What's that Kushnirenko playing the fool in prison for?"

"I wrote you about it, didn't I?"

"Sure... so he wants us to bail him or he'll sing. I knew it was coming! I had a feeling Kushnirenko was that type. So there you are. Of course, no one will believe him. What material evidence can he produce, and what about all the scandal and fuss?" The thought of it made Matyukha chew nervously at his cigarette. "What a skunk! If they get you, mum should be the word. All right, he'd get a term of two years in the prison at the most... We would have supported him somehow."

"When his wife last visited him, I passed ten rubles on to him."

"How's he doing there?"

"Playing cards like the devil. His wife told me that when she saw him in prison, he came out wearing only underpants and a borrowed sheepskin thrown on his naked body. He lost his bedsheet and pillow at cards. And his head is bashed in. He complained that it used to be the criminals who molested him, but now it's our own people."

"How's the investigation going?"

"Seems like it's been finished. He denies everything, saying that he bought the horse from a Gypsy and that's that. His wife asked the investigator whether he could go on bail. He says that in this case the village community must vouch for him."

Danyusha bent closer to Matyukha and said:

"We have to arrange that somehow at the meeting today."

"Yes, we'd better," Matyukha said after a while.

The gramophone stopped playing. Ohir's wife came in, putting a plate of patties on the table and Sekleta brought a bowl of *borshch*.

"Would you like to sit at the table!" Ohir's wife proposed. "Liza, you're the mistress of this house after all... Where's your Zinka — she could at least have relieved you of the child. Zinka!" she shouted in the direction of the kitchen. The domestic promptly appeared and took the child.

The guests noisily took their places at the table. Matyukha took one decanter from the sideboard and then another one, smaller in size, with fruit liquer for the women.

The master and mistress of the house began offering their guests patties and *borshch*. Matyukha poured out generously tots of moonshine.

By the end of the first course the atmosphere at the table had changed radically. The master of the house was no longer sullen and became talkative. So did the other guests; everyone talked louder and more than was usual. Spoons and forks clattered noisily, everyone gorged himself on the food.

Sekleta and Zinka brought in the roast and pickled apples, at which Matyukha, for no apparent reason, noted that water was indispensable for ducks.

"Why, of course," one of the women remarked, "they get fatter and you use up less feed when they're on the water."

"Quite right!" Matyukha agreed. He filled a glass up to the brim, spilling some of its contents onto the tablecloth, and offered the glass to his father-in-law. The latter waved it off — he had to watch his health after all!

Matyukha grunted, looking greedily at the glass which was clear as a crystal. As before, the red tip of his Party card showed from the side pocket. He looked at the guests, a smile frozen on his lips. Then he knit his brows and said in an unnatural voice — perkily, apparently mimicking someone from the District Party Committee: "Once you are a Party member, you must not drink!" When he slouched his shoulders and raised his eyebrows, he was again his old self. "As if the higher Party members don't drink. Not this rubbish, of course, but all sorts of cognacs and portwines. Boy, how they drink! Ours is Party work — so drink without any arguments!"

He downed the glass. Filling up again, he continued:

"At least we've learned how to distil it. Now it's palatable like it used to be in olden times. But at first it was rusty-colored and stank so much you had to hold your nose. You had no choice but to drink it, for otherwise you'd go round the twist. When I was with the partisans the only time I wasn't drunk was when I was asleep. Boy, the things we did then! And then there was the time when I was military commissar in the *volost*... Come on, Nikanor Ivanovich, drink to the dregs lest fortune foresake us."

Danyusha filled up. Matyukha went on with his harangue.

"If you don't drink, your fortune will desert you and you'll wander about like a lost soul. D'ye think it's that easy for a Party member to deal with folks like ours? D'ye think I don't know how they look at me — as if I were a devil. 'Just look how he lives it

up!' they say. And why shouldn't I? Didn't I spill my blood for the Revolution, not sparing my life, so to speak? Does that mean I should be going around in rags, chewing barley and leading a dog's life like them? What did I struggle for then?"

"Quite right!"

Spoons and forks clattered. The womenfolk on the other side of the table happily chattered away. Matyukha really got into his stride.

"Naturally, those who know what life is all about say it's all right. But you know what kind of folks we have around here! All they do is gossip — not to my face, of course, 'cause I wouldn't let them — 'he's for the *kurkuls*....'"

All those at the table started as if shocked by an electric current.

"How much longer will there be such a thing as a '*kurkul*'?"

"Everyone is equal, but there's still this notion!"

"Trotsenko lives at his friend's home, because he's been chased out of his farmstead. He's going around a beggar, but still they call him a *kurkul*!"

"What funny folks we have! We don't have *kurkuls* any more, that's as clear as daylight. What we have now is a self-sufficient farmer. But he who opposes the authorities or doesn't support them, he's a *kurkul*, a hostile element."

"But don't we pay the tax in kind like we should?" Ohir said with a shrug.

"That's just it. And what about the pair of oxen and the pair of horses you've got...."

"But the horses are Danyusha's"

"Even if they're yours, so what? A self-sufficient farmer — that's what counts. He's the only one that benefits the government. The other day Liza read in a newspaper, in *Pravda*, that now they're even giving bonuses to the good farmers. The authorities know what's what all right. So rent as much land as you want, only of you can cope with it. Hire as many as a dozen farmhands, by all means."

Danyusha added gravely:

"There's nothing else for it. Berofo the war our Ukraine was 'Europe's bread basket.' Do you know how much grain we exported abroad? And how many years have we been starving now? We'll be suffering even more if the authorities won't take measures to solve the agrarian problem to suit the interests of the state. What do we see now? A *dessiatine* of land that had been under the land-

owner or the farmer-proprietor — the *kurkul*, as they want to call him now — used to yield two hundred *poods* of grain, while today it's only twenty. The proprietor sometimes gets up to a hundred, admittedly, but with the CPP beggars it's only twenty *poods* — and with 'God's blessing' at that. For with present standards of farming it's amazing that you get back enough grain for sowing."

"That's right!" Ohir said, as he put his fork on the plate and wiped his mustache with a napkin. "My heart bleeds at the sight of the CPP torturing the sacred land. I was robbed of my plot behind the barn. It's six years ago now, but I still can't bear to look at it. It simply breaks my heart! One of those bums pops up on the field sometime after sunrise, throws the grain on the stubble, scratches the whole lot with a hoe hitched to a pair of cows, and gives it a once over with the harrow — and the rest depends on God's blessings! Then harvest time comes. Sometimes it happens that one of those poor buggers loses his way and goes about looking for his plot all day long."

"At least they sow the land," Nikanor Ivanovich said with a laugh. "Our folks are more cunning: what they do is plow up the plots in autumn with the leftover grain on the ground. And you know, it grows."

"They should have been crippled in the cradle for farming like that!" Ohir said, slumping back in his chair. He bent his head, his beard spread across his chest. His eyes appeared to be musing as he looked across the table toward the corner of the room. Then he said in a grave tone:

"Before the Revolution I had seventy *dessiatines*. You could have got me out of bed at midnight and I'd have led you through every nook and cranny blindfolded. I wouldn't ever trip on a furrow. And when I plowed — I usually did it with two teams — I wasn't afraid they'd pick on me. I cut the furrow knee-deep. And the seeds fell not just onto the ground, but into a featherbed. Well, then the land will reward you.... You must love the land. When I slept, I used to see it in my dreams...."

"Now you don't have those dreams, have you?" Nikanor Ivanovich said with a laugh.

"Oh no, I have them to this day."

He sat there with a thoughtful look, heavy and gloomy. At the other end of the table the women were chattering gayly and laughing. Matyukha again reached out for the decanter, as though to drink to the sacred land, for better yields and pleasant dreams.

"You just listen what I've dreamed the other night," Ohir said

with a smile, almost bending his entire frame over the table. "It's a pure fairy tale, not a dream. Here's to my health." He downed the glass following it with another. Then he wiped his mustache with a napkin and started recounting his dream. The women stopped talking and turned their faces in his direction.

*...In the morning, or so it seemed, they set out to sow: he, Danyusha, and Ilko, their farmhand. They were heading for a field beyond the farmsteads by the orchard. He looked into the distance and saw someone plowing his field. The sky was red, and against its background everything was like a picture book: the black outlines of a man and a horse hitched to the hooked Russian plow. The man was walking behind the plow. "Hey, what's the idea?" Ohir stopped in his tracks dumbfounded. "Take a look at that," he said, turning to Danyusha. "Well," he said, "I see a man plowing." "Sure, he's plowing... but on our field!" The sight made Ohir furious. They hurried up to the field and stopped at the edge. Soon the plowman started moving toward them. Unable to stand it any longer, Ohir rushed off full tilt to meet him, followed by Danyusha, while Ilko remained with the oxen. Panting, he ran up to the man, and saw it was Tikhin Kozhushny — sturdy looking, his face red, urging on a nag which was more like a bag of bones. He halted with a malicious smile on his face. Ohir wanted to shout but couldn't; he felt rooted to the spot. And Kozhushny asked: "What are you looking like that for? Because I'm plowing your land? Oh no, yours is over there now," he said pointing to the manor lands just where the salt marshes were. "What do you mean it's not mine, by what right?" "By the Soviet right," he rejoined with a vicious laugh and urged on his nag. Ohir planted himself in the furrow in front of the horse and hit it hard on the muzzle. The horse whinnied. That instant the sun, or rather something red flared up behind the forest, and aeroplanes came flying like a flock of crows over the treetops. Ohir was flabbergasted when, all of a sudden, Tikhin started to shake violently and — whop! — fell backwards on the tilth with his arms spread out wide. He writhed in convulsions and blood gushed from his mouth.*

There was a silence at the table, you could hear the subdued breathing of the guests. Someone said, "Well, yes!" Ohir regained his breath and heaved a deep sigh.

"So there I stood, struck dumb. Ilko had stayed behind with the oxen, which meant that all suspicion would fall on me. They'd

start an investigation, drag me to court, and, in any case, the GPU would get at me. I looked down on the ground and what did I see. Instead of the gushing blood there's grain pouring and pouring — like from an elevator, covering Tikhin up to his neck. There was already a great heap of grain, but it kept pouring on. I told Danyusha to go running for sacks, but he seemed to be glued to the ground. I wanted to move, but couldn't stir. I broke into sweat. When I woke up, my shirt was dripping wet." Ohir leaned back in the sofa, breathing heavily, as if all this had happened in real life. One of the women said:

"Of all the things to dream. Looks like there'll be a war!"

"Oh, you and your wars!" Nikanor Ivanovich said, dismissing the idea with a wave of his hand.

"Then what did all those aeroplanes and the blood mean?" the woman retorted. "The things you hear now about what the next war will be like makes your flesh creep. It'll be fought mainly in the air and people will get choked with gases."

"Yes, technology means everything," Matyukha said, and turning his head toward his father-in-law added, "that's really a remarkable dream you had."

"Sure," Danyusha agreed with a crooked smile and lit a cigarette. "It wouldn't be bad if there were a couple of other land reformers besides Tikhin writhing in convulsions, with the grain piling over them." Puff! — he blew out a streak of bluish smoke.

"Tikhin's a goner. Ever since he was given the works he's like an ox who's had the stick broken on his back: he looks at you from under a yoke and only snorts. Now we've got a new trouble-maker around."

"Who's that?"

"You'll know him when you see him...."

Presently Hnida arrived, accompanied by the storekeeper Hubarenko and his wife.

"Oh, my dear guests, come in," Mathyukha said. He was already drunk and spread out his hands in a gesture of welcome. "Hnida, you devil of a nit\*, cunning bastard. Come on, you'll have to catch up on the drinks."

He filled three glasses for Hnida and one for Hubarenko.

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\* Translated from the Ukrainian "Hnida" means literally "nit" — a play upon words the author employs in describing the true essence of this character — Tr.



"You don't mind drinking your own health too, do you?" Hnida said.

"No, I've already had my share. I have to appear at the meeting. Besides, I want to leave a little space in my stomach for the evening," said Matyukha in refusal. Hubarenko complied, while Hnida, gnawing on a bone, said:

"They're gathering already. When I passed, there were quite a number of people. David's got something up his sleeve, and Tikhin and Yakim, who came back from sugar-beet harvesting this morning, are with him. They're stirring up people. I've heard them talk about the land and the grain they'd gathered..." — after a pause he added — "that David's a serious man, we'll have a lot of trouble with him. Re-elections aren't that far off. He could play a really dirty trick on us, which would put us on the spot."

"What?" Mathyukha said, looking contemptuously and menacingly at Hnida. "Who'll be put on the spot? Me!" He scowled, his eyes became bloodshot. "Why, I..." He rapped out a round oath and — bang! — brought his fist down on the table like a hammer. The plates and dishes rattled. The women started with a shriek, and some of them jumped up from their chairs. The men grew restless.

"All right, Kornyusha, take it easy!"

"What do you mean by 'take it easy'? Some milksop thinks he can put me in it? Why, I'll" — and again — bang! — he hit the table with his fist — "soon crush the resistance out of him!"

Liza ran up to her husband and tried to calm him down.

"Of course, you will. Now, don't get so excited, it does you no good."

"Why doesn't he mind his own business!" Matyukha sat down on his chair, looking black and breathing heavily. Liza patted his back.

"See, you've spoiled the evening for yourself and for the others. We all came to have some fun, and now it's like a funeral."

Matyukha became listless.

"Start the gramophone."

The gramophone started to play the waltz *On the Hills of Manchuria*. It seemed to come somewhere from a brass band playing at the back of a garden. The music filled the room and drowned the voices. Natalia made a turn across the room and stopped before the cheval glass, tidying up her hair. The women started to clear the table, while the rest remained sitting on the sofa, chattering noisily. On the table in front of the men only the knives and

forks remained. Liza refilled the decanter. The orchestra stopped playing. Then Vyaltseva started to sing, followed by a duet and brass music.

Zinka came in from the kitchen. Obscure as a gray quail, she crossed the carpeted floor in her awkward-looking boots and approached the master of the house through the noise and tobacco smoke to inform him that a man had come to see him on behalf of the community, asking whether there would be a meeting today or not.

"Let them wait."

Zinka left the room and told the man that the master, in his drunken state, couldn't be bothered and told them to wait. The man put on his cap without saying a word and left the house. Zinka went back to wiping the dishes. She looked through the window, lost in thought. The sun, a ball of red, was setting behind the cottages, somewhere in the steppe.

## VIII

By the school, not far from the square where the church stood, a crowd had already gathered. The men shuffled on the porch, smoked, engaged in small talk, and went in and out of the school building. There was a crowd near the gate to the street.

"Why don't we begin?"

"The chairman's not here yet."

"The chairman's got visitors!"

One of the men started to scratch his pate in dismay — he'd come here leaving his cattle unfed and unwatered — then his neighbor said:

"Why, didn't you know how things are run here? If they tell you to be here at two, there's no point in coming before seven. They probably don't do that anywhere else!"

Somebody was for leaving, as nothing would take place today anyway. Then someone shouted from behind the gate:

"Brothers, let's be off!"

"Why, what's happened?"

"Take a look over there!"

The men by the gate calmed down immediately and looked over toward the square. Silence fell on the porch too, which offered a good view of the whole scene: along the road leading from the

windmills, a pair of fiery horses hitched to a britzka came flying straight toward the school. As they neared, the black lathery horses were literally tearing up the ground with their hooves. The drover, wearing the red cap of a militiaman, leaned back on the coach-box, giving the horses their head. The occupant of the britzka was Sakhnovsky, the district chief of militia. A tremor ran through the crowd and they drew back to the gate. The carriage passed the school like a whirlwind, scaring off the crows nesting in the poplars around the church. From somewhere down the street came the baritone — "Whoa-a!", driving the sparrows from the wattle fences, and the children for cover behind them.

"Well, now they'll be coming!"

"Let's go, brothers!"

The crowd moved again and broke into an even louder roar. Those on the porch made for the gate. The crowd was already breaking up, when suddenly those in the street started pushing back.

"Hang on! They're coming!"

"Didn't the chief of militia go to the house?"

"Yes, but they met at the gate, so he got off the britzka and didn't even enter the courtyard. They're heading this way. Seems something important is up."

Nobody knew what was going on: had someone been arrested? If the chief of militia had come to raid the moonshiners he would not have been so hasty about it or done it without consulting Matyukha beforehand. An anxious silence fell over the men as they quietly and broodily moved toward the school. Their feet echoed on the porch as they entered. The news spread from group to group: "They're coming!"

In the classroom the secretary of the village Soviet sat at a table, marking something in the tax register. The villagers sat down at the desks around him, and a whole group of men sat down at the back of the room opposite the window. Tikhin Kozhushny stood near the window; Yakim made himself comfortable on the windowsill. He had just returned from sugar-beet harvesting and was describing work on the plantations and the life of the well-paid peasants who lived near a sugar refinery. The men were all ears, eager to hear his story. Hordiy, who had little land and seven children, exclaimed:

"A sugar refinery — what luck! And here, the moment you bring in your harvest you're out of a job, because nobody needs you. If you burn down the mill, or God didn't let the winds blow, at least

you could turn the windmill by hand and have something to do. How are we going to live later on, in ten years time? There will be more people and land is scarce as it is: our community, for instance, doesn't even have three-quarters of a *dessiatine* per man. You scratch and scratch your lousy plot and hardly grow enough grain to last till spring. What's going to happen? We're in an awful mess, David!" He leaned toward David sitting beside him at the desk and shook his head despairingly. "You read lots of books, so tell me, son, what will it be like tomorrow?"

The young man raised his head and asked reflectively:

"What do you think's going to happen, Hordiy?"

Hordiy's brown, intelligent eyes looked thoughtfully at the inkwell on the desk, turning the question over in his mind. Suddenly he looked up and said:

"I think, son, that if the authorities don't do anything about resettling people on the undeveloped land in Siberia, in the Kherson region, or in the Kuban, and if they don't build enough new factories to absorb the poor peasants like myself who have seven mouths to feed, then life will be bad."

"You're right there, Hordiy, both about resettling people and about the factories. As a matter of fact, the authorities have already done something about it: there is a resettlement fund, you know. But the trouble is we're poor. The government can't support the migrants, and how far can you go on your own? The old plants have to be put into operation and new ones built. Agriculture can only be improved if industry is reconstructed, then it won't be the miserable affair it is today."

"You're right, it's not agriculture, it's a miserable affair," the peasants agreed. "Pivnenko here got a son studying at an agricultural school." Pivnenko bent over into the circle of men and remarked:

"An agronomist must carry some weight."

"We must introduce machines, like tractors," said Yakim. "At the refinery they mostly use tractors."

From behind his back someone added:

"Tractors — sure! Then build military barracks and tear down our houses and put up a commune. A really splendid life we'll have: working by roster, buying food at the store with ration cards" — and, stealing a sidelong glance at Yakim, the speaker added with a crooked smile — "and we'll make Yakim here a quarter-master sergeant."

Yakim looked at him without saying a word: how could you

communicate with such a man! He spat on the floor in contempt. Then someone said from the back of the room:

"Funny, don't see anyone around here lecturing about collective farms anymore."

"So what. Look how many coops there are already, and how many there will be later on!" David said. "But that's not the point: now when you walk through the village and look into the courtyards and at the village common there are piles of manure bricks prepared for heating the houses. How about taking those thousands of wagonloads of manure and carting it out into the fields?"

Hordiy took him by the shoulder.

"That's just the rub, David, by the time you cart it there you'll spill most of it along the road: our plots are way off beyond the farmsteads, in Hanivka."

"It's ten *versts* away. You can hardly make the journey there twice in one day."

"Depends whose fields you're talking about. Some have them right near the village," a voice came from the dark of the classroom.

"I, for one, wasn't afraid of the Revolution and simply occupied the land I wanted," said Yakim, Hnida's married son. "So what do you expect me to do now, give it away to you?"

"Move the land in Hanivka to the village and the problem will be solved."

David looked intently into a dark corner of the room, trying to see who had spoken, and retorted with emphasis:

"The land surveyors will do that."

"Sure!" said Hnida. "How d'ye like him falling for those land surveyors. You'd better take it easy!"

"And if I don't?"

"You ask Tikhin and he'll tell you what's what," said Hnida with a broad grin. Against the gray dusk of the room Tikhin's clumsy figure moved slightly near the window, and he said in a hoarse voice full of hatred and contempt:

"Don't you grin too much, Hnida. I'll hold my tongue for the time being, but when I fly off the handle you'll be sorry!"

"Ugh!"

"You'll see!"

"You suppose we don't know who's work that was?" Yakim asked Hnida.

"Hush!" the warning came suddenly from the door. Silence fell as Matyukha, the chief of militia, and old Hnida burst into the classroom and made for the table. Ohir's son and Hubarenko headed

for the front benches and sat down. Other peasants came in, pushing their way to the back of the room or crowding around the door, filling the classroom to capacity. At the table the chairman was speaking to the secretary and the chief of militia in a low voice. Hnida tried to worm his way into their circle. There was a deafening silence in the room. Matyukha raised his head and his drunken eyes glared over the faces of the villagers, lingering on Tikhin and David standing near the window. Matyukha whispered something to the chief of militia who stared at David. Then he snapped his cigarette case shut and lighted a cigarette.

Drunk as he was, Matyukha hoarsely declared the general meeting of the Obukhivka community open. He took a slip of paper and started to read the agenda: "First, the appeal of Kushnirenko, resident of Ohirivka farmsteads under the Obukhiv village Soviet, and second, current affairs."

"Are there any questions?" he asked, looking sullenly at the villagers.

Silence. Then David's quiet, yet distinct voice cut in:

"I have a question."

Surprised, Matyukha froze, holding the paper in his hands. His shoulders slumped slightly and he frowned. There was a stir in the classroom. Those sitting at the front desks turned their heads round; someone banged the lid of a desk.

David got to his feet.

"What I and, I think, the community would like to know is firstly: what is happening to our application on land distribution, which was forwarded to the village Soviet six months ago? Secondly, we want our representatives tell us what has happened to the grain that was collected for that purpose and what document they have drawn up with the artel? That's all for now."

Behind the table Matyukha smiled contemptuously and carelessly flung the words into the room:

"Just understand once and for all, comrade Motuzka, that these questions have nothing to do with the things we are considering now. We'll discuss them when they're put on the agenda."

"That's why I propose they be included on the agenda. You put it to the vote to see what the community thinks about it."

"What's all this?" said the chief of militia with a shrug. Matyukha also shrugged his shoulders with a look of surprise, as if he didn't understand what was going on. Then he scowled.

"Kindly refrain from instructing me, citizen Motuzka, you are

called to order. We've got an established agenda. Everybody hear me?"

There was a commotion at the window. Matyukha brought his fist down on the table.

"Another word and I'll throw you out like some kittens. I've not come here to mess about!"

He took a slip of paper from the secretary — apparently the appeal (the ink it had been written with was still wet) — and started reading:

*To the village Soviet of Obukhivka,  
Shcherbanivka District, from citizen Pav-  
lo Kushnirenko, Ohirivka farmsteads*

### *A p p e a l*

*On the night of August 19 this year I went to the market at the village of Yaresky, which is 65 versts from here, to buy myself a horse. I bought a bay mare nine years old from a Gypsy and paid 180 rubles for it. I was about to leave for home, when I was approached by peasants from the village of Obukhivka — Hordiy Chumak, Pilip Motuzka and others — who claimed that the horse belonged to Chumak and that, together with six other horses, it had been stolen the previous night from the pasture. Fearing the enraged peasants would subject me to mob law, I, innocent as I was, took to my heels. But I was seized, badly beaten up, and only the militia managed to free me from the mob. I was then arrested and for the last two months have languished in jail for the misdoings of others. At present the investigation is under way and it shows that I am innocent. Yet I am still in jail while my farm is going to pieces and my family is without any support whatsoever. Therefore I humbly ask the Obukhivka community to give my wife their decision that I should be freed so that I will at least be let out of jail before the trial which will conclusively prove my innocence.*

*Pavlo Kushnirenko*

Matyukha put the appeal on the table and took up another piece of paper. The villagers stirred at the back of the room. Everyone knew Kushnirenko only too well — a bandit, the like of whom it

was hard to find. Everyone knew what had happened at the market. And now the rascal feigns to be humble and appeals to the community!

The hum of voices rose. Matyukha put down the paper and, leaning on the table, his shoulders slightly slumped, he stared fiercely at the audience. He stood in this posture for a minute or so until the commotion subsided and there was deafening silence, interrupted only by snatches of a song coming from the street. Only then did he pick up the paper again and, glaring threateningly at the crowd, say in a grave voice:

"So that's the appeal. It's clear enough and can be put to the vote right away. However, I must remind you that the community's immediate duty is to defend its members. What's happened can happen to any of us: you buy something and it turns out to be stolen. Can we let an innocent man suffer when such a thing happens? It'd be another matter if the man had really stolen the horse and suspicion fell on him. Anyway, the investigation will sort things out. The chief of militia here told me that some Gypsies have already been caught redhanded. While the case is being investigated a man suffers in jail without any reason at all and his farm goes to ruin."

He stopped for a moment and silence reigned in the classroom.

"We've already written the decision," Matyukha continued. "The only thing left now is to sign it. I don't think there's any reason to put it to the vote."

"On the contrary, I think it should be put to the vote," David said from his desk. "Before we vote the community should know the decision and what they are supposed to vote for."

"When you sign it, you'll read it for yourself. If you disagree don't sign; we're not trying to force you. And besides" — Matyukha smiled — "you've only been in the village a few days, so how would you know what's really happened?"

"It's enough to hear what people say about Kushnirenko!"

Then Yakiv Hnida shouted from his place:

"So far it's you who's done all the talking! We don't need judges around here!" He got up from behind his desk and approached the table where the chairman was sitting. "Comrade chairman," he said, "let's vote. If somebody's trying to settle old scores here, that doesn't mean we have to join in. Since it's his horse that was stolen he doesn't care whether the man is innocent or not even if he rots in jail!" And placing himself in front of the desk, he said:

"I'll count the voices!"



"That's right," Matyukha said, striking the table with his wedding ring and calling the meeting to order. "Attention, comrades! Now Yakiv, see what people are voting for. Who's against that..."

"Not 'who's against,' but who's 'for,'" objected David from his place.

"...that we bail Kushnirenko, raise your hands." Matyukha took up the lamp from the table to see better.

Yakiv counted:

"One, two, three... now, whose hand is that? Raise it higher. Don't hide behind the backs. Ah, it's you, Khomenko!"

"Oh no," said Khomenko, worried. "I was just leaning against my neighbor."

"Seven," said Yakiv.

"That's just what we'll write down: seven against because of old scores. Now come up and sign, and the secretary and I will do the rest," Matyukha said.

Hnida's son was the first to sign — he did not even read the appeal. The men sitting in the front row got up. One of them timidly took the pen, dipped it into the inkwell for a long time, and then scratched his name so laboriously that the sweat broke out on his forehead. The classroom came into motion: some went to the table, others to the door. David, too, got up and, followed by Tikhin and Yakim, approached the table. He took the piece of paper and started reading it to himself, while Yakim and Tikhin read it over his back. After reading the appeal, David put it on the desk and turned round.

"No," he said, shaking his head, "I couldn't sign such an appeal: it says that he 'did not take part in any bands' and 'no suspicion falls on him.' You've had too big a hand in it, fellows."

Matyukha heard all this.

"What?!" Red in the face, his fists clenched in rage, he came up to David. Matyukha seethed with fury, but there was nothing he could do — there were too many witnesses around him, it would only undermine his authority. Otherwise he would... grr! After all, David was a Party member. Enraged as he was, Matyukha drew back. He turned to the door where a crowd had gathered, and seeing Khomenko try to slip out of the room unnoticed, he grabbed him by the collar and dragged him into the middle of the room.

"Where are you going? Did you vote against? You didn't, eh?" And he hit him in the face bringing blood to his mouth. "If you didn't sign the appeal, you bastard, I'll teach you a lesson!"

David grew pale and trembled all over. He took a step toward the chairman. But Tikhin caught his hand and Yakim appeared at his side.

"David, let it be!"

But there was no holding him back.

"So you still throw your fists around! At general meetings as well! You son of a bitch!"

"Get out of here!" Matyukha shouted.

David felt sick, his face was contorted with pain and hatred. Tikhin and Yakim pulled him toward the door. He did not turn round. Only at the door did he turn his pale and severe face and shoot over his shoulder:

"You wait, Matyukha, you won't get away with this!"

"Shut the door!"

Someone from the crowd shut the door. It became so quiet in the room you could hear the pen scribble: someone was signing his name — slowly and heavily, as if he were breaking a furrow. Khomenko wiped the blood off his face with his coat flap and added his signature. Other peasants went up to the table where Matyukha sat reclining in the chair. He looked as if he were gradually calming down. The chief of militia leaned toward him and said something to him.

"Oh yes, of course," said the chairman with a nod. He got up and declared the meeting closed, because there were no current events to consider. He told Yakiv Hnida to stay and keep an eye on things and to bring the appeal to his home after everyone had signed.

## IX

In the kitchen the samovar had grown cold. Zinka stood by the window, washing glasses. A militiaman sat at the end of the table drinking tea. He wore a greatcoat, sword-belt, girdle and a sword at his side. His face was broad with prominent cheekbones looking as if they had been hastily cut out with an ax. It was glistening with sweat which ran in little streams down his low forehead to the eyebrows, and from the eyebrows down his cheeks. He placed the cup on the saucer, took out a handkerchief from inside of his greatcoat, and started meticulously wiping his face. From the dining room came the voices of the guests interrupted by ringing female laughter.

"Want some more tea?" Zinka asked.

"No for Christ's sake! If you gave me some sixty-proof stuff it'd be better!"

He unbuttoned his collar and wiped his perspiring neck with the handkerchief, adding, as if to himself:

"Now, if there wasn't anything to drink it'd be a different matter. But I know they'll be boozing all night and have a nip next morning. Those people don't know anything about decency, might at least have treated me to a drink for propriety's sake."

"You should have said that to the mistress."

"What do you mean? Go to her and say, 'Come on, fill it up, please!'" He leaned against the wall and looked at the girl with a scornful smile. "Who do you think I am? If I want to, I could have a quart, no, a whole pail of booze to treat anyone. Do you think I'm penniless? Maybe I spend more money on booze than you realize. But that's not the point. They made me sit down near a slobtub to drink tea like a farmhand... Why, whenever I go visiting with my chief we always sit together at one table."

The dog started to bark in the yard. Zinka looked through the window. The moon was bright so she could see that the men had entered the yard. Shortly afterward they entered the house, spurs jingling. Matyukha asked the guests to take off their coats and invited them into the dining room.

"Make it fast, friends, the evening has been wasted as it is!"

"Small wonder. With your brand of democracy we could have played about until midnight," said the chief of militia, unbuttoning his coat. "It looks like you've got a whole gang on your neck around here. How did you ever let it happen?"

"Unless we sort them out quick, it'll be our end."

"Exactly."

Sakhnovsky hung up his greatcoat on the rack and pulled the girdle with the sword and holstered revolver over his tunic. The spurs jingled again. The militiaman rose from the table.

"Well, I'll be going, chief."

"Far?"

"No, just here in the village."

"I might need you, you know."

"This girl here can come for me. I'll be at Fekla's place."

"This girl?"

There followed a pause of silence. The militiaman took his carbine, swung it over his shoulder and left the house. Sakhnovsky did not take his eyes off the girl. She stood sideways, her profile delicate and severe as if chiseled. He saw one of her nostrils

tremble and her brow ruffle. His eyes felt their way down her naked neck toward her breasts and further down over her shapely body. Jingle — he stepped in her direction. The girl started and turned: her lips were tight together and from under her ruffled eyebrows her severe eyes gauged into his. It seemed that any moment she would break down under his challenging stare; a slight tremor went through her limbs. Jingle — he came up to her and took her by the elbow. She freed herself from his grip and said sternly:

“Don’t touch me!”

That moment Matyukha shouted from the threshold:

“Lyonya, come on, we’re waiting!” Sakhnovsky turned sharply on his heel and went into the dining room. As he stepped over the threshold his spurs jingled. He bowed to the guests and went toward the mistress of the house, sitting on a sofa at a round table with some young people, and kissed her hand. Then he kissed the hands of the other ladies: besides Natalia and Nina, there was the grocer’s daughter, a plump, old-fashioned blond, and another girl. The women were playing post office. Only one man was with them: Danyusha. All the others sat at the dinner table talking. Matyukha busied himself filling a decanter near the cupboard. The older women laid the table.

“Violet,” said Liza to Natalia, handing her a card, and turning to Sakhnovsky she smiled at him and said:

“Oh, are you naughty, Leonid Petrovich!”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. You set the ladies’ hearts thumping when they heard your spurs jingle in the kitchen and then you take your time joining us. Or did our little Gypsy take your fancy?” She cast a glance at him and laughed.

“My, is she a beauty!” Natalia remarked.

“Phew, you call that beauty,” said the grocer’s daughter in disgust. “She’s really like a Gypsy, especially when she pulls on those rags of hers... ‘Chrysanthemum,’” and she handed a card to Sakhnovsky, on which he read: “Why is it you visit us so rarely?” He looked at her. Is she ugly, he thought. Then he rummaged in the cards and came across something like an answer — “I am very touched by your concern.” He handed it to Pasha, after which he pulled out his monogrammed silver cigarette case and started to smoke. Through the smoke his eyes roved from one woman to another. Take Liza over there, for example — isn’t she a dame? With his eyes he stripped her batiste blouse from her bare neck

down to her waist, along with the camisole. The table stopped him indulging in further fantasies. Then his eyes strayed to Natalia—her whole figure was there in front of him: one foot crossed over another, a part of her stockinged calf showing below her skirt—and he ogled at her....

Hnida and his son joined them later, when the clock had just struck ten. It was noisy in the house, like a wedding party. Everyone spoke at the same time and loud as if his neighbor were deaf. Matyukha was down to his waistcoat, the collar of his shirt unbuttoned. At the other end of the table the women were chattering loudly. Hnida approached the chairman who was as drunk as a lord. He raised his heavy shaggy head and sullenly blinked with his tired eyes.

"Well, how're things?"

"Everything's all right, they signed it." Hnida pulled the folded sheet of paper from his coat and put it on the table. Matyukha took the paper and checked the signatures.

"Not everyone signed," said the younger Hnida.

"Who in particular?" asked Matyukha sternly.

"Hordiy Chumak and Pivnenko... About ten people altogether, counting with those who voted against." He sat down at the table and added:

"There were also some smart alecks who first signed and then crossed their names out."

Matyukha looked darkly.

"Don't you know how to deal with these bastards? Belt them in the teeth!"

"I know. But — if I had the authority."

"Do it on my authority!" Matyukha leaned back heavily in the chair. Then he thrust his whole body to the table, stretched his hand unsteadily toward the decanter, his chest touching the table, and downed a drink.

He filled a glass to the brim with moonshine and nodded silently to Yakiv. The latter emptied the glass in a single draught, croaked, wiped his little mustache with the broad palm of his hand, and then had a bite to eat.

Matyukha filled the other glasses.

"David's holding some kind of meeting," Yakiv suddenly recalled when he had gulped down the food, and intently looked at the chairman. "That's the last thing we want around here."

"A meeting you say, right now?"

"Yes, his house is full of people, and, apparently, they're having some sort of discussion."

Matyukha looked at Yakiv from under his ruffled brows and rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Where's my revolver, Liza?"

Liza jumped up, which startled the rest of the women. Ohir, who was sitting near his son-in-law, took him firmly by the arm and said:

"Drop it, Kornyusha. It's not the right time!"

Matyukha glared at him. Sakhnovsky shouted from the table:

"But what's happening? Who are these anarchists who refuse to recognize the authorities?"

"Oh come on, gentlemen," said Danyusha, "let's be sensible! Let them discuss whatever they want to their hearts' content! Wouldn't it be interesting for all of us to know what they're racking their little brains about? What they're up to? That's the main point." And turning to Hnida he said:

"Couldn't we send our man there?"

"We've got someone there as it is," said Yakiv somewhat reflectively.

"Who?" Matyukha asked with a frown.

"Ohtiz."

"Take it easy, Kornyusha, everything will be all right," said Ohir. "How about another drink?" He managed to make his son-in-law sit down, shoved a glass toward him, and downed the drink. The others followed suit. When they had emptied their glasses, he leaned toward the table and added in a low voice so that the women at the other end would not hear:

"Gentlemen, there's no point in rushing this business. We must consider things from every angle and then — whop! — finish them off military fashion!"

"What's the matter now!" Sakhnovsky hollered from the sofa in a drunken voice.

Yakiv said:

"If we could only get Kushnirenko on our side."

Matyukha looked at him quizzically:

"Don't we have anyone else to choose from?"

From behind his back a pair of hands with a plate of cherry jelly stretched toward the table; Matyukha leaned back.

"Lay in wait for him at night — might as well be you — and bump him off like a dog."

Danyusha nudged Matyukha. The latter looked at him and saw Danyusha's eyes shift sideways toward the hands holding the plate. He turned his head and saw Zinka putting down the plate on the table. He gave her a shove and stared at her maliciously.

"Go to hell! What are you crawling around here for?"

"I'm not crawling, I'm serving the food."

Matyukha swung his arm back to strike, but Zinka dodged and he missed her, almost falling down backwards with his chair.

"Scum!"

Liza jumped to her feet and rushed to her husband.

"Zinka, you're always getting on his nerves!" she scolded the girl.

Zinka raised her eyebrows in surprise and shrugged her shoulders. She left the room without saying a word. Matyukha told Liza to lay a table in the bedroom and sent Zinka for some pickled crab apples. It was decided that the men would sit in the bedroom since it was safer to discuss matters there.

"And make it fast!" he said, looking sullenly at Liza. He lurched toward the table and tried in vain to pick up a spoon, cursing under his breath. At last he caught hold of the spoon and scooped some jelly from the plate, his drunken eyes surveying the guests who were already treating themselves to the jelly. He made a broad gesture, spoon in hand, and said, "Help yourself."

After the jelly had been served, the women rose clattering their chairs. Then the men got up. Ohir, Hnida and the grocer diligently crossed themselves before the icons and then shook the master's hand in gratitude. The younger men started smoking and some of the women went into the kitchen. Nikanor Ivanovich turned on the gramophone. After a while the older men again sat down at the table, this time covered with a new tablecloth, and continued the conversation. Their talk centered on the market. The storekeeper seemed to know everything about it, while Ohir was more interested in the current prices for oxen.

"Does that mean you want to swap yours?"

"Oh no, mine aren't that old," said Ohir and added after a short pause, "I want to get myself a second pair for the spring. It's a bit hard on one pair."

Hubarenko winked and, looking intently at Ohir, nudged Hnida.

"Hear that: it's a bit hard on one pair. Looks like you'll have to have your property nationalized for the second time, Yukhim Fedorovich."

This was said in jest, but it made Hnida feel ill at ease. He raised his eyebrows and shoulders guiltily and said:

"What a time we had in the good old days."

"Yes, those were the days..."

The storekeeper saw a shadow cross Ohir's face, so he became grave all of a sudden and said to no one in particular, as if by the way:

"If a farmer is a clever man, you can nationalize his property or anything else and he'll still remain a good farmer. But if he's a fool and a bum, you can give him a pair of oxen every year, and he'll still go down in the world as a proletarian; he'll either squander his fortune on drink or let the oxen die through neglect."

"Right you are," said Hnida with a nod, "because he doesn't really care: it wasn't him that made the fortune. Then there are some who think like this: if I lose something, they'll give it to me again anyway."

"Right. The authorities have already come to realize that no matter how much you pour into a keg it won't fill up if it's got no bottom. However much our CPP are given land and seeds and cattle, nothing will come out of those beggars, because they've never been farmers in their lives. The real farmer's the one who inherits his trade from his forefathers. They're the ones the authorities should be paying attention to now," said the storekeeper, slumping back in his chair. Ohir was more absorbed with the rumbling in his stomach and it was hard to tell whether he was listening to the harangue or not. The grocer continued:

"Of course, all this must be done gradually. Today it's the middle farmer who's getting all the attention. With time things will change for the better: you can already lease land from the poorest peasants as well as from the land fund."

Ohir broke his train of thought and, shifting his bulky frame toward the table, he said with a sigh:

"I'll tell you this: we've got to hang onto the land for all we're worth. As it is some of us don't have cattle anymore and we've been allotted plots God knows where. If this tramp stir people up we'll be in for some nice trouble."

Hubarenko craned his neck and rejoined in a low voice, stealing a quick glance out of the corner of his eye at Hnida:

"That's for the younger ones to settle." As he said this, he nodded his head toward the other end of the dining room.

Hnida seemed to be deaf to this remark and returned to the subject of oxen and their prices. The gramophone blared out a song



about a seagull. On the sofa the young people were laughing: Danyusha was wittily telling them Jewish anecdotes. Even Matyukha's mug, red like a pumpkin, broke into a smeary drunken grin. Liza came up to him and said everything was ready as he had asked. He frowned, waiting till Danyusha had finished his anecdote. Then he got up to his feet and beckoned them all. No matter how much the women implored him to let Danyusha tell just one more short joke, Matyukha remained adamant.

"Later."

## X

In the bedroom a round table with a decanter of moonshine, glasses and food had been placed near the bed.

"Now, friends," Matyukha said, as he slumped on the bed and leaned his head against the wall, "we have to consider a very serious question. So Yakiv close the door and everybody sit down."

The first thing they did, of course, was to down a drink. The chief of militia swore because they would not let him have his fun with the women, and wanted him to talk business instead. Danyusha slapped him on the back with a drunken smile.

"Oh, come on, Lyonya, stop that foolery. That Pasha... why, she's as mean as the devil, but don't you worry — until you get married you'll..."

"Oh, to hell with her!"

Matyukha remarked:

"Since we've got that bastard on our backs, we're all involved — not just me. The problem is that he's a Party member."

"Yes, he might cause trouble," Hnida added. "He's none of your Tikhins. This one knows the ropes in the Party and the district authorities. He doesn't give a damn. I can see right through him: he'll get to the bottom of everything, that bastard. At the meeting today I heard them talking about Kushnirenko. How come he's got the registration card on the stolen horse? they say. Where did he get it, since it's filled out all neatly and the color and the description of the horse match? So David says: 'He couldn't have printed the card himself, there's probably a buddy of his who's in charge of keeping these cards.' Besides, Odarka, who hanged herself, was supposedly to have left a letter or told someone about it. All in all, he's a dangerous man. If things go on like that it'll be our end!"

Silence fell. For a while no one said a word. It seemed they were hurriedly thinking over their lives of the past few years: there were quite a few peasants — pauperized, deprived of draught animals — who complained without knowing the real reasons for their misfortune. In fact, it was Hnida and his company who stood behind all this mischief, and Danyusha, too, had a hand in it. Matyukha took hush money and Sakhnovsky was responsible for the disappearance of the registration cards. If this came to light, they would all earn but one dubious title — horse thieves. That was something which would not be pardoned. And, besides, smears of dirt and blood appeared one after the other on all these incidents. Lyonya could clearly see in his mind's eye the crowd gathered in front of the barn in which Odarka had been taken down from the noose. He was placed in charge of the investigation at the village Soviet. A boy whom he questioned tête-à-tête hollered in response to his request to testify: "It was you, you bastard, who made her kill herself!" The boy tried to hit him. They arrested him, and then as the militiamen led him to the town he tried to escape... Well, they shot him down — who would find out the real truth?

The spurs jingled under the table. Sakhnovsky jerked himself to his feet and started pacing up and down the room. Suddenly he stopped near the table and said firmly:

"Now listen, friends, I think we'll have to bump him off and that's all."

Everyone remained silent. From behind the door came the gay laughter of the women; then Liza was heard telling something, apparently witty because the women burst out laughing again. Matyukha got up from the bed and, filling a glass of moonshine, said through set teeth:

"Yes, I agree. Bump him off!"

Danyusha shrugged his shoulders — after all who would be against such a proposition? What worried him most was not so much the idea itself, but how to effect it without leaving any traces. That point called for special consideration. There were too many people involved and the incident would not go unnoticed. There would be questions: who knew about it, and, God damn it, who killed him after all? The case would be looked into. That meant a scheme had to be developed, everything had to be meticulously considered and the appropriate situation framed.

"While you're framing a situation, he'll have time to stir up trouble."

"Will he? He won't if we keep an eye on him."



Yakiv Hnida coughed and leaned toward his friends. He, too, had a scheme, although he did not think much of it. But if everything went as planned it would be all right. Yesterday he stayed late at the mill when David and Tikhin were still waiting for their wheat to be ground. Tikhin went home for some reason and sent Maria to the mill. That devil of a woman was quite taken up with David right there in front of everyone. When they left the mill, Hnida followed them. Near the gate of Motuzka's house he saw them starting an affair.

The spurs of the chief of militia jingled as he perked up at this news.

"What's she like then?"

Yakiv heaved a sigh, and blinked, giving a nod of approval.

"Pretty as a picture! She's got no kids and looks like a young girl: fleshy and full-bosomed. Tikhin's sick as you know, so she found herself a young man."

Yakiv grew silent. In his mind's eye Maria appeared before him as large as life: buxom, with rosy cheeks. He twitched his eyebrows at the thought of her.

"So I thought maybe we could use this circumstance for our own ends: as soon as they seriously start their affair we'll spread the word around. Then it'll be easy to waylay David. Might as well be done right in his house — he's always reading at the end of the table opposite the window — and none will be the wiser. Who's done it? Of course, the jealous husband whose wife had been taken away from him. How much will he get for it?"

The chief of militia said gravely:

"Eight years."

"You don't say!" Yakiv exclaimed, happily surprised. "Now if...!" Again Maria appeared in his mind. Yakiv concealed his real thoughts, adding:

"Yes, it'll have to be done..."

Everyone agreed that Yakiv's scheme was good enough. But everything depended on David and Maria in this case, and in no way could they indirectly influence the course of events. It would be all right if everything worked according to plan. In case it fell through, Danyusha came up with another scheme, which was, admittedly, a bit more complicated.

The men turned their eyes on Danyusha. He drew on his cigarette, enveloping himself in a cloud of gray tobacco smoke, and embarked on explaining his sly scheme. Everyone listened with attention and excitement. Some of the details made one or another of the men blurt out, "That's great!", then they would calm down, looking alertly into Danyusha's face. When he had finished, Matyukha brought down his fist on the table and said:

"Great! I'm all for it! The main thing is that you were right when you said, 'when did anyone ever vote against?' This time there were seven of them raising their snouts."

"It could be arranged that the peasants themselves make short work of him," Yakiv said.

"Oh well, by then we'll know what to do. Let's drink to our success!"

Between drinks they commented on the subject, now one, now another adding some new detail. The chief of militia, by then pale with too much drink, said all of a sudden:

"We must bring a woman into this case somehow. How am I to carry out an inquest without a bit of fun!" He lounged in the sofa and pulled Matyukha toward him, whispering something in his ear.

It was hard to guess what he was telling Matyukha, but suddenly the latter pried himself away and said:

"What strange taste you have. What can you see in that scrawny bird."

"Isn't it Zinka you're talking about?" Danyusha was eager to know.

"Lyonya here has fallen for her," Matyukha said with a laugh... Ohir's son knit his eyebrows suspiciously. The chief of militia got to his feet abruptly and with a drunken glitter in his eyes said impatiently:

"So that's all, then, is it?"

They proceeded to allot the parts each had to play in either Hnida's or Danyusha's scheme, depending on which worked out best. For the time being they decided to keep a close eye on David and somehow draw him into a trap from which he would be unable to escape. That was to be Sakhnovsky's concern: the district authorities had to be bluffed and David's letters were to be subject to close scrutiny.

There was a knock on the door. Liza entered and inquired whether tea should be served there or whether they would join the guests in the dining room.

"Wait a minute," Matyukha said. Then he recalled something and turning toward his wife asked, "Where's Zinka with the codlins?"

"Didn't she bring them?" Liza replied with a shrug of her shoulders, and left the room.

Sakhnovsky sat on the bed, his eyes turned to the door. He heard nothing the men were talking about. The laughter of the women and the sorrowful voice that could be heard from the next room seemed to come from far, far away. Suddenly he started — the door opened, and closed — and again the voices receded far, far away... Zinka came up to the table, put down the bowl and turned briskly on her heel. Matyukha stopped her.

"Now, take a bucketful of rye from the storehouse and give it to the chief of militia's horse. Take the key to close the barn. Haven't you done all that yet?"

"But you didn't tell me to."

"All right, go!"

Zinka left. Meanwhile, the samovar in the kitchen had boiled over — the mistress of the house hurled words of abuse at the domestic. But Zinka was so tired and had a splitting headache, so she did not say anything in defense. She put a large shawl on her head, took a bucket from under a bench and left the house.

It was already late. The full moon stood high in the sky, right over the yard. Complete silence. She heard the rustle of a leaf fall from the chestnut tree near the barn. Somewhere far, far away, on the other side of the village someone shouted and dogs barked. Zinka felt the same as she had on the farmsteads when she had harkened to the sounds of night there. It seemed she even caught the scent of the maples in the garden and the weeds on the waste land. She even felt her heart jump as it used to there...

The storehouse smelled of grain and mice. Zinka filled the bucket with rye, closed the storehouse, crossed the yard, and passed through the gate leading to the barn. She trod quietly, her head bent in thought. From the garden came the scent of weeds and the smell of fallen leaves wafted from the beach.

When the girl opened one half of the barn door a wide streak of moon light burst inside, chasing away the dark in the corners. The horses whinnied from their box stalls, picking up the smell of rye in the air.

"Wait a minute, you'll get your share," she said gently to them and carefully sidled nearer, afraid they would kick. Her caution proved groundless. The horses kept poking their muzzles at her hands, so she had to restrain them. She carefully picked out the leftover feed in the manger and poured in the rye. The horses started chewing happily. That instant the door closed with a squeak and it became pitchdark in the barn.

Zinka started and became alert. No, it was quiet in the barn, maybe someone from outside had closed the door. Could it have been the wind? Quietly she tiptoed to the door and was about to push it open, when someone grabbed her hand. She let out a cry and drew back, but strong hands pulled her the other way, gripping her neck to the point of choking; a filthy smell of moonshine hit her as a voice hissed:

"Shut up, or I'll strangle you!"

He threw her to the ground and pounced on her. One of her hands was painfully twisted behind her back, but he could not get hold of the other one. Desparately she beat his face and tore at his clothes, but with no apparent effect. After a last hopeless attempt to free herself, she wound her hand around his neck and instead of pulling him down she drew up and sank her teeth into his neck. A whimpering cry escaped from his lips, he hit her head. She broke loose and rushed headlong into the dark night.

## XI

The stinking shag smoke spread out in a gray mist, swaying lightly over the heads of the peasants who sat on the bench and near the oven with cigarettes in their mouths. Although it was stuffy in the room, the peasants sat bare-headed in sheepskins which they had unbuttoned but were reluctant to take off. The sheepskins gave off a smell of sweat, leather and earth. The door leading into the entrance hall was slightly open, but this did not help much: from time to time the old mistress of the house would break into a long cough near the front part of the oven where her women neighbors were sitting. Khristya was standing near them — she had just returned from a date. At the table Tikhin would occasionally whoop, pressing his hand to his aching chest. At such moments David would look up from the newspaper and wait till Tikhin stopped coughing. Tikhin would spit on the floor, lift his emaciated face and say, "Read on," after which David would start reading again.

The peasants listened to him attentively, frozen in different postures — some leaning forward, following his reading with wide-open eyes, others with heads bent low as if deep in thought. From the corner of honor, Jesus, grown dark with time, looked down with raised brows, as if in surprise. From the wall above the little slanting window, Lenin, with a twinkle in his eye, seemed to follow intently every word and gesture of the peasants.

"Wait a minute!" Hordiy interrupted David. "What does 'stabilization' mean?"

David explained that the word meant strengthening something, allowing you to stand more firmly on your feet. But realizing that the answer was too vague, David put the newspaper aside, cleared his throat and embarked on a whole lecture about the state in which the capitalist powers emerged from the world war, how their industry had advanced, and the contradictions corroding the whole capitalist system. He spoke of the USSR and the revival of her national economy. Then he took a notebook from behind the icon and started reading figures. But seeing that his listeners were tiring, David turned to the page entitled "Village Life," which featured short reports by the paper's country correspondents.

Hordiy who sat at David's side looked at the newspaper.

"Hey, what's that picture about? Looks like a pair of legs sticking out."

Those who sat near to David craned their necks, and some came over from the oven to have a look.

"Come on, read what it's all about."

David read the story under the picture: in the village of Demidivka, which was in their district, the chairman of the village Soviet got drunk at a christening party and when he was heading home that night he stumbled into a ditch opposite the village Soviet and fell asleep there. Only when the villagers had started missing their chairman did they find him in the ditch and pull him out. The picture showed them just about to drag him out: his feet stuck out of the ditch, a pig at his side was attempting to push its muzzle into his face, apparently trying to kiss him, while the villagers stood around at a loss, not knowing what to do. A smile of uncertainty appeared on the face of some of the men. Only Yakim laughed out aloud, while Hordiy remarked gravely:

"Why, it's us muzhiks they're making fun of. Just look — they've made us out to be a bunch of fools scratching their heads. The chairman is only an excuse and, anyway, the only thing you can see of him is his boots sticking out of the ditch, and good boots at that, not like those holey ones of the muzhiks."

David could not help laughing.

"What do you mean 'only his boots'? Listen to this: 'in the village of Demidivka, chairman Kindrat Nesterenko...' Sure — we don't know him, but you can bet your life his villagers will recognize him just by his boots."

"It's all made up — the village and the name. Do you think the authorities would allow such things to be written about themselves?" one of the men remarked, to which David replied:

"Do you think that if a man's got scabs on his skin he can cure them by going to bed in a sheepskin? Never. You've got to strip the shirt from his back for everyone to see his scabs. Maybe some of them can be treated with iodine; others have to be pierced and the puss squeezed out. It's the same with our Republic. It wasn't born out of thin air. It was formed in dirty trenches and cold railway cars, where men went hungry and didn't take off their shirts for months on end. So why should we be ashamed of having scabs and sores? We've got drunkards, and we've got villains in influential positions, some of them worming their way into the Party. We should not conceal all this, but tear off the shirt and purge the disease. That's what the authorities and the Party are doing right now. They are not making fun of the peasants as you say, Hordiy."



Hordiy shook his head in disbelief. He looked intently at David and then bent his head in thought. David went on to read another report about a coop farm in some village, but Hordiy seemed too occupied with his thoughts. When David had finished reading, Hordiy looked up and said hesitantly:

"How about writing to the newspaper about our chairman?"

Someone rejoined sullenly:

"One newspaper wouldn't be enough to hold all the things about our chairman."

Tikhin started coughing, then spat on the floor, leaned back and said:

"All right! Since we're all gathered here let's write something now. How long can we tolerate all this? Maybe we'll get justice from the higher authorities. If not, we'll write a letter direct to the capital!"

"Right! How long are we supposed to put up with this?"

"Others live as they ought, but our life's unbearable!"

Everyone started talking at once. Those who sat near the oven also raised their gloomy faces. Some of them still expressed fear. But the suppressed wrath and embittered hopes deep inside these poor peasants crushed by Matyukha's highhandedness were gradually roused from sleep.

The first to rise from the bench was old Khomenko whose face was swollen from Matyukha's blow.

"Look everyone, you've seen it all for yourselves," he said excitedly. "How can we go on living like this?! When Denikin was giving us a beating, we knew it was bourgeois power, but this is our own, Soviet power! Where's the justice in it? Since Matyukha sold his soul to the *kurkuls* he's been treating the poor like dogs!"

"Exactly! And he draws his gun at the drop of a hat."

"Get writing, David!"

"He and his crowd used forgery to get the lease of the steam mill set up by the CPP, and now he fleeces the poor folk as much as he likes!"

"He's deliberately delaying the distribution of land, so that the *kurkuls* lease a half of their land!"

"Write, David!"

Then Hordiy got on his feet.

"There's something else... our horses are being stolen now. Who do you think is behind it? Look how they worry about Kushni-renko? He's nothing but their..." He stopped abruptly, looking toward the door in surprise. Everyone else did the same. Zinka

stood on the threshold, her hair disheveled, her shirt torn at the collar. Everyone was silent. Under the men's gaze the girl drew up her shoulders as if she were cold, and said, "Good evening". Her eyes surveyed the room. As she recognized Khristya who was sitting on the bed, her eyebrows stirred slightly, apparently at seeing a familiar face. She crossed the room quietly to Khristya.

The men remained silent. There was something about the girl that prevented them resuming their discussion. The girl stopped near Khristya. Nobody dared question her. At last old Motuzka asked:

"Did anyone hurt you, child?"

Zinka wearily shook her head.

"Why is there blood on you then?" Khristya asked in a terrified voice. Zinka wiped her lips without saying a word. The men drew nearer her; one of them lifted up the lamp: its light fell on her pale face and torn shirt.

"Yes, it's blood!" someone said.

At this Zinka covered her face and started sobbing bitterly.

Everyone suddenly became alarmed. Khristya put her arm round her girl friend and tried to comfort her. David got up from the table. At first he looked at the girl without saying a word. Then he took her hands and drew them from her face and said gravely, yet gently:

"Why are you crying, Zinka?"

Probably hearing some old, half-forgotten ring in his voice, she caught her breath and stopped crying all of a sudden. A pair of large sorrowful eyes looked up at him.

Someone asked what had happened and Zinka told how they had been at Matyukha's home and how the chief of militia had attacked her in the barn. She could not remember how she had escaped. It was only in Hordiy's garden that she had come to her senses. In all probability she had fallen into it while running. What she did remember was that he had chased her and fired his gun.

Tikhin broke into another long cough.

"Maybe he's still looking for her?" someone said in the silence that followed. The peasants were roused into activity. Some of them started buttoning up their sheepskins and rumpling their caps in their impatience to leave. Everyone started at the sound of a cock crowing in the cattle shed. Realizing that they had outstayed their welcome at David's home, the guests hurriedly buttoned up their coats, pulled on their caps and took their leave.

All who remained were Tikhin and Hordiy Chumak, who sat at

the end of the table, and Yakim and Pivnenko, who were smoking near the oven. David was standing near the loom with a wistful look on his face. Hordiy was first to break the long silence:

"Zinka'd better spend the night here. And you, David... oh well, people saw and heard everything for themselves... I only wonder whether this kind of justice has spread all over the place? Is this what it's come to — killing each other like dogs? We can't go on like this!"

David was resolved to go to the district the following day. He knew exactly what to do.

Tikhin was still sitting at the end of the table.

"All right, Tikhin," David said, "you can go home, they'll hardly come here looking for her."

Tikhin got up without a word and the four men left.

David sat down at the table and cupped his chin in his hands. Khristya was laying the bed. Zinka stood near the loom. David remained motionless, then he raised his head with a jerk and looked straight at the girl. For a long moment they gazed into each other's eyes.

He was the first to speak, and his reflective voice betrayed both joy and gentle sorrow:

"What a long time ago! You were still in your teens. I didn't recognize you that time at the manor. But now, seeing those eyes and that smile — it's strange, so many years have passed, yet I would have recognized you straight away by that smile. It was so long ago it seems it all happened in a dream!"

A faint smile crossed Zinka's face.

"And I... when did I last see you? Oh yes, it was when the partisans took over the manor and burned it down. You chased someone around the fire with a gun in your hand... Then the White Guard soldiers were shot and you looked for Katriya in the orchard and near the pond till dawn... I haven't seen you since you left for the front line. I thought a lot about you when the Revolution broke out and then when I became a domestic. And I wanted to see you so much..."

The girl grew silent. A little wrinkle formed between her black brows as she reflected. Suddenly the wrinkle disappeared and she smiled. Why did memories of long ago surface in her mind?

*He lived at their home that summer when the White Guard troops were billeted in the village and he posed as a smith's assistant. Once she had stolen a whole file of papers from head-*

quarters for him (she and her sister washed the floors there)... What a daredevil she was! David picked what he needed out of the papers and after a while she took them back.

David was arrested after all: someone from the farmsteads informed on him. During the night he was led to the brickworks to be shot, but he managed to escape. How dreadful it was then at the manor! When he remembered this he could hardly believe it was true: she was so young, and when they started to shadow Katrya, he would tell Zinka what to pass on and where to meet him and the girl would promptly respond to his requests. In the night she disappeared from the manor: looking around watchfully to make sure she was not being followed, she dashed across the rye field. She could whistle in whatever manner they agreed upon. When he responded to the whistle, she would fly to the place it came from like a quail...

Did he remember all this?

In the dark Zinka's eyes gleamed close to David's just as they had during those blue summer nights of long ago...

They sat side by side and the girl would tell him in a whisper what had taken place at the manor. The fact that they were whispering in the broad expanse of the steppe alarmed them a bit, and their eyes glowed unnaturally. David would take off his coat and place the pistol on his cap. Then he would tell her what to pass on to Katrya. They would fall silent; it was time to go, but they did not move... Zinka's brows no longer expressed worry and tension, they curved gently downwards like the wings of a weary bird. She would look moodily into the starry sky, while David gazed into her thoughtful eyes.

She was still only a teenager and David did not touch her, although his young blood seethed and he could not take his eyes off her. "All right," he would say, pulling on his coat and picking up the gun. "So long, Zinka!"

He would cut straight across the rye fields. The blood beat through his veins — he was dizzy with youthful ardor. He would turn his face to the manor and shout toward it defiantly. Then he would strike up the song of the partisans, and even the steppe and the starry night hushed and listened...

"Oh, Zinka! Those were the days..."

Zinka's dreamy eyes looked at him; a faint, pensive smile crossed her face. Suddenly she shuddered and for an instant her

face became rigid. Her brows slowly broke into an expression of sorrow, horror appeared in her eyes. She leaned close to the young man and whispered in alarm:

"David, they want to kill you."

He started and drawing away looked intently at the girl.

"Did you hear anything?"

"No, but I can see it by the way they look. But actually, I think I did hear Matyukha say something about waylaying somebody just as I went in the room. He even wanted to hit me for snooping."

She grew silent, dropping her head and shaking it slowly from side to side as if she were grieving for someone or her head was aching badly.

Khristya came up to her and made some lighthearted comment. But noticing Zinka's meditative eyes she stopped and leaned toward her girl friend.

It was very late and everyone in the house was asleep. On the bed someone was mumbling in his dream. David put down the pen and leaned back from the paper — he had finally finished writing it. Then he stretched out his hands on the table and dropped his head heavily on them. The third cocks crowed.

## XII

In the morning a wind blew up. Frayed gray clouds covered the sky, floating over the river and houses like masses of dirty wool. It seemed that at any moment they would get caught up in the high poplars near the church and fall apart or remain hanging there in a tangle. The air was filled with the strong scent of late autumn: the wind tore at the yellowed leaves and spun them across the barren gardens like dandelion fluff. Crowing jackdaws circled in the sky. On the common the windmill sails turned at full tilt, while the young women bustled around small heaps of dried dung, loading them onto carts to take home and hide in the barns. The wind promised rain.

That morning David decided to go to Shcherbanivka right away. But looking at the watch he recalled that the grain had not been winnowed. He had to finish the winnowing in case it rained.

On the threshing floor near the cottage the winnowing machine was rolled out of the cattle shed onto a linen cloth spread on the ground. The grain, already winnowed once to free it of chaff, was

piled in the granary. Old Motuzka brought it over in a box, and David turned the winnower. The machine, rickety and with worn gear teeth, rattled deafeningly. Gusts of wind picked up the chaff and blew it into the eyes. As soon as the father emptied the box into the hopper, he got down on his knees and carefully swept the grain from under the winnower. He was mentally calculating how much money he would have to add to Khristya's earning to buy a horse. David was probably thinking about the same thing.

Toward evening a mist frayed out over the village.

...Next morning, when David rose and looked out of the window, it was still misty. Near the threshold the levelled patch of yard which served as the threshing floor glistened like a greased frying pan. Huida's house across the street and the garden and windmills beyond it loomed foggily. Khristya came into the house with a bundle of straw for the oven fire. The straw was sodden with rain. Looking at David standing at the window, his mother said:

"Do you really have to go in such bad weather? It's a long way."

"I must."

He dressed, pulled on his greatcoat, fastened it tightly with a belt, soldier-fashion, and donned his Budyonovka cap. Mother asked him to stay a bit longer — till the potatoes were boiled. David dismissed the proposal, saying he would manage eating bread alone throughout the day. Nonetheless he thanked her for reminding him to take something. He cut off a hunk of bread and crammed it into his pocket. Then he took some papers out of the books, folded them, hid them carefully in his coat cuff, and left the house.

On the beach the steam mill snorted heavily. From the tilth beyond the gardens came the cawing of jackdaws. The drizzly air smelled of the steppe, plowed land, and the dried dung which the villagers used to warm their houses. Schoolchildren with gray linen bags slung across their shoulders walked along the street. On meeting David they stepped aside, staring at him silently from under their large caps pulled right down to their ears. Then some of them called out from behind, "Good morning!"

As David came out of the village the hum of the telegraph wires was the only sound accompanying him on his way. On his left, beyond the river, a patchy black band of forest showed through the drizzle. Everywhere he looked there was the steppe, the misty horizon and solitary farmsteads scattered across the landscape. All was enveloped in the fine rain and the monotonous hum of the telegraph wires. David thought of the thousands of other out-of-



the-way, ignorant Obukhivkas lying beyond the broad, boundless expanses of the steppe.

The Revolution had swept over them, breaking the fallow like thousands of plowshares. And then shoots, dense and green, pushed forth from the black, fertile land.

But here and there in some remote corner the weeds started to choke them...

He thought about Matyukha and his cronies, about the meeting the day before yesterday and the one at his house the other night. No, Matyukha, that's a load of rubbish! David thought. When a farmer comes to his field and sees weeds choking his crop, he tears them out by the roots and takes them away.

He quickened his pace, Obukhivka still on his mind.

The road was good along the sandy track leading to the willow scrub, after which followed black earth and salinas. Though the ground had seemed solid, his boots had got covered with mud and he now had to drag his feet. Beyond the Mikhailivka farmsteads he

was fortunate enough to come across a man driving a cart pulled by a skewbald mare. David asked him for a lift and the man agreed since he was also going to the district center. A couple of hours later they approached Shcherbanivka.

A large market place sprawled over the approach to Shcherbanivka. A whole flock of windmills seemed to have flown in and descended there. Further on stood the market storehouses, stands and stalls. The market was just closing. On the left, beyond the storehouses, was the estate of the former engineer Pogorelov. When David had visited the market with his father in his childhood, the high water tower and the house with terraces enclosed by a high fence had all seemed like a fairy tale to him. He would look through a hole in the fence into the yard where various machines had stood, and into the garden with well-trimmed trees and some strange shrubs with drooping branches. Now there was no fence. The water tower stood lonely in the large yard overgrown with weeds. Next to the orchard only one wing of the house was in good shape. By a dunghill a militiaman wearing a red cap was busy with a pitchfork.

As they passed by, the carter turned to David and said:

"That's where our militia station is right now. Over there by the orchard there's a cellar where I once did a stretch, and I wouldn't wish that place on anyone. They've got the usual lockup, yet they like to throw their prisoners into the cellar."

David wanted to know what the man had done to be detained.

"Well, it all happened like this," said the man. "We live on the farmsteads, so you must know what a kind of life we have. One night some men came to my house and demanded I let them in. I didn't, so they started breaking in through the window. I had a rifle and let it off. So I chased 'em away, but next morning the militia came round for the rifle. I gave it up, but they still arrested me and held me for three days till I paid a fine. Whoa!"

They had arrived at David's destination.

Wagons stood near the porch where a crowd of peasants had gathered. The clock showed eleven sharp when David entered the office. Clerks were busy scribbling at the tables and a blond lady typed on a typewriter. The peasants crowded near the door. The air smelled of earth and the peasants' sheepskins gave off an odor of rain-drenched sheep. On the walls a number of posters urged: "Buy Peasant Bonds!", "Raise Your Harvest Yields!", a farmhand insisted the peasants join the "Vserobzemlis" Union, and two sturdy men, a worker and a peasant, shook hands and proclaimed —



"Long Live the Alliance Between Town and Country!" David's feeling of loneliness and depression disappeared all of a sudden. Again he felt confident and happy, as if all these people in the posters were real as were the factories and smoking plant stacks and the squadrons of planes in the air. Life teemed, the country was being revived.

He took off his Budyonovka cap. His hair was a bit disheveled; there were sparks of joy in his eyes. He entered the chairman's office. Instead he was received by the secretary who explained that the chairman was away on business and would not be back till evening or maybe even the next day.

"That's a pity," David said.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" asked the secretary.

David informed him that they were having trouble about the distribution of land in Obukhivka. In spring they had sent their decision on the matter, but since then nothing had happened, and the document itself had disappeared somewhere. So he wanted to inquire about it again. They were at present organizing land communes and intended to call a meeting to which they wanted to invite someone from the district, for Matyukha had established his "dictatorship" in Obukhivka and did whatever he liked.

The secretary said nothing definite. He looked intently at the young man, and said that this particular question was within the chairman's competence, but, unfortunately, the chairman was absent.

David then went to the Party committee which was in the same building, just across the corridor. When David entered, Mironov, the Party committee secretary, was talking to the chief of militia. With a wave of his hand Mironov gave David to understand that he was busy at present. David went out into the corridor and sat down on a windowsill to wait. Some minutes later the chief of militia left the office: his neck was bandaged. He shot a sharp sidelong glance at David and went past him, jingling his spurs. David then entered the Party committee office.

"Well, what can I do for you?" asked Mironov, lighting a cigarette and looking intently at the young man.

David took out some papers from his coat cuff along with his Party membership card and put them on the table in front of the secretary. First of all, David wanted to get registered with the Party committee, because the last time he had come here there had been nobody around. The reason for his present visit was the horrible state of affairs in his village. He was from Obukhivka.

Mironov knew that already. He opened David's Party card and examined it, casting sullen sidelong glances at David. He recalled what he had heard about this young man from Sakhnovsky just a couple of minutes ago. Yes, Sakhnovsky might be right, Mironov thought. There is something suspicious about that Motuzka.

"Since when have you been in the Party?" he asked, his eyes fixed on David.

"Since 1921."

"Where did you join the Party?"

"In the Red Army in Tashkent."

"Hmm," muttered Mironov, giving David a long penetrating look, after which he asked him what he meant by arbitrariness and disorder reigning in Obukhivka. (The words "arbitrariness" and "disorder" were underlined in his application, the secretary made a mental note). The intonation of the secretary's voice made David feel instantly ill at ease and he realized he could not say what he really thought in a sincere and comradely fashion. He frowned as he told the secretary about the community meeting, Matyukha's policy and his mugging, and the incident with his domestic. On the face of it Mironov was listening to him attentively. After David had finished his story, Mironov drew deeply on his cigarette and asked without any apparent reason:

"Tell me, comrade, where were you in 1919 before joining the Red Army?"

"Before Denikin's troops came to our parts I was at home, and then I made for the forest to join a partisan unit."

"Hmmm!" Mironov grew silent. A long pause followed. From the corridor came the noise of men's voices and of a door squeaking on its hinges.

Mironov was the first to speak again:

"So that's everything you wanted to tell me?" He put aside the Party card and bent his head over the papers.

David flared up.

"Comrade, I thought you might have something to say! Isn't it enough what I told you: at the meeting, in front of the whole community, a Party member strikes a man's face to the point of bleeding only because the man votes against the decision of the village Soviet chairman. Isn't that enough? The chief of militia attacks a girl and attempts to rape her; fortunately, she manages to break loose. Isn't that enough as well? The village is intimidated, ignorant, the library's being used for social gatherings and at night there's endless boozing sessions with Matyukha in the lead.

I been beside myself these past few days. At times I can hardly believe it's true, it's more like an oppressive nightmare. I came here, thinking I'd take counsel with comrades. What are we to do? We can't go on living like this!"

Mironov waited till David calmed down, and then he said in a strangely indifferent manner:

"All this will be discussed by the Party committee. Obukhivka is certainly a murderous village and ignorant besides. But who's to blame? We know and the Party committee knows that Matyukha drinks. But he's not losing his faculties: seems reasonable that he's been re-elected chairman for the second time. It's kind of incredible that he... and at a meeting at that. As for Sakhnovsky — as you know he's not a Party member. And then you write about the 'attempt to rape': that's a very loose concept, I'd say."

And, generally, the secretary was surprised: there was heaps of work for a Party member to do in the countryside which was setting up cooperations and organizing cultural and educational work. And he, David, was bothering with such trifles...

David was struck dumb and looked at him long in the face. He wanted to say something, but checked himself. He only bit his lips hard and rose to his feet. Slowly he pulled on his Budyonovka cap, unable to believe that he now had to turn round and leave. The secretary was attentively looking at his papers on the table, as if indifferent to whether David was still there or not. When David stretched out his hand to take the Party card, the secretary suddenly raised his head and said:

"No, comrade, leave the card here."

"But why?"

"Don't you worry, it won't get lost," Mironov answered evasively.

David went out onto the porch and stopped in the drizzle, still unable to comprehend what had happened. Either the man was a fool or he was in with the gang, thought David. Gradually he regained his composure, but he was as cheerless and depressed as before. He went to the post office, sent the letter to the editorial office of the *Voice of Labor* newspaper, and opened a three-month subscription for a newspaper for the village library with the money they had collected the other Sunday. Now he felt a bit more relieved and confident.

The clock on the post office building read two o'clock. David hurriedly attended to some other business he had to do and then made his way home.

It was still drizzling, and overhead the melancholy hum of the telegraph wires droned on in one and the same key. He had a sensation that deep inside him was a taut string which was also ringing sorrowfully and painfully.

This feeling persisted all the way home. As he entered the Mikhailivka farmsteads it was beginning getting dusky.

Here and there lights shone in the windows. By the time he came out of the farmsteads it was pitchdark — he could see neither the road nor the steppe. Through the drizzle the sky and the tilled land had merged into a single black, sticky mess. The wires hummed. Sometimes the drone would stop and all was quiet, with only his boots clumping through the mud. Then he felt solid ground under his feet — the sands had started. A little further on he could see the willow scrub. In the dark, on either side of the road, the shrubs and knolls stood out in blotches against the gray sand, and the black band of the young pine forest loomed nearby.

He passed the cross at the edge of the road. In Denikin's days some peasants had been shot here when they were being driven to Shcherbanivka. He recalled yesterday's encounter with Zinka... He suddenly felt utterly depressed, as if a slimy hand had squeezed his heart, sinking the fingers deep into its flesh.

They'll kill me, the sons of bitches, he thought. They'll corner me somewhere and kill me. What will be will be. Hadn't he looked boldly into the face of death before when they'd stood him up against the wall? What's our own life worth compared with that great happiness of all mankind for the sake of which they left their mothers, wives and children and, ragged and hungry, took up arms probably never to return. Thousands met with a bloody end without hesitation, because happiness would come to those they had left and those who were yet unborn. And the fact that they had seen it only for a fleeting instant... But then, could happiness or life itself be measured in terms of time, an instant, a day, or a year?

A little yellow dot twinkled from behind the willows, then another one — he had come to the end of the willow scrub. Right down in the valley was Obukhivka which looked like a sprinkling of gold grains which someone had liberally strewn on the black tilled earth.

### XIII

After his visit to Shcherbanivka David became taciturn and broody. The first few days he did not leave the house. He busied himself around the house, helping his father winnow the grain through a sieve. The following Sunday it would be sold at the market in Shcherbanivka where they wanted to buy a horse. When he stayed home he sat down at the loom, banging the lathe and shooting the shuttle, while his thoughts strayed far away from what he was doing. When he finished a bobbin and inserted a new one, he would sit rapt in thought as if he did not know what to do next.

"Aren't there any bobbins left?" his mother would ask from behind her spinning wheel. "Come on, Dokiya, get your distaff and twist some yarn."

Dokiya would shrug her thin little shoulders in great surprise.

"But there's a whole boxful of bobbins."

"What?" David would start. "Oh no, I've got enough bobbins." And again he would bang the lathe and listlessly push down the treadle, while his thoughts were far from being occupied by his work.

Oh, damn it, would it not be better if he went straight to the county? He might as well go to the railway station tomorrow. But he would have to go empty-handed, with no material evidence. Besides, he had left his Party card with Mironov. No, he would wait for the answer from the *Voice of Labor*. They must have received his first article by now, and a few days later he would send them the second one. He would wait a bit and see.

Tikhin came over for a chat. As he entered the house he brought in the pungent smell of his damp sheepskin. He took off his coat near the door, greeted everyone in a hollow voice, and sat down on the bench at David's side. He did not say a word: only his eyes looked intently at his comrade. David put down the shuttle.

"Brother, my visit was a waste of time."

Tikhin nodded understandingly and hung his head.

"Come on, Tikhin, don't look so down in the mouth," David said cheerfully. "It all happened a bit ridiculously." And he told him how the chairman had been out somewhere and so he could not have a good talk with him. And, well, at the Party committee... Since he had come home the thought of Mironov had plagued him. On the face of it he had seemed a genuine enough type, but there was something weird about the things he had said and his

suspicious attitude toward David. He told Tikhin that the secretary had asked where he had been at the time of the Revolution and for some reason made him leave his Party card. David thought that probably the chief of militia had a hand in all this, since he had seen him in the secretary's office that day. Or maybe they had something up their sleeves against David. It would certainly be no picnic to have a tug-of-war with them! It would be as bad as opposing yesterday's powers that be. Besides, the people of Obukhivka were a strange lot, Tikhin remarked. He had already heard some of them gossip: "Again they're raising the question about land distribution, again they'll be gathering grain. Some of them have made a fortune already on this deal, and now David is anxious to get himself a horse at our expense."

Color flooded into David's face.

"It'd be a different matter if it were the *kurkuls* croaking, but it's coming from some of the poor ignorant peasants," Tikhin said, taking a piece of folded paper from his coat and handing it to David. It was a list of the future land communities: twenty-three people had volunteered to set up a new settlement around the former manor, and seven, mostly those who had returned from Siberia, had enlisted for the coop which was also to be organized there. The Siberian Klim who lived with the smith at the farmsteads, said Tikhin, had come to him, saying he was anxious to see David about something and had waited for him till evening. He wanted to join the coop, and Zinka's father would certainly join as well. In all, they could count on nine families. Those who would remain in the village and vote for the distribution of the land would only be opposed by half a dozen households.

The news made David happy.

"See, and you hang your head. This Sunday we really must... oh, I forgot, this Sunday will be market day and everyone will be away. All right, let's make it next Sunday or some time in the middle of the week for holding a meeting. We'll invite someone from the district in case that joker disrupts the meeting. Then we'll keep pushing our decision and keep a close eye on it so it won't get shelved again."

Tikhin was sitting with head bent low. He raised it, but his eyes were still fixed on the floor, as if they were too heavy to lift. He broke into a long cough, heaved a deep sigh and looked at his friend.

"It'll be difficult, David," he said, adding in a whisper, "it might mean bloodshed. The men clashed yesterday at the coop store. Both

Hnida's sons looked daggers, but the sly devils kept their mouths shut. They probably are hoping to instigate the farmsteaders for their own ends. They were both loafing about with Tyahniryadno who was up in the cups after visiting the Hnidas. At the coop he picked a quarrel with our men. 'I'm not afraid of jail,' he says. 'I got a five-year stretch for being with the bandits, but I only did two and then got off scotfree. All right, I'll do another two years, but I'll stuff more than one belly with my earth just as they stuffed the bellies of the provision commissars with grain.'"

The spinning wheels whirled in the silence that followed. Khristya hummed a song under her breath. David placed his hand on Tikhin's shoulder and said with emotion, yet firmly:

"Yes, Tikhin, it'll be difficult. I was just thinking about it on my way home yesterday... Maybe those bastards will even kill me. So what, they might do away with me or with you, but what really counts is that our efforts won't be in vain and we'll have done something to make the life of others more decent."

Tikhin was silent. Emaciated and clumsy, he got to his feet; as he breathed in the silence a wheezing sound escaped from his chest, and he said, "Yeah" and nothing more. He invited David to his home that evening; the men were supposed to be meeting there. In fact, meetings were held in houses all over the village.

Tikhin then left the house.

When evening had set in, David got up from the loom, took a notebook, and sat down near the window, writing something and calculating. The women had stopped spinning. Mother was preparing to make dumplings, while Khristya made the feed for the suckling pig.

Petrik came home from school, and soon afterward Zinka arrived. Petrik hung his school bag on the peg and quietly sidled up to David to see what he was writing in his notebook. David lightly tapped him on the forehead with the pencil and smiled. The boy's face lit up: David's gesture meant he was in a good mood. Zinka came up to David and sat down beside him on the bench.

"I see you've got a blackeye," David said to his brother. "Where'd you get it?"

Mother:

"At school, where else. Do you think they go there to learn? They don't even get any homework. The only thing they do at school is fool around and exchange blackeyes."

"Oh, you don't understand anything! I got it in the drawing lesson."

"You little devil," said mother with feigned contempt, unable to conceal a smile at the sight of him. "So your mother's such a fool she doesn't understand what's what? You'll be telling me next that someone painted that blackeye on your face!"

Dokiya started to laugh. Petrik gave her a scornful look: now, why does she have to... And he started to tell what had happened.

During the lesson he was drawing in his notebook, when Hanna Ivanivna came up to his desk.

"What are you drawing?" she asked.

"A collective farm."

"A what? A collective farm? Where'd you see that?"

"I didn't see it anywhere, but we, peasants, are setting it up."

The children crowded around his desk to see his picture. He had drawn farmyards, all sorts of buildings, and behind them a tractor tilling the land.

"Nothing doing, every farmer's already got his bit of land," said Valko the grocer's son and went and stuck his finger into the inkwell and smeared the picture. Petrik gave him a good smack on the ear.

"How can you do that?" said Hanna Ivanivna.

"How can he... be such a dog!" Petrik replied.

"Yet it's you, that's got the blackeye!" everyone in the room remarked, laughing.

"Oh, that happened later on, when they hit me on the sly," Petrik rejoined. "Anybody can do that. During break Valko attacked me with his gang and hit me in the eye. But me and the boys gave him a good thrashing. After lessons we chased them with sticks right over past the mill. Ivan Knish lost his boot in the mud, and we found it and threw it on the mill roof."

Mother shook her head disapprovingly and admonished the boy:

"How can you behave like that? What on earth will you be like when you grow up if you fight now while you're only kids?"

"Well, why did he smear my picture with ink? And him saying every farmer's already got his bit of land!"

Petrik abhorred this phrase probably because it came from Valko's mouth. Why should he let them get away with it? Suddenly the boy felt hungry. He took a loaf of rye bread lying under a cloth on the table and tore off a chunk which he started to devour greedily.

Mother:

"You might have at least put some butter on it, you little tramp. It's over there in the bowl near the dish rack."



Petrik was quick to respond to this suggestion.

"The bowl's empty, mum."

"Well, child, if it's empty, it's empty. Wait a while — the dumplings will be ready any time."

The child had nothing to put on his bread, she thought sorrowfully. For three years they could not scrape together enough money to buy themselves a cow. They had sold their cow when famine set in. They had a little heifer, and she decided to wait till it grew up. And now they had to have a horse. The bit of money Khristya brought home was put aside for the purchase. Alas, not a penny could be spared from this sum to buy the girl even a cotton blouse. The poor soul was almost dying of cold working barefoot on the sugar plantation. Yet it was David who was her greatest worry now. Her sharp maternal eye and responsive ear took in every one of his words and facial expressions, filling her heart with alarm. While he was at the front and no news reached her she had pined away. And when he came home her heart still knew no peace. She knew not why, because there was something being concealed from her.

She was all ears when she heard David ask Zinka something near the window.

"No, I haven't noticed anything," Zinka said quietly. "If something happens I'll run over here immediately."

Now she constantly kept her eye on them, knowing too well that they would hide their intentions in every way possible. She was really worried about Zinka after that horrible night, thinking Matyukha would chase her away. But he didn't. Instead he picked on her mercilessly, and she only heard insults from him now. She bore it all in silence. Bitter as she might feel at times, she kept her mouth shut lest Matyukha chase her out.

It became completely dark in the house. As Khristya lighted the straw in the oven, the reddish, flickering flame illuminated the figure of mother sitting on the bench near the oven. Gradually the murk started to recede and now the distinct outlines of Zinka could be seen in the room. She raised her head and turned to David, speaking in a low voice.

She had two weeks left before her term at the Mathyukhas would run out. Then she would leave home and stay there till next spring to be hired out. It could be that no one ever would. Klim had been at their home yesterday evening, asking Tikhin to include him in the list of future coop members, and her father had joined as well. That night she had a strange dream: the weeds had

disappeared in the manor yard and they were burying their wooden plows.

"I saw you in my dream, David, and I didn't like what I saw. Maybe that's because I keep worrying and thinking about you all the time."

"Stop worrying then!"

"I can't help it."

She grew silent as did David. Maybe the dusk of the room reminded them of the starry nights of long ago, when the swaying rye had rustled in the steppe, bending to the ground. Zinka's pensive eyes had looked into the star-studded sky, and the boy's into her pensive eyes...

Suddenly the girl started and got up: she was expected home a long time ago! For a minute yet she chatted with Khristya by the oven.

David was sitting in the dusk near the window, wrapped up in thought. The vigor and ardor of youth had surfaced in him just like during those days of old. On the distant horizons of his vision his cherished dream appeared in indistinct outlines of colorful, sunny daubs. He saw a pair of clear, transparent eyes that reflected the colorful images in the distance...

## XIV

Day after day passed, interrupted by long intervals of starless autumn nights. The trees had become completely bare. The rains had drenched the thatches and seemed to have bent them even nearer to the ground. The streets and roads leading into the steppe became muddy. Autumn... Those farmers who had finished plowing their fields and those who had not all stored away their plowshares till next spring. Now all their energy was centered on their households. The men tended the cattle, or "put to right" the grain, winnowing in the barns, working outside from morning till night. The only exceptions were the meals which they had indoors. But as soon as the farmer had left the table he would grab his cap even before he had time to roll himself a cigarette. It was hard to breathe in the house: after the pungent steppe air the lungs were unaccustomed to the hemp dust and the suffocating heat of the ovens. Besides, the house was a hive of activity — a real textile mill. As soon as the women had heated the rooms they sat down

at their spinning wheels. The young women and girls handled the spinning wheels and the older women the spindles. And if a house had a weaver — usually an old man — the unpretentious melody of the spinning wheels was joined by the hollow thumps of the loom and the clarinet-like trill of the bobbin running across the warp. The nephews' allotted share of work was twisting the yarn. This went on from morning till dusk and sometimes late into the night.

In the evenings the men tried to get away from their homes. "Wind at least a bobbin," their disgruntled wives would urge them.

"All right, I'll do it tomorrow morning," they said, puffing at their cigarettes and stepping over the wattle fence or the stile, depending on which side their neighbor lived.

Tikhin was right when he said that real meetings were now being held in the villagers' homes, just like before the Revolution. Throughout the long autumn evenings the peasants talked about the land, about the local authorities, exchanged the latest news, and discussed the burning issue closest to their hearts — the land. True, they only spoke of it surreptitiously, or among sympathetic friends, to the whirring of spinning wheels, and casting furtive glances at the door. Matyukha's henchmen were spying and prying everywhere. Yukhim Kolodets was the first to suffer the consequences of being incautious. One evening they had gathered at his home, and next morning Matyukha summoned him to the village Soviet, being already informed what the conversation was all about. He boxed his ear and even wanted to lead him off to the militia in Shcherbanivka, but Yukhim managed to wheedle his way out of the predicament.

The news immediately spread through Obukhivka. "If Matyukha wants he'll do the same to you!" the villagers said. "He's the boss around here and he knows you won't go complaining about him."

"That's not the case everywhere. We won't know where to complain so he takes advantage of our ignorance; he knows if he smashes your face the only thing you'll do is wipe it on your sleeve. But why doesn't he give Motuzka a belting? That man's telling him the naked truth to his face, like at that meeting when he called him a scoundrel. And he brought out all their dirtiest washing into the open! What can it mean?"

The villagers held various opinions on this point. Some thought that since David was a Party member Matyukha accepted from him what he otherwise would never have tolerated. Others saw in it

"some kind of policy," although no one had the slightest idea what that policy could be. The main thing beyond anyone's doubt was David's sincere, undisguised hatred of Matyukha and his gang. Admittedly, when David had first come home opinions about him had varied. They had known David since his childhood and the Motuzkas had always been respected for their honesty and decency, but who could be sure. Throughout the Revolution the whole of Russia had changed, to say nothing of her people. Weren't there cases when before the Revolution a man had been a bit of a nonentity, a drunkard, a farmhand, a hopeless tramp — like Kolodko, for example — and now he was a farmer of means: he had a horse, a cow, seven *dessiatines* of land under crop, and didn't touch a drop of moonshine. Or take Matyukha again — he had fought against the bourgeoisie, standing for the power of the poor, while now... Maybe David was of the same sort.

However, the villagers' first meetings with David had an exceptional effect on them. They saw the same old David Motuzka: irrepressible and intelligent, just as he had been before the Revolution. He was interested in their life and told them many things. He had become a mature man, with a firmer, steadier voice. He wore an army greatcoat and did not carry a revolver tucked behind his belt. The morning after his arrival in the village he was threshing rye with his father and in the evenings he talked with the peasants who saw that he was wise and well-read. Nobody had ever seen him gadding about or carousing. "A serious man" — that was the general opinion of the peasants. At the mill that night he spoke out boldly, mentioning Matyukha and Hnida aloud for everyone to hear — something which the villagers did only in a whisper, because mostly it was "Comrade Chairman," "Yakiv Havrilovich," and God forbid if they said anything against him. Tikhin Kozhushny had tried once: who could know whether he would survive till next spring. When David had spoken at the meeting, they had all listened with bated breath, waiting with alarm what would follow next. No, Matyukha did not touch him. This was such an unusual event that it became a subject of talk for many days. Various assumptions were voiced, the minutest details recalled: how Matyukha had started to tremble, and those who sat at the front desk were supposedly to have heard him grit his teeth. But he hadn't hit him! What could that mean? He must have been scared. Even those who were hopelessly convinced of Matyukha's intrepidity shrugged their shoulders in surprise. Yet everyone sensed an alarm in the air, and the odd words and snatches of

phrases they heard at the coop store or at the mill from "the other side" were portents of a storm to follow the lull.

For some days now Tyahniryadno had not sobered up and had been boozing continually with Hnida.

The evening before, David had been to see Tikhin. It was already dark and the weather was windy. Throughout the village the lights blinked in the windows. David heard the voices of two drunken men hollering a song behind the cattle shed. Just as he left his yard he met two figures holding on to each other and swaying drunkenly through the mud, hollering into the night:

*"With my faithful host I'll ride  
And if need be destroy a hundred towns..."*

"Who's there?" one of the men asked, detaching himself from the other. The voice was unfamiliar to David.

He passed them without saying a word.

"Who's there, I said!" the voice boomed again threateningly, emphasizing the "I." By then David had already left them behind. Filthy curses reached his ears, as if someone were throwing handfuls of mud at his back. Then a wattle fence pole cracked. David stopped and turned round. The pole was apparently rotten, for David saw that formidable "I" wallowing in the mud under the fence and cursing. The other snuffled heavily — probably trying to get his crony on his feet. They fussed for some time. When David reached Tikhin's house he saw them both stumbling across the street, heading straight for Hnida's farmyard.

Late that night when Tikhin's home was packed with people, suddenly — crash! bang! — the window was smashed to smithereens and a lump of brick missed Hordiy's head by a small margin: it bounced off the window pane and fell right into the circle of men. Everyone jumped to their feet and ran outside. The dogs barked in the village. There was no one in sight either in the yard or in the garden or street. The only thing they saw was a group of young people who were passing by, singing and shouting. Everyone realized that this was the doing of those two drunkards.

Next day David went to the village Soviet and asked Matyukha who the drunkard was loafing about the village. Yesterday he had attempted to attack him with a fence pole and in the night someone had broken Kozhushny's window. It could only have been the doing of those two rogues.

Matyukha was sober that day, but very angry nonetheless. He looked at David with bloodshot eyes and his brows jerked slightly.

"So, what if someone does try and chuck a fence pole at you I daresay you deserve it!" he said, looking searchingly at David. "As for the windows — well, it's not my job to guard them. You'll probably soon be breaking each other's windows and bashing each other's heads in with fence poles anyway! What have I got to do with that?"

After a pause — there was no one in the room besides them — Matyukha leaned across the table and whispered emphatically with a threat in his voice:

"Motuzka, you better stop those tricks of yours, or you'll be sorry! I know everything you're intending to do. But you'd better mind, because I've got something lined up for you as well. You'll be sorry, but it'll be too late by then. Now go away, and don't bother me." When he was leaving, Matyukha said to his back so that the people who had gathered in the village Soviet would hear him through the open door: "And stop holding those meetings. If I catch you one of these days... Maybe you're making moonshine there or worse still? There have been more thefts registered in the village."

David stopped in his tracks, turned round and asked ironically for everyone to hear:

"Comrade Matyukha, it seems you're forgetting" — he pointed to the wall — "that's Lenin, not Nicholas II. As far as the thefts are concerned, well, you're the chairman around here. Maybe you know who's been robbed *and* who's done it."

"We're still investigating who's done it!" Matyukha said again emphatically, his eyes hanging on David's face.

...From that day on no meetings were held either at Motuzka's or at Kuzhushny's home. It was not because they were afraid of Matyukha, simply that they could not afford to glaze the windows every day. Besides, David thought it time to leave their homes and come out into the open. They must emerge from their "underground" and go to the village library. His friends agreed.

"But just look at the state that library's in!" Yakim said, spitting on the floor with disgust.

## XV

In the center of the village, near the square and the church, and opposite the school, stood a large dilapidated house with a porch facing the street. It had once been a store. Autumn rains and storms had battered it, and no one had ever patched up its wounds



which were scattered profusely around the windows and the porch; closer to the ground, at the foundation, there were signs of what had once been a wattle fence. The tin roof must have been painted at some point; perhaps the old-timers could still remember what color it had been, but now no amount of research would have yielded any information on the matter. The porch had decayed and the winds had carved a whimsical pattern on its roof.

This was the village library.

In the daytime its dirty windows with broken panes looked dully onto the pasture. Not a single thought stirred in this house all day long. Two of the windows were hung with white curtains from frame to frame, their flowery, starry pattern feebly standing out against the green of the windowsills. These were the quarters of the former librarian. He had held this post during the times of the Prosvita \* Society, but his present duties as assistant at the

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\* Prosvita Society — (*prosvita* — lit. enlightenment, education) — initially organized in 1868 for the promotion of education and culture among the

coop store were a far cry from his work of yesteryear. Yet he still was the holder of the library's key, and in the evenings, when the boys left the library, they closed it and hid the key in a place they had agreed on with the former librarian. The next morning, when Hanna Ivanivna, the librarian's wife who was a teacher, let the hens out of the attic, she took the key and put it in her pocket. As simple as that.

The porch was occupied by the librarian's drowsing hens. This was their exclusive domain during the day.

When evening drew in, a rooster alighted on the hitching-post, crowed "Good night" to his friends across the pasture, and then invited his ladies into the roost.

The quiet of the first moments of evening was interrupted by voices, jests and the ringing laughter of girls. From both sides of the village and across the pasture young people converged on the library. Boots thumped on the porch as the crowd noisily entered the building. When David and Yakim approached the porch, the pale patches of light shining on the street from all four windows were being trampled into the mud by the youngsters who had not been let in. There was noise, laughter and commotion at the windows.

"Fedir, lift me up to the window, then I'll give you a turn."

Fedir complied and his young friend ogled through the window.

"Good God, Fedir, its your brother Ivan over there kissin' and cuddlin'!"

"You're kidding?"

"No. Look at him kissing her!" the boy choked with delight, and pressed his face even closer to the window flattening his nose against the pane.

The first thing David saw when he opened the door was the dense gray tobacco smoke swaying overhead. Through its hazy veil he saw two rows of girls sitting on benches along the walls, singing a song about a true love who had gone on distant travels. Along the opposite wall there was a crowd of boys. A lanky fellow sat on the table, just under the cobweb-covered portrait of Shevchenko framed in a dirty *rushnik*. Another fellow was bent over the first boy's knees, his face buried in his lap, and holding one

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people in general, the Society soon gained an expressed nationalist character. After the Revolution some of its bourgeois-nationalistic elements tried to use the Society for anti-Soviet propaganda. With the appearance of Soviet educational and cultural institutions, Prosvita closed down in the early 1920s — Tr.



hand behind his back. A hand swished through the air and landed with a mighty whack on the open palm. The fellow raised his head from the other's lap — he must have done that more than once judging by the painful expression on his face, although all this was supposed to be really funny — and his eyes scanned the crowd.

"You!" he said, pointing to a boy whom he thought to be his assailant.

"No, lie down again!" the crowd roared merrily. Someone pushed his head back into the lap of the lanky fellow sitting on the table. Everyone shoved to try and hit the open palm without being caught in the process. "Let me, no, me...!" Whack!

David shook his head in disapproval.

"Well, you see it for yourself," Yakim said.

"Yes, there'll be enough work to do. But, Yakim," — David shot an enthusiastic look at his friend and added — "see how their eyes burn! Sons of bitches, they're good at playing this game. Just imagine what they'd be like if they were given a glimpse of the big wide world. I wish the newspapers would arrive as fast as possible. Then their eyes would burn even more! Believe me, brother! The only thing we have to know is how to do it."

He asked whether there were any books in the library. Yakim led him into a dark corridor and opened a door leading into a dark room. On the threshold he lit a match.

"Those are our bookcases."

David went up to a bookcase and through the broken glass inspected the torn volumes on the shelves. He took one of the books and was met with the smell of decayed old paper mixed with dust. The corners above the shelves were hidden by cobwebs. He put the book — a volume of Leskov — back on the shelf.

"This is also full of books," said Yakim, knocking against the door of another bookcase with his knuckles. "They belonged to the general's widow. It's a good library, but most of the books are romantic stuff and poetry. You'd hardly find anything about a muzhik's life in it. They take them out without even looking at the titles. They're most concerned about whether the paper's thick or thin. They don't loan the books any more, because nobody returns them: they tear out the pages to roll cigarettes."

Behind the wall someone strummed a guitar and a mild soprano sang:

*"The night has strewn its silvery stars  
There on the river bottom..."*

Yakim struck another match.

"Just take a look at those walls," David said, shaking his head.

They were covered in patches like sores. In the corners the cobwebs hung from the ceiling, and one of the corners was black near the floor from damp and mould. Pieces of plaster had fallen away from under the windowsill.

"This building needs a good repair."

"That's nothing, it can be done," said Yakim, throwing the empty match box into a corner, and, turning toward the door to leave, he added, "We'll have to bring the young people to heel first. Once any of the peasants have been here and seen this they won't be forced to come again."

"We'll manage the young people somehow," David said.

When they returned to the big room, the boys were still engaged in the same game. The older ones stood near the window, smoking and spitting on the floor in boredom. The tobacco smoke had become denser. Singing girls moved through the smoke as if they were out for a moonlight stroll, looking for someone. It seemed their songs softly floated from somewhere far, far away and not from the direction of the wall. Near the door Hordiy's Kostya swung his hand and brought it down on the palm of another boy. He turned his face toward Yakim. It had a tired look, without a spark of merriment.

"Yakim, you could bring along your accordion once in a while," he said with a ring of boredom in his voice.

"I have other things on my mind," Yakim dismissed the suggestion. He asked the boy how long they intended playing this foolish game. Kostya shrugged his shoulders — who knows? Someone grabbed him by the shoulder from behind and pulled and roared with laughter — now it was Kostya's turn for the beating.

"Haven't you got fed up with it!" he said crossly.

Someone argued. The lanky fellow jumped down from the table and also refused to go on with the game. The circle dispersed. A group went over to the girls. The boys standing near the window came up to David, and Ostap Ivzhin said with a sad smile on his lips:

"Well, David, that's what our library looks like."

"I see, it's lousy!"

Yakim threaded his way to the middle of the room, raised his hand and said:

"Comrades, attention! Girls, calm down, you'll have your chance to sing later!"

Everyone turned toward him. The noise died away, and the girls gradually broke off their songs. In one of the corners a girl was laughing loudly as if someone were tickling her. Kostya stepped forward and shouted over the heads:

"All right you there, haven't you been tickled enough yet? Shut up!"

"Suppose they don't want to?" Knish's son stood up and looked sullenly.

"You'll see what!"

"My, my!"

At this a sturdy boy, Harasko Koloda, pushed himself away from the wall and said with a severe look:

"All right, shut up! Or we'll coop you up! Yakim, speak."

"Hey you, take it easy!" the blond Filka Hnida rejoined from near the wall. Yakim sized him up from head to toe and started speaking:

"Listen, friends! Tomorrow all the girls who sing in the choir, and, generally, all those who are more of the conscious cast gather here, we've got some work to do! Tomorrow there's a church holiday, so you won't do your spinning anyway. Bring along brooms and if anyone's got any paint bring that as well. How long will we be getting together in this typhus barrack in the autumns and winters?"

Then, addressing both the boys and the girls, Yakim said that although he was not much of a speaker and was not very coherent, he spoke what he felt to be the truth — it was time the young people start a new life. When their parents were young and were slaves of their destinies, working from morn till night in the summer and killing time in boredom in the winter, they had nowhere to apply the young vigor they had accumulated during the winter. Evening parties were their only pastime. Their hands were all blisters from the game they played. "And believe me," Yakim said, "the blows were far harder than now." He told them it had all been senseless hee-haws and songs which had done nothing but make the windows rattle! Where could they apply their strength? Nowhere until next spring when they would be hired as farmhands. But now all the young people had a new path to follow, which they had to build with their own hands and their own minds. This called for some thinking, reading newspapers and books and listening to lectures. This did not mean it would be all work and no play. Young people deserved to have some fun, but not the sort Yakim had seen today. Nobody felt happy when they went home after

such parties. Yakim knew that feeling only too well: at times he had been drawn to this place looking for something he could not really explain. No sooner had he come and he would be disappointed.

"That's why we want to get at this 'something' and at least let's feel toward it." Yakim said in conclusion: "David will see to things. He has subscribed to some newspapers and tomorrow we'll start: the boys can come as well to give a hand moving a trestle or fixing the porch."

"We won't keep you waiting," said Kostya enthusiastically.

"We'll come," someone assured.

The statement was followed by a lot of noise. The girls showered Yakim with questions, asking over and over again what they should bring. "Oil paint, that's all right, but what about some clay for plastering the cracks? We have to have at least two trestles which the boys must get from somewhere."

"Let them get some pine branches!" another girl shouted. The plump Halina poked a finger into the wall beside the window and immediately a chunk of plaster fell away.

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed. "Take a look at this!"

The incident triggered off a noise that sounded like the loud gaggling of geese on the pasture.

Khristya jumped on the table, took down the *rushnik* from the Shevchenko portrait, and shook it so violently that a cloud of dust enveloped it. She folded the *rushnik* deciding to wash it tomorrow.

"Oh yes, one more thing," Yakim said. "If anyone's got portraits of the revolutionary leaders, bring them along. For the time being" — he turned to David — "we'll borrow your Lenin portrait."

David gave a nod, while he looked at the young people with enthusiasm and joy.

## XVI

The next day, while the bells were still tolling, and as Obukhivka's women were on their way to church they saw the young people hustle and bustle around the library building. From the porch came the thumps of hammers and the clanking of axes — the boys were fixing the porch roof and the steps. In the street a group of children had stopped on their way to school. A girl ran out of the house. She wore only a chemise and her skirt was tucked up.

"Kostya, bring me that trestle from over there."

Kostya who was busy fixing the steps raised his head.

"Please, go and help yourself," he said with a laugh, because there were no steps.

"Don't you see I can't?"

"I'll help you get down!"

"Oh, you devil! That's the only thing you think about!"

Kostya laughed from below, his eyes involuntarily glued on Khristya. He jerked them away, threw the ax aside and brought the girl the trestle. Halka came out on the porch and they both carried the trestle in.

Some of the boys went to cut pine branches in the wood beyond the willow scrub. More girls arrived and the boys helped them into the house, while others, bent on mischief, refused to help: "Let them try it themselves and see what a woman's worth without a man." The girls inside came to the rescue of their sex and put the boys in their place.

"Big deal! Think we can't do it?"

"And there's auntie Maria coming to give us a hand!" Khristya exclaimed merrily.

Maria approached the group, a joyous expression on her face which was red from the walk. She wore a black coat, a little flowery kerchief on her head, her blouse was partly unbuttoned. The girls stretched their hands out to her, she took one of them and with her other hand grasped a post and pulled herself onto the porch.

Inside, pandemonium reigned supreme as one would expect during such repairs. The Shevchenko portrait had been taken down from the wall and stood on the windowsill. In the middle of the room a heap of skirts and woolen kerschiefs was piled high on a table. The girls were peeling the whitewash off the walls — some standing on the floor, others on the trestles. In the center of the floor a girl was mixing clay with dung for plastering the cracks in the walls. Yakim was making putty near one of the windows.

"Good morning, girls," Maria said gayly as she entered. She made a girlish turn on her heel and surveyed the room. Her coat hung on one shoulder, but she did not take it off yet. She smiled briefly, pulled a brush out of her pocket and put it on the windowsill beside Yakim, and said jokingly:

"Poor soul, you're all alone here with the girls. What if they give you the works?"

"I'll call my friends," he replied in the same tone and he meant it when he called David: "Hey, are you still alive over there?"

David's hollow response came from the other room. At this Maria's coat fell from her shoulder of its own accord. She put it on the pile on the table, tucked up her skirt, rolled up the sleeves of her chemise, and tied the end of her flowery kerchief behind her head. She made another round of the room, surveying the walls.

"Khristya, peel down that whitewash nicely over there. That's it!"

A piece of plaster fell on the floor.

"After all we're doing this for our own benefit."

Maria asked why they were not cleaning the other rooms as well.

"David's busy with the books in there," one of the girls replied.

"So what, we can clean at the same time."

She turned round and went into the corridor. On the threshold leading into the room with the bookcases she stopped, looking wordlessly down on David who was bent over the books scattered on the floor. She stood like this until he looked up. She stared at him and after saying hello came and squatted down beside him.

"All the time you fuss over your books!" she said and fell to thinking for a spell. Then she asked in a businesslike way whether he would mind her whitewashing, or rather cleaning the whitewash off the walls. David had nothing against this provided she would not soil the books with the whitewash. The books were in a bad state and he thought they would take up all his time until evening. His head ached a little from bending over them.

As he said this, he raised his head and looked at the young woman. Their eyes met. David was the first to glance away. Maria heaved a sigh and, leaning with one hand on his shoulder, rose to her feet.

"Did Tikhin go to Ohirivka?" David asked as she walked away.

"Yes, he did," she answered from the threshold still looking at him. She stood there for a while, then her black eyelashes dropped like reeds bent in the wind. She squinted at David and, unable to control her feelings, blushed.

"And what if he did?" she asked, stepping toward David.

"Oh... nothing, I just wanted to know."

Maria turned round and left the room jauntily, knowing he was watching her.

David returned to the books. He picked out the good ones, putting aside those which had to be repaired or stowed away in the attic. In the process he suddenly recalled that he had forgotten to tell Tikhin something. He had probably gone to Ohirivka to see his sister and give her a hand on the farm, since she was widowed and

had little sons to bring up. David wanted Tikhin to ask some of the boys to go to Ohir's farm and see the farmhand Ilko who, as Zinka had told him, had an interesting letter. David was sure Tikhin knew what to say to the poor peasants living around the farmsteads, when they came to see him. Ohir's son and Tyahniryadno must have done some vile agitating by now. At the next meeting the poor farmsteaders had to be reckoned with since they were part of the village community.

Maria and Halka brought a trestle into the room. They put it by the wall near the window, Maria took off her boots and climbed up. Halka left the room. Maria started scraping the wall with a knife, humming a merry tune. For some reason David's thoughts turned to her. He saw through her all right. That flowery kerchief and the blouse with the bright insets, usually worn by young girls, was put on especially for him. She had not come here to whitewash the rooms. And the way she looked at him! He recalled that at their home he always caught her eyes whenever he looked her way.

His train of thought was interrupted by a little piece of clay the size of a pea rolling down his back. He looked up: she did not look his way, but carried on scraping the wall. He thought the clay must have fallen by accident. Then suddenly she bent her head and shot a sly look under her arm. What a devil of a woman! She had tucked her skirt right up to her knees and had taken off her boots on purpose. David frowned and concentrated on the book titles. Strange as it may seem, but he could not make out the letters, they were somehow mixed up, and color flooded his face. He knew he had only to call her and she would have instantly stretched out her arms and fallen on his chest with those wide dreamy eyes. What the hell! he thought. From below he saw her large eyes just as he had on that moonlit night.

David recalled something he wanted to ask her about that night, but checked himself. Maria stopped humming her song, kept silent for a while, and then turned abruptly to the young man and asked with a tinge of sorrow in her voice:

"David, what's the matter? No sooner are we left alone and you stop speaking to me. Perhaps you don't think it worthwhile talking to a woman? Or are you cross with me for something?"

There was a childish expression of embarrassment and sorrow on her face.

David looked at her and shrugged his shoulders. He asked her why she thought him cross with her.

"That's just what I want to know!" said the woman thoughtfully.

David confessed that sometimes her behavior amazed him. He felt there to be no use in hiding it. At times he had pitied her. He quoted as an example the night they were returning from the mill and had stopped for a chat at his house. They had talked about Tikhin and the treatment he needed. She had been upset about it all, saying that she did not grudge anything for medicine and if need be would sell her length of cloth to buy it. When she drove away she had said something back to him.

Maria remained silent.

She stared at the young man with bated breath. From behind the wall came the muted song of the girls.

David was rapt in thought for a while. Why had he told her all that? He looked up abruptly and concluded:

"I didn't hear what you said then and shouted, 'What you say?' and you, Maria... you simply laughed and said, 'Never mind, you should have listened!' That's all. A trifle, isn't it? But that night, and sometime later I thought a lot about what I should have listened to. And you know, Maria, there were times when I thought bad things about you. It seemed strange to me and I simply couldn't believe it: one minute you were upset and the next you laughed. For two years you've lived side by side with Tikhin..."

She remained silent.

"What bad things were you thinking about me, David?"

"You see, you had hardly gone twenty yards from the gate, where we had talked about Tikhin's misery, when you started to laugh, and you did it whenever I came visiting you. Why do you think Tikhin's become so sad lately?"

Maria seemed to hear a tinge of contempt in David's voice. The blood rushed to her cheeks and her breasts heaved with emotion. He must probably take me for some..., she thought. As if she did not understand what he was implying. He thinks that she behaved in the same way in front of everyone just as in his presence — always merry and restless.

"Oh, David, what...!" She sighed and grew silent, continuing to scrape the wall vigorously. Then she got down from the trestle without his help, although the trestle was rickety. She pulled it to another place and climbed up, without asking David to help her. She pulled down the back of her skirt.

Yakim entered the room with a girl. He asked David for a ruler to cut glass for a bookcase. He was merry and full of jokes:

"Now you two, don't overdo it whitewashing the room."

"Auntie Maria," said the girl, "shouldn't we put some more dung



into this clay?" she held out a lump which she had brought as a sample. Maria looked at it and squeezed it in her fingers.

"No, the clay's all right," she said. "Have you started plastering the cracks?"

"Yes, we've just begun."

As she was leaving, Maria said:

"Tell one of the girls to come here and give me a hand." She went on diligently scraping the wall. Yet all the time she was keenly listening for the sound of every turning leave, expecting to hear something.

David was the first to break the long, tense silence. If he had offended her in one way or another, he said, he did not mean it. Probably he should not have touched on the subject altogether, for no one could avoid seeing things occasionally not as they were in reality. Besides, he had only known her two weeks. She should not think that he thought bad of her all the time. Certainly not.

He got up, took another pile of books from the shelf and put it on the floor. The books he had picked out he placed in the bookcase. Then he squatted by the pile and took out his tobacco pouch. He had no paper on him for a cigarette. Instinctively his hand stretched out to a torn book he had put aside to be stowed away in the attic. But he did not tear off the page. He went to Yakim and after a minute returned, rolling himself a cigarette. As he squatted down beside the books Maria could not restrain herself any longer and asked:

"What else do you think about me?"

He struck a match, lit the cigarette, greedily pulled at it and blew out a long streamer of gray smoke. Through the smoke Maria's appearance gave him a pleasant surprise: her knees were hidden beneath her skirt and she was very attentive, only her brows had a slight expression of sadness.

"It happened when I visited your home for the first time after I returned," David said, looking thoughtfully somewhere into a corner. "There were a lot of elderly men and women. The young women were sitting on the bed. We talked about our life in Obukhivka and put our heads together to think of what to do about Matyukha and his gang. And you said something to the effect that the Obukhivka men were a toothless lot. One of the men told you rudely to mind your own woman's business. You flared up and gave it to him. I don't remember exactly what you said, but you did it in a way that made the men blink in surprise. And the young women on the bed were literally devouring you with their eyes

with admiration... With the girls you feel at ease, whether you're singing a song or cracking a joke. And the moment you start speaking all the married women give you an attentive ear."

Drawing on the cigarette, David grew silent. Maria dared not move on the trestle. Her eyes were fixed on the young man and her full breasts heaved with emotion.

"Well, I keep thinking," David said again, looking with admiration at the woman, "what a fine activist you'd make! It'd be simply great to watch you."

David's eyes shone with passion. She was beautiful, he thought.

"Our men still regard women as creatures who've got thick hair and shallow brains. That's nonsense. There're lots of women in the Party and, generally, in public institutions. The peasant woman has it hard, that's true — chores around the household, in the kitchen, at the spinning wheel from morning till night, looking after the kids who hang onto her like burrs. But you, Maria, you've got no children..." And suddenly he said, alarmed, "Maria, what's the matter with you?"

She turned to him, a painful look on her face.

After a pause she said:

"David, at least don't remind me" — and she added with effort — "about children. You said that with most women kids are like burrs. If such women really think so, they're fools. No matter how many kids I had, David, they'd be like flowers to me, not burrs. I'd do everything for them and even have enough time to spare to attend meetings or such like. I'd do all that just for their sake. You want to set up a coop, but actually you're doing it for our children. Now, if you haven't got any... Me and Tikhin were really happy when we moved into our new house. We had just married. I told the oven-maker then to do everything to make our house really warm, and I wanted our windows to shine bright for the kids. And now... I come home and the house is empty and I feel as lonely as a stalk. But even a stalk grows — it sheds its seeds and next spring, although the stalk has dried up by then, the green shoots come pushing out of the earth around it... And you, David, regard it as a blessing that I've got no kids." There was a note of slight reproach and sorrow in her voice.

She looked at David, so strange and unknown to her, and seemed to wilt away. He felt a mixture of excitement and pity. Just a minute ago her eyes were beaming with joy and mirth: slim, full-bosomed she emanated a youthful vigor. But then she had suddenly faded. David was gloomy. And then, recalling something or just

giving vent to her emotions, she shook off her sorrow, looked at the young man with sparkling eyes and said passionately, a ring of challenge in her voice:

"Now tell me, David, am I not a fine woman, damn it?"

She was again an embodiment of health and vigor, and her eyes devoured David with fire.

"David, please hold the trestle," Maria said all of a sudden, remembering that she still had to whitewash the room.

David got up and held the trestle. Without taking her eyes off the young man, she got down, putting a hot hand on his shoulder. Her breasts slightly brushed against his body. She looked appealingly into his eyes. Then she jerked away and jumped on to the floor. Breathing heavily, she said in a voice full of suffering:

"Oh, David, what a...!"

Just then Halka ran into the room from the corridor, offering to help Maria, and both of them started whitewashing the room.

## XVII

The work was finished only by evening of next day.

Both rooms were neatly whitewashed. Green garlands of pine hung on the walls, and under the ceiling two lush strings of pine garlands were stretched crosswise from corner to corner and red paper strips were attached to them. (They had seen something similar at the club of the sugar refinery.) On one wall hung the Shevchenko portrait surrounded by a green pine wreath and white *rushnik*, and on the opposite wall above the table, a Lenin portrait was also set in a green wreath and adorned with a red flowery *rushnik* one of the girls had brought along.

The house was full of young people and the girls were finding it hard to wash the floor. The white cozy rooms dressed in greenery gave rise to general admiration. From the west the sun streamed in golden-red sheaves of light through the windows, scattering its rays throughout the room and across the opposite wall. The rays fell on heads and entangled like awns in hair.

"All right, get moving," the girls complained, "because of you we can't reach down to the floor."

Yakim came in from the adjoining room, tiptoeing across the patch of washed floor boards.

"Friends, clear the house, please, and let the girls finish the washing! On opening day next Sunday you'll have the chance of sitting around here till midnight."

The crowd slowly drifted out of the room. The red rays of sunlight on the wall started to fade away. The girls finished washing the room, rinsed the floor rags which they would need later on, and hung them outside to dry. In the entrance hall they dressed and one by one left for home.

The last to leave were Yakim, David and another young man — Savko, an "outstanding" Obukhivka painter. Yakim locked the door of the library and put the key into his pocket.

"Enough of that anarchy!" he said goodnaturedly as he descended the newly repaired steps.

He invited the men home to finish the wall newspaper which had to be ready by Sunday.

The lights were already on in his house. Near the oven a young woman was preparing supper. At the table sat Yakim's sister Tetyana, a schoolgirl, who was diligently copying David's editorial on a large sheet of paper. The men sat down at the table. Yakim took the drafts of the newspaper articles and Tetyana's cheap set of water colors from the crossbeam overhead. Savko immediately started to test the colors with a brush. They had to paint the newspaper title and make drawings and heading pictures. David got down to reading the articles, a good half of which were written by him and the rest by other contributors. Written in ink and pencil with crooked, awkward letters, they covered the most varied themes — land distribution, forestry, the village library, and Matyukha. There were also a number of verses by local poets. David even came across an article which described the dirty machinations at the coop store, as a result of which a whole barrel of rotten herrings was delivered to the buyers from Hubarenko's store.

David praised the article.

"We'll have to give it a picture," he said to Savko.

"By all means, I'll do a picture including the coop store and Hnida," said Savko after he had read the article. "But how am I to show the smelling herrings?" he said puzzled.

"Draw some people holding their noses and everyone will understand that the barrel stinks," said Yakim.

"Great idea," said Savko joyfully.

Old Karpenko, Yakim's father, came in. He took off his coat and joined the men at the table.

"What are you doing?"

"We're making the wall newspaper," Tetyana said with a businesslike air without raising her head from the sheet of paper.

"Be careful, boys, that you won't write something to your own misfortune," said the old man, shaking his head in disapproval.

"What do you mean by our 'own misfortune'?"

"Well, I heard Tetyana read about the chairman and the coop store. Somebody was giving them real hell. They won't let you get away with it scowling at us as they do."

"Rubbish," David said. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained. You'll find wall newspapers in every military barracks you visit, in every workers' and village club. It's only here that we've got such peculiar customs."

"Who knows what's where. But we don't have anything of the sort. It could be that this kind of thing will make us old folks feel uncomfortable in our own homes," said the old man.

"Don't you worry, father, everything will be all right!"

At this the old man took a thread-winder from under the bench running around the oven and started winding a hank of yarn. The boys continued their work. Suddenly David asked the old man how many *dessiatines* of land Knish, Hubarenko and the rest taken together owned in Rokitne. The old man stopped winding the hank.

"Why, are you writing about the land as well?"

"Of course. Agriculture is now the main theme with us. If we carry out the land distribution we'll be able to stand on our own feet, if not we'll rot in poverty. I need the information about the land for my article."

The old man began making careful calculations in his mind.

"Well, it's three hundred *dessiatines*, or a bit more," he said after a while.

David wrote down three hundred. Then he asked some more questions about this and that. At each question Karpenko would stop winding the hank and answer in a grave manner. From time to time he stopped his work and put in a word in the young men's conversation.

David left Yakim's house late in the night.

Mother was at home alone spinning, as Khristya had gone to Halka Pivnenko for a chat at the spinning wheel. Father was repairing Petrik's boots near the bench. Both of the children were asleep.

Laying out supper for David, mother said:

"Tikhin's Maria was here twice — early in the evening and just a couple of minutes ago. She asked you to call round at all costs."

"Did she say what for?"

"No. But she insisted you come. She looked alarmed."

So Tikhin must have got back from the farmsteads, David thought. Or maybe he brought some news or the letter. David hurriedly ate up his food and left.

## XVIII

A group of men were standing by the gate of Knish's house across the street from Kozhushny's farmyard. The voice of Yakiv Hnida could be heard in the dark. It looked like the men had come from somewhere and stopped by the gate for a chat. Although it was dark, Yakiv recognized David and stopped talking. He waited till David stepped over the stile into Tikhin's yard, and then resumed talking. David only heard some snatches of the conversation: "...he knows all right which side his bread is buttered"... "let him, that bastard."

The lights in Tikhin's house were on. Although the windows were covered with mats, thin streaks of light shone through the cracks above. The door leading into the entrance hall was not bolted. When David entered the house, Maria made a step toward him and stopped in the middle of the room, excited and seemingly confused. A new rose blouse styled after the latest Obukhivka fashion tightly covered her full breasts. Her hair was plaited into two beautiful braids winding around her head like snakes. Her eyes looked numbly at David: there was an expression of both guilt and joy in them. Then fright flickered in them.

David crossed the threshold, surveyed the room, and rested his gaze on the young woman. Neither of them said a word. Her black eyes beckoned him. Without saying a word the young man put on the cap he had just taken off, unable to tear his eyes off her. Maria took another step toward him. Her eyes were near his face and David felt the hot breath from her open mouth which uttered just one word, passionately and entreatingly:

"David!"

With an effort he jerked his eyes away from hers. He leaned back. All of a sudden he took a step forward, abruptly sat down on the bench and threw back his head. They both remained silent. After a while David wiped his forehead with the palm of his hand, threw the cap on the bench, and asked irritably:

"What is it you want from me, Maria?"

Maria came up to him, quiet and alert, and sat down on the bench beside him. She looked over toward the opposite end of the room in a deep-eyed way.

"Only don't be angry with me, David!" she said, looking entreatingly at him.

"Well, what do you want?"

Maria remained silent for a while. She sighed with a sob, deeply inhaling the air like children do after crying, and started to speak in a quiet, sorrowful voice, looking dejectedly somewhere into a corner.

She had invited him for a chat to ask his advice. She had no relatives with whom she could talk, except her sister. When she had invited him she knew he would think Tikhin had come home. No, Tikhin probably would not come home today. Besides, it's not that late...

"My God, what am I blabbering about? Tikhin won't be back till tomorrow."

Her voice sounded strange to David. Yesterday at the library he had heard that same sorrowful ring in it, although it was so unusual for a woman who was the embodiment of mirth. She stuttered, contradicted herself, left out the most essential things she wanted to say, or broke off her story and remained silent for a long time.

"I'm listening," David would say then. The young woman would start, trying to pick up the thread of her broken story.

"David, I want you to understand me right," she said. "Don't think bad of me." She was excited. "I was thinking..." She hesitated and added with effort, "of leaving Tikhin."

Pause. Her eyes were fixed on David's face, alertly catching the slightest movement in it. David knit his brows. He raised his eyes and asked apprehensively:

"But why?"

Maria remained silent. Suddenly she turned on the young man, her face lit up, she started to speak passionately. There was still a note of sorrow in her voice. She felt entombed in this house. It had not always been so, but that was a long time ago, God knows when. She had the same feeling when she saw David for the first time. Again she hung her head and asked David not to think bad of her for having married Tikhin without loving him.

*Her parents were poor and had died when she was a child. Looking at her no one ever suspected what a hard life she had, for she was always merry, in the street no song would start without her. But no one ever had a bad word to say about her. The boys used*

to follow her in throngs, but her smiles were meant for all of them. With some of them she would stand at the stile for hours on end, but none could boast of ever being invited into her house. They used to roam around the house on moonlit nights, calling her to come, but she would lie down to sleep on the bed and much as she tried to drift off into slumber she did not go out...

One spring some men, Tikhin included, came over from Obukhivka to build a house for her neighbor. That's when they met. On Sundays he joined the boys and girls in the parties. She was as merry as ever, but he behaved as if her charms did not effect him. After that he never saw her laugh in his presence. With the rest she did, although not in the same way as before, but with him never. He was soft spoken, grave, and the things he talked about differed from what she heard from the other boys. He was kind to her. At night she thought a lot about him... Once in early summer when they had finished the house, he came over to see her while she was weeding the garden, and said:

"You know, Maria, I've taken a fancy to you. If you marry me I'll make a match."

That's how they got married. At first they lived at his mother's. It was an agreeable enough life. That summer they moved into their new house. And there she fell to thinking.

Now she lived in it like in a coffin.

She hung her head and quietly swayed it from side to side, as if looking down in sorrow at the torn and wilted hopes lying at her feet. David also looked at the floor and remained silent. Maria raised her head first.

"What am I to do, David?" she asked sorrowfully.

"Well," David said slowly after a pause, "it's hard to tell: another man's soul is as dark as a forest. If you were fed up with something, it'd be a different matter. But as it is you've got to make up your own mind, Maria. There's one thing I would like to say, though. Do you really think that having one's own kids is the only way of being happy? What about those who haven't got any, or those whose children have died? And what about those who never get married? Of course, if, say, all the children in the world died in one night, or all the women became sterile in one night I'd surely shoot myself in the head the next morning. And I wouldn't be the only one. Life would have then lost all its meaning, we would have to come to an abyss into which all our paths



would collapse. But that's not the case today — the world's full of children."

David realized that his words were not much of a comfort to Maria. Her face seemed to be hewn out of stone — not a single feature moved.

"Aren't there cases, Maria," he continued, "when people expect children one year, two years and even more, and then they come."

He even tried to chase away her gloom with a smile, reminding her about the aged Joachim and Anne from the Bible. But immediately he regreted saying this, seeing that she hung her head still lower. His words about all the women becoming sterile in one night still rang in her ears. When he said it he even emphasized the word "all." Did he have her in mind as well?

"I've consulted old women and doctors," Maria said, "and all of them told me I was healthy; it's my husband..."

David remained silent for a while. Then he started talking about Tikhin. She wanted to abandon him just at a time when he was so ill. Had she thought how he would feel left alone with nobody to care for him? Wouldn't it be cruel after two years of happy married life?"

"But am I to blame for it?" she said, clasping her hands in despair. "Tikhin will surely understand that I can't command my heart to do something it'll disobey. I know him well enough: all right, he'll grieve and sulk for a while... He knows my troubles himself. You don't think we'll part as enemies, do you? I'll visit him every morning to heat the house and wash his clothes till he gets well... When he decides to marry again, he'll take himself a widow with a kid."

David looked at her intensely and not without a certain degree of excitement. He guessed right away what she was getting at when she mentioned about visiting Tikhin every morning. Where would she be living in that case? Probably somewhere in the immediate neighborhood. He stood up. Maria grasped his hand and entreated him to stay a little longer. All right, she would drop the subject, and if David wanted it that way, she wouldn't leave Tikhin, but he simply must stay with her for a while yet.

Her eyes were so imploring and hot that color flooded into David's face.

"Well, what do you want?" he shot with anger which was not so much aimed at her as at himself, because he felt himself weakening.

"It's you I want, David," Maria whispered with passion. "All right, I won't leave Tikhin, I'll go on living with him. He won't

ever find out anything. I'll have a child and he'll think it's his. David, my love, I don't want anything but you!" She implored him with all her desire.

"Let me go, Maria!" David freed himself and agitatedly went across the room to the oven and back. Maria quietly followed him. At the oven they met and passed each other by. Suddenly he stopped and turned to her.

"Now listen. If you and I, Maria, were roaming with a herd of cattle, everything would be all right. But we live in a community of people and that's by far a more complicated thing. So let's drop the subject."

But try as he might he could not conceal his feeling toward her. At times it overwhelmed him and, damn it, there was nothing he could do about it. No, it was not lust. When two young, healthy bodies strive to unite, that's natural. But... oh, there were so many buts: man's feelings were more complicated than a herd's. How would Tikhin react?

„Or would you like to make us enemies?" David said. "There is only a handful of us as it is, and we would be snarling at each other like dogs. Besides, is this an end in itself? Yesterday I told you about that..."

"David, would you believe me," she said, making a step toward him, "that if I would feel a child stir under my heart tomorrow, you wouldn't recognize me. But now as I look at this desert of a house my soul becomes a desert as well."

Maria was silent and sorrowful. She stretched out her arms and placed them on the shoulders of the young man. And he placed his hands on hers. But just when her arms slid down his shoulders and then tightly wound round his head and she passionately pressed her whole body — knees and breasts against his so that her hot breath hit his face, he grasped her arms with a jerk, squeezed them in his hands till it hurt and clumsily pushed her away. Maria swayed and fell against the edge of the oven. A moan escaped from her lips — but it was not from pain.

David returned to the bench with broad strides, grabbed his cap and, without putting it on his head or looking around, left the room.

When the door shut with a bang, Maria's gaze rushed after him. It bounced off the closed door and fell to the floor. Her breasts rose and fell with excitement, her blouse was too tight for them. She pulled off the blouse, tearing it at the armpit and carelessly threw it on the bench, from which it slid down to the floor. Her

hands fell helplessly to her lap and she bent her head down to her knees.

When the door squeaked a second time she started. Looking tiredly at the door, an instantenous feeling of unexpected joy colored her face. She remained sitting on the bed, waiting alertly with bated breath.

David came into the room, threw his cap on the bench, and standing aloof said in a calm but gloomy manner:

"Somebody bolted the door from outside, Maria."

She did not say anything in reply. Her face remained immobile, drained of color.

"Well, what can I do? I can't possibly break a window," said David. "I suppose I'll have to stay here till morning. It's a pity I've got nothing to occupy myself with." He reached into his pocket to find something to read, but the pocket was empty, so he decided to go to sleep.

David took off his greatcoat and spread it on the bench in the opposite corner of the room. Maria quietly came up to him, hung his coat on a peg under a crossbeam. Then she took Tikhin's sheepskin from her bed, spread it out on the bench, put a soft pillow at the head, and covered all this with a sheet. Without saying a word she returned to her bed and sat down.

In the meanwhile David had spotted a book. He reached out for it and saw that it was his *Land Code* which he had given Tikhin to read. Although David had read it over and over again, he took it and lay down on the bench. After a while he got up, pulled off his boots, moved the kerosene lamp closer to the edge of the table, and lay down again to read without undressing.

"You better go to sleep, Maria. It's late," he said, propping himself up on his elbow.

His voice comforted her and she sighed. She got up, went over to the hearth to stir the leavened dough in a bowl, returned to her bed again, and put her arms on a chest standing nearby, and rested her head on her arms.

She remained in this posture for a long time, thinking all through the lonely night about her happiness, outwardly so simple and plain, which seemed so near that she expected it to come any minute. She also thought about Tikhin. He stood before her eyes — haggard, gloomy, unloved. One of his hands was pressed to his chest as he broke into a long cough, spitting up blood and looking at her with painful eyes. Today for the first time she felt no pity for him. The thought struck her suddenly, it had crept up to her

from behind and a voice whispered in her ear — the woman started and recoiled.

It was silent in the house. David was no longer rustling the leaves of his book.

Maria went up to him — he was asleep. She took the book from his chest, put it on the table, and looked for a long time on his manly face, handsome and serene in sleep. She turned out the lamp, went to her bed, which was uncrumpled and covered with a snow-white sheet specially spread for tonight, and quietly lay down.

...In the morning voices roused David from sleep. It was already dawning. By the trough Maria was kneading dough, and a woman — the table hid her from David's view — said excitedly:

"At least wake him up while it's early, so less people see him and waggle their tongues."

"Let them gossip," Maria said, "it's all the same to me. Do you really think, Kilina, anything happened between us? Absolutely nothing!"

David could see the woman now: she had stepped aside and shook her head in disbelief behind Maria's back.

"Why should I think otherwise?" she said in mock surprise, and hurried to leave. "Oh, it's late. Give me your sieve, I must run."

Maria gave her the sieve. The woman hurriedly left the house.

David sat up on the bench.

"So the broadcast has been turned on?" he said with a smile. Maria smiled faintly and gave him a long tired look. Her face was pale after the night during which she had probably not caught a wink of sleep.

## XIX

The same day the whole of Obukhivka was astir with the news: "That night David and Maria had been caught at it." The women gossiped about it by the draw well or with their neighbors across the stile.

Transmitted from mouth to ear, the incident gained in flesh and color in the wild imagination of the women. Soon they were joined by the men. Unlike the women they did not savor the details, but discussed the incident in its essential details. Quite a few wise male maxims were voiced by both bearded old-timers and raw youths.

Toward evening a group of men had gathered at the coop store



to discuss serious things. Their conversation broke off abruptly when they saw Tikhin coming around the corner of the school and walking down the street with ax in hand.

When he came up to the men, he greeted everyone. Some of the men returned the greeting, others did not. Hnida shouted with a malicious grin on his face:

"Hey, you better hurry up! You'll be just in time for the second course!"

The men burst out laughing, and young Knish added:

"Maybe the pot's still boiling!"

Again there was laughter.

Tikhin turned round — they all looked his way and roared with laughter. Have they gone all mad, or are they drunk? he thought. A look of hatred flashed across his face.

"How do you think Tikhin will take it?" someone from the crowd remarked.

This was just what Hnida had been waiting for.

"Don't you know what's Tikhin really like?" he said in a grave and assured manner. "It's only outwardly that he's so calm and submissive, but just try and provoke him. No wonder they say that still waters have deep bottoms. You can call me a liar if there won't be some drama between those two. See him going with that ax? Do you think he won't crack his rival's skull with it some day? Believe me, jealousy can turn a man wild!"

"Of course," somebody said. "After all it happened once already in Shcherbanivka when a husband hacked down his wife and her lover when he caught them!"

"That's it! You'll see!"

...On his way Tikhin passed Pivnenko who was repairing his gate.

"You back from the farmsteads?" Pivnenko called out to Tikhin.

"Yes."

"How are the farmsteaders there?"

Pivnenko put aside his saw and took out his tobacco pouch to have a smoke. Tikhin came up to him, drove his ax into a chopping block, treated himself to Pivnenko's tobacco, and started relating:

"Not all the farmsteaders are of the same opinion: the *kurkuls* — well, we know what they think so no use talking about them. Ohir's holding meetings at his home every day. With the poor farmers it all depends where their plots are. Those who've got their fields nearby won't even listen. Some of them have agreed to go along, though. Yesterday night I talked with them and set their minds at ease: they thought the Obukhivka peasants wanted to occupy the land right around the farmsteads. There are also those who wouldn't mind going to the new settlement."

"Looks like it'll be a tricky business," Pivnenko said downcast. "Small wonder, Tikhin, with so much power against us!"

"Their power — that's where it is!" Kozhushny said and slapped his side pocket in a lusty way, looking slyly at his friend with half-lidded eyes. "Do you think that because they hold power they can't be brought to account? No, brother! Soviet power is ours and it's just!"

Tikhin asked whether Pivnenko had seen David.

Pivnenko mumbled something in response and then said that he had not seen David today, so he must be at home. The man's behavior seemed strange to Tikhin. Pivnenko felt ill at ease, and looked away.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh nothing... you'll find out yourself."

Tikhin looked intently at him and began to worry.

"Andriy, tell me what's happened?"

The man hesitated, now looking at Tikhin, now turning away. Finally he said with effort:

"You see, they're gossiping throughout the village that David and Maria were caught at it last night in your house or something of that sort."

Tikhin started. He raised his haggard face, his brows dropped over his immobile eyes, and he stood there struck dumb. The cigarette in his hand still burned — he raised it to his mouth and deeply inhaled the smoke once, then again, singeing his mustache. Then he threw the cigarette away — it hissed on the frozen ground. All at once he broke into a long wheezing cough, spitting up blood, and went away without saying a word.

"You forgot to take your ax!" Pivnenko shouted after him.

Pivnenko grabbed the ax and took it out into the street. Tikhin did not take it under the arm nor did he swing it up on his shoulder. He carried the ax by the handle. When he passed Motuzka's yard, he did not even cast a glance in its direction.

Tikhin's yard was empty when he stepped over the stile. It was dark inside the house. In the sty the suckling pig was squeaking and through the open door leading into the stable he heard Maria admonish the horse in a rough, kind way.

"Whoa! Take it easy! You'll have your share, you rascal," she said, slapping the horse on the neck.

Tikhin became grim. Her voice, so dear and close to him, cut him to the quick. She stood big as life in his mind's eye, looking at him from the pillow with love and a slight trace of shame. "Oh, you're so...!" — and she snuggled to him and buried her face in his chest. Something snapped inside Tikhin and seemed to fall into an abyss; her face with its gentle eyes and he himself seemed to be sliding down into this abyss. The man who had just crossed the yard and entered the house and stopped rooted to the ground — that was not really him.

He threw his ax under the bench and stood motionless in his sleeveless jacket and cap in the middle of the room. He went to the bed with a heavy tread as if measuring the room, then his eyes fell on the pillow and he turned away. He went to the table and stood over it with head lowered for a long time. Then he sat down on the bench and clasped his head, which seemed to be splitting from deep thoughts and pain.

He did not know how long he stayed in that position. His whole life passed before his eyes — the time, some years ago, when he was building the house at the farmsteads and met Maria for the first time, whitewashing their new house, his happy meeting with David. Recollections of his youth floated up in his mind: his days as a drover at the manor, the time he had been with the partisans in the woods... What dreams they had nourished then! Now Tikhin had a new house, but he had made up his mind to abandon it and join David and the other Oubkhivka peasants in organizing a coop at the new settlement round the Hanivka manor. He recalled one of his fellow villagers remarking to the effect: "A coop you say — all right, so some will be sweating, while others will be playing the boss, living off the fat of the land and ruining women." Who would have ever thought then... He recalled the letter in his pocket and the newspaper he had brought. With what joy had he carried it home, checking from time to time whether he had not lost it on his way. And now it was no more than cigarette paper. He remembered Maria begging him to drop smoking because he was so ill... Now she would not say that again. Oh, what a life! Why doesn't it choke him to death! He again broke into a long, painful caught. Then he raised his head.

Now it was completely dark in the room. He heard feet shuffling across the frozen earth under the window. The door of the entrance hall slammed, then the door into the room squeaked. Maria entered. She took a mug standing on the bench near the sloptub, washed her hands, then she turned, took a rag from a nail, and quietly started wiping her hands. Evidently she had not seen Tikhin. She hung the rag back on the nail, heaved a sigh and turned round.

"Oh, who's that?" she said, frightened, and took a step forward, looking at the figure sitting in the dusk of the room.

"Is that you, Tikhin?"

Tikhin heard her breath quicken. Suddenly she turned round, remembering that she had to put on the light. She looked for the matches on the cornice, but could not find them, although Tikhin heard the matchbox rattle under her fingers. No need, Tikhin thought, there's enough light for her to prepare the slops for the pig.

In the dark Maria poured the slops into a pail and carried it to the sty. The restrained excitement in her voice still rang in his ears. He imagined what her face had looked like at that moment: it probably had an embarrassed and blushing expression since she had been afraid to put on the light. Tikhin again bent



his head. A while later the door squeaked and the pail handle clanked near the sloptub.

Maria went to the oven and took the matchbox from the cornice. Then she brought the kerosene lamp to the table. Looking at her keenly, Tikhin asked:

"You need the matches, or have you already found them? Where were they?"

"In the ingle. I must have left them there after stoking the oven."

Presently she struck a match — it lit up her face, set in a fixed expression. Tikhin's lips twisted into a contemptuous smile and he got up. He took off his jacket and threw it on the bench together with his cap. He sat down on a stool near the bench without asking her anything.

Maria had noticed the change in his behavior immediately. So somebody must have told him, she thought. She realized that she had to break the news somehow, but did not know how. He sat there for a long time, but she still remained silent. She would tell him right now. But no, she felt she would stutter, that it would not come out as it should. She was not sure whether she should say it jokingly or seriously. Why didn't she blurt it out before she went to the sty while it was still dark in the room? Maybe he was tired after the journey, or there was some bad news from the farmsteads?

The silence oppressed her and she spoke just for the sake of saying something:

"Did you finish the cattle shed at my sister's?"

"Yes," Tikhin replied grimly after a pause. Just before saying this he was thinking furiously: she must be enjoying the whole affair. She'd probably be glad to get rid of her husband altogether! He rolled himself a cigarette and lit up, deeply inhaling the strong shag smoke. He coughed and wheezed, spitting up blood from pain and rage. When Maria proposed that he eat something he refused, and he did not want to wash his hair either today. Maria gave him a quizzical look, shrugging her shoulders in feigned surprise as if she did not know what was wrong.

"You've never been like this before!"

"Yes, never," he said and threw away his cigarette, relapsing into silence again. After a while he said:

"Make the bed, I'm tired."

Maria hurried from the oven and made the bed for two as usual. So maybe after all he hadn't found out anything, she thought joy-

fully. Or maybe he was simply tired. Without undressing Tikhin lay down on the edge of the bed. He put one hand under his head and with the palm of the other covered his face.

Maria fussed around the house for a long time. She beat up the dough in the bowl and busied herself around the oven. She did without supper that evening as well and also decided not to wash her hair.

She was still alarmed, but somewhere deep in her heart there was a spark of joy. Throughout the whole day after David left he had been constantly on her mind. He stood before her as large as life, so dear and lovable. And in his eyes — didn't she see herself what was in his eyes? When she had put her arms around his head, he had grasped her hands and trembled all over, yearning for her. Oh yes, she knew why he did not take her. The words he had said the night before still rang in her ears: "If you and I, Maria, were roaming with a herd of cattle, everything would be all right." She hoped and longed for him to smother her in his embrace, but instead: "...we live in a community of people and that's by far a more complicated thing." Now she knew it was all because of Tikhin. For the first time that night she thought about her sick husband without any sense of pity. She even hoped that all the sooner he would... Today she had thought about Tikhin again, waiting with alarm for him to return and not knowing how she would meet him. Maybe he would appear before her eyes, quiet and emaciated, with sunken eyes and a wheeze in his chest, and she would feel pity for him. Throughout the day she had a strange feeling of pity and indifference. When she went to bring some straw and looked at the scattered pile she again thought about Tikhin. In the stable when she gently slapped the horse on the neck the thought suddenly struck her: Who'll hitch you to the plow when Tikhin... She did not finish the thought and sighed. From behind the horse's head, in the dark of the stable, she seemed to hear the familiar "Whoa!" uttered by the voice she loved so much, and she seemed to see the dear face of the new master holding the reins in his hands. Her excitement did not abate as she waited alarmedly for her husband, nor did it leave her when she entered the house. But now it had gone. Nothing stirred within her as she looked at him lying on the bed. She wished he would die like that. And only deep, very deep inside did she feel pity.

Some time passed before Tikhin heard her go out into the entrance hall and bolt the door. He waited quietly with closed eyes in a state of unrest. She came up to the bed, threw some

bedding at his feet, blew out the lamp, and lay down across the bed at his feet. Again he felt a pluck in his heart. So it's true, he thought.

Maria seemed to have fallen asleep. It was already midnight or close to dawn — Tikhin did not know. He groped for his tobacco pouch in the dark, rolled himself a cigarette and smoked and thought. When he threw the stub on the floor the thought shot through his head: I'm just like that stub fading away with my battered liver! Nobody needs me anymore, neither friend nor wife... well, let it be! He felt a strange apathy. And tiredness enveloped him like a warm blanket.

Maria must have uncovered herself in her sleep, he thought.

He got up in the dark, looking at the white figure of Maria lying at his feet. He was not angry with her any more. There was an unusual calm in his soul. After a while he asked her gently:

"Maria, why did you lie down there?"

She did not respond, although he was aware she was not asleep. Or had she fallen asleep after all? He moved toward her on his hands and knees and passed the palm of his hand across her face. He felt her eyebrows jerk under his palm. She sat up and drew back abruptly with undisguised loathing.

"Don't you dare touch me! Get away!"

Color flooded Tikhin's face. He felt a sharp pain in his chest reminding him of his illness. After a short pause he leaned close to her with a face contorted from pain, and said through set teeth:

"Oh, you...! I wouldn't even think of touching you!"

Maria recoiled at such abuse which she had never heard from him before. She breathed rapidly and heavily, looking bewildered into the dark of the room. The large black hollows of Tikhin's sunken eyes drew nearer.

"Do you think I don't know anything? You're wrong, girl, I know everything!"

Maria drew back even more and said hoarsely:

"What do you know?"

"Everything!"

There was a pause.

"All right, then, know if you please," she said as if throwing down a challenge, and afraid he would hit her she drew back. She was almost lying on her back now. Tikhin was very close to her. Although it was dark, he could see every feature in her tense face which was so remote and yet so familiar to him. Something snapped in his chest, as if a dike had been breached, a feeling he had never

known before: the feeling of a man who was betrayed and rejected. Repulsive as this feeling was, Tikhin could not do anything about it. He had already grabbed her by the shoulder and said:

"Lie down here, since you are what you are...!"

Maria freed herself and hit him in the face. She wanted to jump from the bed when his hand seized hers, and with the other hand he hit her in the chest so hard it took her breath away, he hit her again... and when she fell to the floor, again and again.

He did not even realize she had fallen on the floor. He sat stupefied on the bed, his clothes in disarray, breathing heavily, his head bent low. From outside came a song — a group of young people passed the house. The song died away as they turned around the corner. Then it was silent. In the dark something white with loose hair was writhing on the floor and whimpering.

## XX

No sooner had the first rays of sunlight proclaimed the advent of dawn, when everyone was on their feet in Motuzka's house. Father, already dressed, carefully shoved a little package wrapped in paper in the side pocket of his jacket.

"Hide it as best you can," Khristya said, "for nowadays the markets are visited by smooth operators from the city, who are such artists, that you don't even feel them picking you clean."

"They won't pick me clean," father said with confidence, but nonetheless checked whether the money was hidden safely enough in his pocket. He pulled a coat over his jacket and tightly girded himself with a belt. Then he threw an old hood around his neck, into which mother put a slice of bread wrapped in a clean cloth. She wanted to say something, but hesitated. At long last she ventured to suggest:

"If there's any money left, buy at least something to make a blouse for Khristya. She's a girl after all."

"Oh, mother, let's hope the money'll be enough to buy a horse," Khristya said and blushed, although her eyes betrayed how much she longed for a vivid piece of fine material for a blouse like the one Halka Pivnenko had bought herself at the coop store not so long ago.

"Let's put it off for the time being, until we are standing firmer on our feet," father said.

He took a little whip and left the house. Everyone went to see him off, even the little children who were barefoot and had not yet dressed.

"Oh, my God! Where do you think you're going barefoot?" mother said sternly. But then she thought it a good thing that the children should see their father off, and added kindly, "At least pull on your boots!"

Dokiya ran back into the house, but Petrik, after a quick "all right," hopped and skipped barefoot across the frost-covered ground to the enclosure.

In the enclosure father had tied a rope around the horns of the heifer and let it out. At the well the sweep creaked as David drew up a bucketful of cold water. The heifer drank some of it. Mother came up to the heifer and gently stroked its back. She had fed and looked after it for two years, happy at the prospect of seeing it grow into a cow some day...

"Now, don't you sell it to a butcher. Better to a farmer, and remind him it's from manor stock, a German purebred."

"I'll sell it to anyone who'll buy it," father said. "Come on, get along!" He cracked his whip and led the heifer out of the yard. Mother followed him into the street which was frozen hard and rutted.

"How will it reach Shcherbanivka," she said, shaking her head. "It's never made such a long journey..."

When she returned into the house, Khristya was already stoking the oven. Mother started to prepare everything to make *borshch*. David sat at the end of the table and pored over some books, writing out figures and making notes on a scrap of paper (today, at the library, he had to read a lecture on the international situation). For him this was a very serious affair. If he succeeded to interest his listeners right from the start, a half of the job would be done. That is why he was so engrossed in his work. Only when it became light in the room and the lamp was turned out did he change his position and sat closer to the window, burying himself in his work as before.

When the room was thoroughly warm, his mother said:

"All right, David, you might as well make a break. I wonder how your head doesn't ache from reading so much. What if we have something to eat right now."

"That's all right by me."

Everyone was at home, for their "godless" family did not go to church. Only at Lent mother fasted and urged Dokiya to do the

same. But father and the elder children disapproved of this, and even little Petrik would remark, "Those churches are only making people stupid." Mother would shake her head and admonish him kindly, "It's God Almighty who really knows." In the corner, just as thirty years ago, hung the icons, of the Savior and the Virgin Mary. They had darkened and become dim from time, and their sorrowful faces stood out with their pale features. If all the minutes, when she prayed before the icons with wearied hands clasped in submission, were added together they would amount to a whole year in the fifty years of her life. And what had the icons given her. In the end the children dismissed their mercy and chose their own path in life; so now when the old woman prayed it was not so much to God as to the expired pains, anguish, and hopes of the past, for which she had shed her tears on these blackened wooden panels during late evenings and early mornings throughout the years. Probably that was why the images looked so dear and sorrowful to her.

When they sat down at the table, people were just coming back from church. There was a while yet before they would be gathering at the library. David got up and prepared to leave. He had to see Tikhin before going to the library. Khristya was also in a hurry, saying she had to see her friends. They both left the house.

## XXI

When David entered Kozhushny's farmyard, what he saw and heard seemed strange — in the sty the pig was squeaking loudly, from behind the enclosure the cow looked at him over the gate with melancholy eyes, then it stretched out its neck and mooed. It had either not been fed or watered. The door of the entrance hall was open wide and the door leading into the room was ajar.

David opened the door — in the middle of the room stood Tikhin. To David's greeting he mumbled something incoherently, which sounded like an echo to David's voice. Then he took his cap from the bench and made for the door, passing by David without looking at him. Surprised, David seized his hand and stopped him. Tikhin did not attempt to free himself.

"What's the matter with you, Tikhin?"

Tikhin looked grimly at his friend and turned his eyes away. David gazed at him: he was pale and his eyes had sunk still deeper. There was no one in the room except them. A guess flashed across

David's mind. When he surveyed the room and saw the bedding scattered about, he had no doubt as to what had happened.

"Have you gone mad, Tikhin?" he said with alarm. "You beat Maria, didn't you?"

Tikhin looked sharply at David with grim eyes burning with hatred.

"So what?"

David sadly shook his head. Tikhin then freed his hand and made for the door.

"How could you believe in such lies?" David spoke passionately after him.

Tikhin stopped at the threshold and stared at him sullenly. David took a step toward him and began speaking. He had never suspected Tikhin to be so gullible: one piece of meaningless gossip and he lost his senses. All right, some bastard bolted the door from outside, so what? Wasn't David Tikhin's friend and didn't his word mean anything to Tikhin?

"So listen now what I have to tell you, Tikhin," David said. "She spent the whole night on the bed and I over there on the bench. I didn't even think of touching her."

Tikhin's eyes remained on David's face. It was hard to tell whether he had heard anything or not, for he was all eyes, greedily taking in every movement of David's face and mouth, as David's sincere and slightly reproachful look penetrated Tikhin right to his heart. It missed a beat and his first feeling was joy, as if he had suddenly met a lost friend who had brought him the news about his missing wife who was safe and sound and still loved him.

All at once Tikhin's face twitched and then froze in an expression of utter grief.

"Oh my God, what have I done?" he said with a moan.

Why hadn't David told him this yesterday evening, where had he been? When he and Maria were alone in this room Satan must have sneaked up to her from behind and whispered in her ear.

"But didn't Maria tell you everything, you must not have believed her?" David said.

Tikhin recalled the Maria of yesterday. He cast one more suspicious look at his friend. No, David was not lying. Those who lied or concealed something could not look so sincere. And Tikhin told David everything that had happened the previous evening.

At first — oh well, in itself it was nothing — she looked for the matches on the cornice to light the lamp, but did not find them. Yet he heard the matchbox rattle as her hand brushed against it,

which meant that she did not want to light the lamp. Why was she behaving in such a strange manner? Tikhin lapsed into a sullen silence. David tried to set his mind at rest: maybe she was too excited to tell him the truth, and that's all.

"And you beat her, Tikhin, didn't you? Where is she now?"

Tikhin said he did not know, and hung his head. He had beaten her up mercilessly. She had fallen on the floor, and then — he did not remember what happened then. He still thought it was a nightmare with him sitting there on the bed and her writhing and moaning on the floor. When she woke up, or where she had disappeared to he did not know. She must have left while he was sitting at the table with his head in his hands. When he raised his head, she was gone. Up to now he had not left the house, although he could hear the cow mooing from hunger and thirst.

"Tikhin, you simply must find out what happened to her?"

"I'll go and ask her to forgive me!" Tikhin said. "How could I have lost my senses like that? She probably went to her sister. I only hope she is there. I'll go and tell her everything, and I must do that today."

"Well, how are things at the farmsteads?" David asked after a pause. For some time Tikhin remained staring blankly into space; David's voice had put him back on earth, but his thoughts were still elsewhere. It was with an effort that he turned his eyes to his friend. Gradually his face lit up and a smile stirred under his small fair mustache.

"Everything's all right at the farmsteads, David! I brought you a present from there."

He unbuttoned his jacket and from the side pocket pulled out a "registration card" for the stolen horse and a little scrap of paper folded in four. He gave it to David, looking at him keenly, his eyes narrowed. The paper was the letter Kushnirenko had sent from prison.

David's eyes greedily read every word of it. At first his face was grim, but eventually he lit up.

"Tikhin, do you realize what you have brought?"

Tikhin smiled, intentionally keeping silent.

"That's their end, brother! Here's the thread leading to the whole hank: the letter talks about the death of the inspector of finance, about the horses... Only Kushnirenko's name is missing — Ilko probably smoked it away. As far as that's concerned, brother, we've got a scientific commission of experts. They'll decipher who's written the letter."



"I told Ilko not to breathe a word," Tikhin said with mysterious air.

"That's the only way it can be."

David carefully hid the letter in the inside pocket of his greatcoat.

"The day is ours now, Tikhin!" he said merrily, slapping him on the back.

Before going to the library they decided to feed the cattle. Tikhin took a newspaper out of his pocket, which he had brought with him from the farmsteads.

"By the way, what date did it come out?" David asked, looking at the front page.

"You're not looking where you should. Better take a look at the 'Country Life' page."

David turned the page and instantly blushed with surprise and joy: the newspaper carried his first article he had sent in Shcherbanivka. It was a short feature about out-of-the-way Obukhivka, about the mill which Matyukha and his gang had appropriated from the CPP, and about the drinking sprees of the chairman. Every word of the story had been printed. David hurriedly read it from beginning to end and looked at his friend with an expression of happiness on his face.

"Today we'll read it out aloud at the library!" he said cheerfully. "Let everybody know that we're not living in the jungle but in a Soviet Republic!"

Tikhin broke out coughing just at that moment, which was probably why he said nothing in response.

They fed the cow. When they were about to leave, the pig started squeaking. Tikhin returned to the house and brought the pig the slops he had forgotten about. At the well he washed his hands and joined David who was already in the street. At the sight of him David started to laugh, and when Tikhin drew nearer he said merrily:

"Tikhin, your mug's covered with slops. I wonder what you'd look like after feeding more than one suckling pig?"

"Slops on my face, you don't say?" Tikhin wiped his face with the flap of his jacket and sighed, remarking dispiritedly:

"Under such circumstances as I find myself I might just as well have covered my mug with dough!"

On their way to the library they remained silent.

## XXII

A whole crowd, mostly young people, had gathered around the library. The girls were in their holiday best, and under their flowery kerchiefs their faces were poppy-red from the frost. The boys had quiffs of hair stuck out cockishly from under their caps. Noise, laughter, voices... And above all this — the crackling of sunflower seeds, which sounded like the chirr of grasshoppers. The husks were falling on the ground like white blossoms.

Near the porch a group of bearded old men had gathered, listening to Hordiy. When the latter saw David and Tikhin approach, he first gave them a long searching look and then cheered up.

"Well, David, you might well see the walls being shoved aside! The house is full!"

Someone from the crowd jokingly warned Hordiy:

"Don't you scare the man, Hordiy. They only finished repairing the house yesterday and already you want to see its walls being shoved aside. They might topple, you know!"

"Those over there also wished to be present tonight," said the younger Pivnenko quietly and gravely, nodding in the direction of the porch where Yakiv Hnida, Knish, the storekeeper and others of their company were sitting on a bench. There was also Tyahnir-yadno standing on the porch with a large crutch-stick in his hand. Only Matyukha was missing.

"Well, if they've come, let them listen," David said, "the more so since some of them will have something to hear!"

"What is it?"

"There's something in the *Voice of Labor*, which concerns them," Tikhin replied.

The peasants wanted to know more about it, but David said he would read out aloud the article in the library. At this the men started to puff at their cigarettes with greater intensity and, following David and Chumak, flocked into the library.

Yakiv Hnida, shaking the sunflower seed husks off his lapel, seeing them go, said with a crooked smile:

"There goes the educator!"

But deep inside he was puzzled and indeed alarmed at seeing David and Tikhin together as if nothing had happened between them. So the trick with the woman did not work. What would become of his scheme now? With these thoughts he got up and followed Knish, Tyahnir-yadno and the rest into the house. He had

heard that they were going to read aloud some wall newspaper, so he had to be present to break up the meeting if need be.

The house was not as crowded as Hordiy had said. He had simply underestimated its capacity: it could hold twice as many people if the small groups of men and women could be brought closer together. Just as outside the husks of sunflower seeds were flying left and right. The room was filled with dense tobacco smoke and noise. David was pleasantly surprised to see older men and women. Although there were a few of them, but this was the first time they had ever come.

At the end of a bench Khristya and Zinka were sitting with Pivnenko's daughter-in-law, Andriy's wife, and the widow Ivha.

When the men entered, Pivnenko smiled in their direction.

"Are you by any chance heading this way to chase us women out?"

"Oh no, such beauties as you are always welcome!" one of the men rejoined merrily. And Hordiy said gravely to the women:

"Now mind you, you haven't come here to wag your tongues and gape. Maybe there'll be some voting to do, so you watch out!"

"You don't say!"

David's eyes fell on Zinka. He greeted her with a smile and she returned his greeting with bright eyes which instantly acquired a look of sadness.

David surveyed the room once more. There on another bench he saw Karpenko's old wife sitting with the other women. The girls in between them looked like flowers among ripe stalks. They wore colorful kerchiefs, and some had red ribbons. It was noisy in the room, from time to time a girl would break out giggling or laughing, and over all this din, just like outside the library, there was a crackling of sunflower seed husks, sounding like the chirr of grasshoppers.

By the wall, on a bench side by side with Nyurka who was dressed and made up in "full fashion," there sat... David could not believe his eyes. Yes, it was Maria. She wore a checkered kerchief, probably her sister's, as he had never seen her wearing it before. A bit pallid and hollow-eyed, she was unnaturally merry and lively talking with Lukiya and Nyurka. Her eyes were turned to the door all the time. Probably they had followed David from the moment he came in. It was only now that he saw her eyes. There was something in them that made him turn away.

He sat down at the end of an empty bench, followed by Hordiy, Pivnenko and the other men. Tikhin sat down at his side. Hnida

came down the passage near the wall and sat on the windowsill near the table. He reached into his pocket, brought out a handful of sunflower seeds and began eating them. Knish took his seat on the front bench where Pasha, Hanna Ivanivna and some other local intellectuals were engaged in lively conversation. Not far from Hnida, Tyahniryadno, a clumsy fellow almost as tall as the ceiling, leaned against the wall, holding the crutch-stick in his hand. Young people kept pouring noisily through the door. Noise and hilarity. The children weaved through the crowd under the arms of the grownups toward the front of the room and some of them pushed right up to the table.

Hnida snarled at them. They were about to scamper away when the resolute voice of Hordiy said from the back of the room:

"Leave the kids alone! Sit down, boys!"

Yakim came in from the other room, carrying a large sheet of paper and put it on the table. A corner of the sheet hung down from the table, revealing something drawn and written on it. "It's the newspaper," the whisper spread through the room. The small boys turned their faces toward the table.

"What's that supposed to be?" some of them asked.

"Don't you see?" Petrik Motuzka said. "It's a rising sun. Our lot made that newspaper."

Yakim solemnly asked the choristers to step forward. The boys and girls came out of the little corridor, and winding through the crowd formed a half-circle behind the table. More people came pouring in from outside.

David leaned toward Tikhin and whispered something in his ear. Tikhin abruptly turned his head and, looking around the room over the heads, he spotted her. He looked in her direction for a long time. She was talking with her woman neighbors and laughing. It sounded unnatural, but still it was laughter and she had come... Their eyes met, and it was hatred that flashed back at him. Tikhin turned away and looked down at his boots. Everything that happened after that he saw and heard through a haze. Only when the choir struck up the "Internationale" and everyone around him stood up, did Tikhin rise. That instant his eyes fell on Yakiv. What a bastard: he did not even get up from the windowsill and did not take off his cap! When the choir stopped singing and everyone sat down, Yakim began speaking about something. Again Tikhin started when someone shouted from the front benches:

"Yakiv Hnida!" That was Knish hurrying to name his candidate to the presidium.

Yakim wrote down the name. Hnida looked at the meeting from the corner of his eye, knowing too well that he would be outvoted, since there were only a few of his supporters in the room. So he withdrew his candidature.

"I don't want to be there, this meeting seems suspicious enough to me as it is!"

Yakim crossed out his name with immense satisfaction.

Other candidates were named: Hordiy Chumak, David Motuzka, Kozhushny. A girl from the choir proposed:

"Ivha Sirenko!"

There was a commotion in the back of the room. Everyone turned round smiling. Hnida's face broke into a grin and Tyahniryadno roared with laughter. Embarrassed, Ivha remained seated on her bench and said:

"What's all that? A woman can't even come to a meeting without somebody making fun of her." And turning to the choir, from where the proposal of her candidature came, she added, "You should be ashamed of yourself!"

Zinka stepped forward and, blushing a bit, said to Ivha:

"Believe me, I didn't mean to make fun of you!"

"Come on, Ivha, it's all equality now!" Hnida said, baring his teeth in a grin. "These days husbands don't even have the right to beat their wives!"

One of the women tried to persuade her that nothing terrible would happen if she sat on the presidium.

"Go there yourself if you're so smart!" Ivha snapped back.

"Make it Khimka Pivnenko," one of the men shouted, "cause there'll be no end to this fuss!"

Other candidates were proposed, although everyone thought that since three people were to sit on the presidium the first three candidates named would be elected, as this had always been the rule in Obukhivka. But this time, however, Chumak and David were elected, while Kozhushny was defeated, because too many wanted to see Khimka Pivnenko on the presidium. Khristya and Zinka had done some good campaigning in the choir on his behalf. The presidium took their places.

The chairman of the meeting — Hordiy — announced the agenda: report by David Motuzka on the international situation and reading aloud the wall newspaper and the *Voice of Labor*.

Then he surveyed the meeting and said:

"Now let's drop the sunflower seeds for the time being: otherwise no one will hear the speaker."

Some were reluctant, others stopped husking. Even Yakiv Hnida shook the husks off his lap, as if to show that the chairman's words were law, as far as he was concerned. But then he demonstratively reached into his pocket and brought out a handful of seeds, which he gave to Tyahniryadno, and another handful for himself. He poured the seeds from hand to hand, blowing over them to sift them, and began cracking them again, but this time more persistently and defiantly.

Hordiy became grim but merely remarked that those who were less conscious politically could go on husking. He also asked people to stop smoking. Then he gave a nod to David who rose and looked enthusiastically round the hall at the faces of the young and old villagers and at the children by the table.

He started with a few words about the library — what it was for and what should be done in it. Then he went over to the international situation and home events. He spoke distinctly and slowly enough for everyone to hear, his words interspersed with colorful figures of speech. He tried to avoid foreign words, and if he came across something like "Tories" or "budget" he explained carefully what it meant.

He dwelt in length on the economic life of the country and the rising production in industry and agriculture, citing figures to compare prewar production with 1921. The large sums, like millions, for instance, he transferred into concrete images which everyone would understand. Say, if so many million tons of grain were harvested, they would fill so many freight cars, and if divided per capita it would come out to such and such an amount...

Everyone listened attentively and gradually forgot about the sunflower seeds which their pockets were stuffed with. Although the images of those hostile Britains and Americas were a little hazy to the peasants, they made them feel a bit more assured: so the bourgeoisie was at odds with each other! Not so long ago the only thing they could speak about was war. The peasants' confidence grew: if David was telling the truth, things weren't that bad after all. Also, they remembered that the tax in kind had been reduced recently, and some did not pay it at all. They looked at David with a new trust and listened to him with greater attention. Maybe it was really true that the prices on fabrics would drop and that there was a special fund for poor peasants who wanted to resettle.

When David finished he was showered with questions. The peasants were interested in the life of the whole country as well as of their Obukhivka. They asked why fabrics were so expensive

and how the workers lived in the towns. Perhaps he could tell them something, as he had been in various towns?

David answered all the questions in detail. He answered the last one, and felt a little tired and drank some water. Then he glanced down at the newspaper lying on the table and said:

"Now that we have had a broader look at what is taking place in the whole country and seen how it is developing and what a happy life is in the making, let us take a closer look at the way we live and whether we live as we should. Obukhivka is one in a million of particles which make up the whole Republic and the life of Obukhivka must be our life too, and vice versa. This newspaper here was put together by our boys. In it we have tried to show our life as it actually is — both the good and the bad sides, and it has some thoughts and suggestions on how to make it better."

Everyone in the room quietened down. The children by the table listened with eyes wide open and even Hnida stopped husking sunflower seeds.

The first article David read — "What is to be Done with the Land?" — briefly presented a suggestion of how to solve the most burning question in Obukhivka — unregulated land use. The peasants were all ears: everything the article dealt with was written to the point — the locations of the plots were correctly indicated and the plan for a new division of land was sound. In fact, it was exactly what they wished for, but... Many dismissed the plan as hopeless. They had already tried, and nothing came of it... Take Tikhin who was trying to get a plot; he'd probably only get it in the world to come... All this the peasants discussed under their breath, so as not to interfere with David's reading. Then there were some articles about the forests and about the coop store.

At the word "coop store" Hnida started and pricked up his ears. Actually, the article was not about any particular coop store, but generally about some coop store which happened to stand in a square opposite a private store with green doors. At this Hnida and Hubarenko exchanged glances. Further on there was the part about the stinking herrings.

The room burst out laughing — everyone got the message. Hnida jumped down from the windowsill like a scalded cat.

"What's that joke all about?" he said, making for the table. Chumak got up.

"We're not making fun of anyone in particular. If our coop store never sold stinking herrings, what's there to get so excited

about? Maybe it happened somewhere else, where a certain coop manager is a close relative of the storekeeper or a godfather to his child."

The room exploded into a still louder laughter, realizing what Hordiy was getting at: that autumn Hnida had godfathered Hubarenko's child. Both men turned brick-red in the face. Yakiv wanted to tear the newspaper to pieces, but Hordiy blocked his way. Tyahniryadno made for the table. Then Tikhin Kozhushny, grim and resolute, got up from his bench and moved closer, Pivnenko took up a position by the wall, and some other men prepared to interfere. David looked piercingly at Hnida and said:

"Take it easy, Hnida! We're only talking about stinking herrings! Soon I'll read something far more interesting for you in the *Voice of Labor*. But let me finish reading the wall newspaper first."

These words had the effect of a cold shower: Hnida immediately calmed down and withdrew to his window.

"All right, go ahead," he said grinning, regaining his composure, although he was far from happy. When David read about some girls who went to old Upirka to have their fortunes told and stole fabrics from their mothers to pay the fortune teller with, Yakiv beckoned his brother Filka and whispered something in his ear. The boy immediately pushed through the crowd toward the door, soon after which a hoarse woman's voice shouted from the back of the room:

"That's outrageous! I'll go to law!" It was Nyurka coming to the defense of her grandmother.

"But it's all true," someone rejoined. "You're the one who should be brought to account! Curse the day that brought you to our village!"

The chairman called the meeting to order, for not all of the newspaper had been read yet. There was a short verse and a fable. It was a conversation between the local school and the church, allegedly overheard at night. The school had asked sadly: "How come that while you're so lazy and no use to people, you're freshly painted, whereas I bring wisdom to children, but take a look at how shabby I am." For some reason or other the author did not say what the church replied — probably it thought it unworthy to speak to its shabby neighbor, and so the fable ended when the church warden Safron came along and rang out the hour. The church heaved a sigh and dozed off. For a long time the school pondered over the dark village thatches, thinking where is the justice in this world?





The newspaper ended with the appeal: "All contribute to our wall newspaper!"

A lively discussion followed. The children pushed toward the table to have a look at the pictures. Petrik was amazed at the beautiful colors they were painted with. Gradually the noise subsided and it became completely quiet when David took out a sheet of paper from his pocket. Yakiv was all eyes. Before reading, David said by way of an introduction:

"So now you've seen what our life in Obukhivka is like — ignorant, dull and utterly bad. But that's not the case everywhere. I'll read now what's taking place in other villages and you'll see for yourself."

In Kovalivka, some forty *versts* away, they were distributing land and switching over to crop rotation. In Harbuzivka the local school had been repaired. At the "Beacon" collective farm in Sorochintsi three water mills were in operation on the Psel River. There were also similar occurrences to the order of things in Obukhivka: in some village the drunken chairman of the village Soviet had burst into a meeting of peasant woman delegates and abused them with foul language.

"And here we've got something about us. It's written not only for us, but for all of Ukraine to read."

David started to read the article:

"Obukhivka is an out-of-the-way village in Shcherbanivka District..." He stopped, for that moment the crowd swayed near the door and Matyukha burst into the room. His shaggy cap had slid to the back of his head and his face was red; it seemed about to burst at any minute. Everyone drew back and let him pass. He stopped at the first bench and seeing that David was holding a real newspaper rather than "counterrevolution," cast a grim look at him from under his knit eyebrows. His whole body seemed to be screaming: "What the hell are you doing here!" Yakiv leaned toward him and started to tell him something. Knish looked at him from his bench and shook his head. David waited till everyone quietened down and resumed reading:

*"Obukhivka is an out-of-the-way village in Shcherbanivka District — twenty-five versts from a railway and seventy from the county center. The Revolution once swept across Obukhivka too: the landowners' and kurkuls' land were expropriated, a total of three thousand dessiatines. But the land is far away from the village, some ten versts. It is hard to work, especially if a poor peasant*

*only has one worn-out horse. The land nearer the village was seized by kurkuls. Last spring the villagers got together and drew up a contract for the division of the land. But the contract vanished into thin air. Obukhivka's artel only exists on paper, while the local steam mill leased by the CPP was seized by the swindling of the chairman of the village Soviet, Matyukha, the CPP chairman, Hnida, the storekeeper, Hubarenko, and the kurkul, Knish. They live off the peasants' sweat by making them pay seven pounds of grain every time they use the mill which is actually theirs. State power in Obukhivka is asleep, or rather the village Soviet is asleep, for its doors are closed all day long, while its chairman boozes with his cronies from morning till night. He can strike a peasant in the face whenever he wishes just as the village constable used to, and his henchmen enjoy every right and complete freedom of action. How long will this go on?"*

"Well, that's all," David said and put down the newspaper.

The room was absolutely silent. Flabbergasted, Matyukha stood rooted to the floor. Was it a nightmare or reality? He moved his hand to see whether he was asleep or not. No, he was not asleep. Presently he regained his senses, color flooded his face again and he rushed toward the table, crying out hoarsely:

"So you're undermining the authorities! Who gave you permission?" Matyukha menacingly approached David. Jittery as David was, he nonetheless replied resolutely:

"I won't ask your permission, Matyukha, to read the press organ of the provincial executive and Party committees."

Matyukha jerked forward, but something seemed to hold him back from striking out right away. This moment passed, and he felt he was losing all face in front of the villagers who saw and heard everything. He had to strike, but fear prevented him from raising his hand. His head jerked and he shook his fist threateningly:

"Now you just watch out! You won't get away with it." He made an abrupt turn and said furiously to Hnida and Tyahniryadno. "Let's go."

The crowd stirred with agitation and began flowing out of the door.

The last to leave were David and his friends.

### XXIII

The villagers had warned David against being rash, but nevertheless he looked hopefully at their faces. Through the humiliation and fright in their eyes there showed something new, a ray of hope. They saw for themselves how Matyukha — the thunder and lightning of Obukhivka and, at one time, of the whole Shcherbanivka District — about whom, instead of the usual bad-wolf stories mothers used to frighten their children with words "Hush, there goes the chairman!" — stood struck dumb before David not daring to hit him. He had behaved in a similar way at their first meeting. Since Matyukha had never met any opposition, he had always been "King and God" for the villagers, but now... And the newspaper put it splendidly. The villagers had seen it printed with their own eyes about Matyukha's carousing and drinking, and there was everything about the steam mill and Hnida. Why, the whole of Ukraine would be reading this and the higher authorities would get to know about it.

For a long time the people stood by the library and then gathered in groups near the gate, discussing the unusual event. Now they were much more lively and bold when discussing, and even those who yesterday had dismissed the whole idea as hopeless were stirred.

"After all, where do we live — on some distant planet or in a Soviet Republic? Look how other people live: are we any worse than them?"

"Why did you want to give up then?"

"Why remind me about what I did yesterday! It's not late to change one's mind, is it?"

It was dark when David and his friends approached his house. At the gate Hordiy warned him once again:

"Watch out, David! They're the sort that might even raid your house! You better stay at home in the evenings. We can always come to you. Tonight we'll make up the list of the future coop members for you to take to Shcherbanivka as agreed. We'll pass it on through Tikhin. Now, where is he?"

One of the men said he had seen him walking in the direction of the opposite end of the village.

They chatted for a while behind the gate and left.

David was happy, although a bit worried. But really, what could his enemies do to him? They wouldn't touch him in the presence of others, and they'd hardly succeed in waylaying him in the night.

Chumak's warning about a possible raid made him smile. But on the other hand, you couldn't be sure: there was no knowing how low Tyahniryadno and Yakiv could sink. So on entering the house, David took a three-pronged pitchfork and stood it in the corner. Under the bench he had an ax ready at hand — just let them try and break in.

When David came in, his father was fixing a horse halter.

"Why did you put that pitchfork there," he said alarmed.

David hesitated — he did not want to scare his parents so he replied in a jocular tone:

"Now that you've bought the horse we'll guard it with the pitchfork."

"God forbid!" mother said, clasping her hands. "It took us so much time and effort to get the horse and if it's stolen again it'll be the end."

"I'll have to get some new bolts," father said grimly. "Tomorrow I'll see the smith. Tonight I'll sleep in the stable."

After supper the old man took his coat and went to the stable to spend the night there.

Hordiy Chumak came with the list, because Tikhin wasn't at home. When Hordiy went to see him, his door had been closed. They decided to wait for him, but Tikhin did not appear, although it was late. Hordiy stayed for a while chatting with David and then left. From outdoors he rapped at the window and said to David:

"You had better move away from the window!"

David sat deeper into the corner and began sharpening a pencil with a penknife.

His parents and the children had gone to bed. After a while Khristya came home, flushed and merry. She broke off a piece of bread and that was all the supper she ate. Khristya looked fixedly at David for some time and then grew thoughtful.

After a pause she said quietly:

"You know, Zinka was so sad today. She asked me whether it was true what they were gossiping about in the village?"

David looked worriedly at his sister.

"Well, what did you tell her?"

Khristya shrugged her shoulders.

"I told her I didn't know."

David became thoughtful. He thought about the girl with large black and sorrowful eyes that night when she had come to their house crying. He called to mind those long distant days when the fragrant and lush rye rustled in the troubled moonlit nights. He

had the same feeling now as then — both sorrow and joy. She had looked dreamily into the star-studded sky and he had looked into her dreamy eyes.

David turned to Khristya, the dreamy look still in his eyes. He smiled at her and said in a merry tone:

“Oh, Khristya, if only you had known!”

Everyone in the house was asleep, Khristya included, but David still sat at the end of the table writing.

## XXIV

Next day David woke up early as usual, although he had gone to bed long after midnight. But he did not get the chance of leaving for Shcherbanivka that day: the wagon had something wrong with it and he had to finish winnowing the wheat so he could take it to Shcherbanivka and sell it so as to pay back Chumak the thirty rubles he had loaned them for the horse.

The first half of the day he fixed the wagon and the second half winnowed the grain in the barn together with his father.

Early next morning the wagon was rolled out of the shed and loaded with sacks of grain.

Mother came out and called them in for breakfast.

They were sitting at the table in the middle of the room when suddenly the door opened and Tikhin came in. He was paler than usual and his eyes had sunk still deeper. At the threshold he took off his cap and stopped. He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and only then came up and put it on the bench. He had heard that David was leaving for Shcherbanivka so he had come to give him this paper.

“Have some breakfast with us, Tikhin,” old Motuzka said.

Tikhin declined. David looked at him with sincerity and sympathy and also invited him to the table, while Khristya got up, moved a stool to the table, and brought a spoon from the sideboard. Then, without saying a word, Tikhin put his cap on the bench and sat down.

For some minutes they all ate in silence, for no one could find a suitable topic for conversation. Old Motuzka began by boasting about the horse he had bought at the market. Tikhin indifferently asked now much he had paid and how old the horse was. Old Motuzka replied, and then did not know what else to say, although

all of them had the same thing on their minds. Mother was the first to ask:

"Tikhin, you probably haven't got any flour at home? We'll give you some, and tomorrow either I or Khristya will come over to you and bake you some bread."

Tikhin said that he really did not know whether there was any flour in his house or not. After a short pause mother asked again:

"Has she come back?"

"No, she hasn't," Tikhin said, putting down his spoon. "I went to see her, but couldn't get hold of her. All her things are still at home."

He spoke quietly and heavily, as if the words were boulders he had to overturn.

"Who knows. Since she didn't take her things, she'll probably change her mind and return."

"Oh no, she won't change her mind!" Tikhin said reflectively. "She spends her time running to Upirka who's supposed to tell her fortune. In the end she'll get mixed up with somebody..."

David raised his head with a jerk and put down the spoon, interested to know what Upirka really was.

"An old hag whom the devil doesn't take," father answered reluctantly. "She's a witch who's ruined many a girl and young woman, and even caused the deaths of some of them. She lives at her daughter's, the widow Vekla, at the other end of the village. Vekla is a moonshiner and the fugitive Khoma, who's either her lover or farmhand, acts as distiller. That's how they live — making moonshine and telling fortunes. They're just taking people in!"

"Say what you like, old man, but that woman knows what's what," mother said. "When I went with Mokrina to ask about the horses she guessed right, didn't she? 'Don't bother looking, you'll never find your horses,' she said. The cards showed that the thieves were vagrants, gypsies or such like. And there was one from our parts who put them on the trail. 'They led them away eastward, so that's where you should look for them,' she said."

Father spat on the floor from irritation and got up from the table.

"You're such an old fool. 'They led them away eastward' — he mimicked his wife — "but where did they find Hordiy's horse? In the east? In Yaresky, that's where, and it's in quite a different direction. Now listen to what I have to tell you. That woman's place is actually a horse thieves' den. Khoma is the first of them. When Kushnirenko was still at large, he spent all his time there.

The rest of the gang are also her frequent guests. So now" — he turned to Tikhin — "if your wife's gone as far as to run to Upirka and doesn't want to see you, throw her out of your head. She's not worth your worries, all the more so... as you've got no kids."

Tikhin bent his head low.

"I've had my share of thinking, and so I don't think about it anymore!"

On parting with David in the yard, Tikhin said:

"Do your business there in Shcherbanivka and come back as soon as you can. We'll have to get down to work. I've been sparing myself for somebody else's sake, or that's what I thought at least. But now if they kill me, it'll be all the same to me. Still, we have to see justice win, if not for ourselves then at least for the people after us!"

"Come on, nothing'll happen to us!" David cheered him up. "So long!"

...As he drove through the steppe beyond the village David was still thinking about Tikhin with a heavy heart. The day was bright and sunny, the air sharp with frost. Gradually David's mood brightened and he thought more optimistically about Tikhin: what was the use of living with only a dismal view of things! He merrily urged on his chestnut. As he looked over the green meadows and the gray band of the woods beyond the Psel in the distance, memories came rushing into his head. He began singing an old partisan song.

By the time he got home, it was already late — the sun was just setting in the willow scrub. Time flew fast, although he had not dallied in Shcherbanivka: the chairman of the district executive committee was away again, at the post office he had mailed a registered letter to the *Voice of Labor*; it was only at the storing station that he had stayed a bit longer, selling his grain. Now he was returning home with an empty wagon.

"Come on, there's only a little way to go!" he urged on the horse. As he entered the village, the lights in the houses were just being lit.

David unharnessed the horse. From inside of the house came the clatter of the loom. He led the horse into the stable and fed and watered it. As he was locking the door a figure appeared around the corner of the house and darted past the windows. On the corner it stopped and, apparently seeing David, came up to him. It was Zinka. Catching her breath, she whispered:



"David, there's something fishy going on!"

He came nearer to her and she said excitedly:

"Ilko came on horseback just as it was getting dark. Matyukha interrupted his supper and left immediately, taking Yakiv along with him to the farmsteads. Ilko only had time to whisper to me in the entrance hall, that something dirty was brewing. The chief of militia had come to Ohir and sent for Matyukha. Ohir's holding a meeting of the farmstead *kurkuls* at his house."

David began to worry. Zinka grew silent and then said entreatingly:

"David, disappear somewhere for a couple of days at least! You could hide at our friends at the manor!"

David was thinking.

No, why should he hide? In any case they couldn't do anything to him overnight or during the next day. He'd wait and see. If anything happened he would probably have to run. But not to hide, but to act. He would go to the newspaper office in town, or straight to the public prosecutor.

"I'm afraid it might be too late!" Zinka said with alarm, looking at him from below with a slightly raised head. Her eyes glistened against the stars. "David, I'm so afraid. Since Sunday Matyukha has been as mad as a dog. I'm afraid he'll chase me away. Then I won't know what's going on there and won't be able to warn you."

She raised her pensive eyes. David saw the reflections of two falling stars. He bent close to her face and said with emotion:

"Zinka, don't worry! Everything will be all right!" For some reason he remembered a time long ago, when the cranes were flying off for warmer parts, and how they used to spend the evenings at the manor with the Austrian prisoners of war. She could not have forgotten that, could she? They had sung then the song about the cranes, and Stakh had been there... She could not have forgotten how wonderfully he had talked at their home: about the revolution and the future... To this day he had always been on David's mind. Where was he now? "Some day the landowner's manor won't be his anymore, because you'll drive the landowner out," he had said. "And you, the farmhands, will be the masters. The land will be yours, and the cattle and the house, and you'll build more houses and plant an even larger orchard..." Now when David thought about the coop he felt sorry that Stakh was not with them, and that Katrya...

Both David and Zinka were lost in thought.

"But you, Zinka, you'll see the day! When I was still in the war, thinking the new and happy life ahead, you came to me from the past through the weeds in the manor, through the green rye and the starry nights. You haven't forgotten all that, have you?"

The hard, alarmed expression in her eyes gave way to dreaminess. Her eyes glistened against the stars. For a long time he looked into her eyes: his face bent closer and closer... and suddenly he held his breath and pressed his lips against her eyes.

A minute later she was already behind the gate and said something quietly in leaving. David could not make out what it was, but it must have been something joyous. She ran toward the garden into the night. David stood unable to tear away his eyes from the direction she had disappeared in. When her footsteps died away, he did not want to go home. The night was starry and bright. Just as it had been during those nights when he had trudged through the rye and wanted to spread out his hands and go somewhere and sing the rebel's song at the top of his voice, so that the night and all the stars would hear.

## XXV

Although Ilko did not know anything definite, he felt something foul in the air, because everyone was agitated. He had never seen Danilo Ohir so alarmed when he came running to Ilko and sent him for Matyukha in Obukhivka. What he was so excited about Ilko could only guess. He had been afraid to open the letter he was given to deliver, but now he regretted not having done so.

Riding an unsaddled horse, he leaned back to reduce the jolting, and listened warily to the sounds behind his back. But the only thing he could hear was the snorting of the horse and the rattle of Matyukha's britzka rolling over the beaten road.

All the way from Obukhivka Ilko could not catch a single word — both of the men sitting in the britzka kept silent, and when Ilko turned round from time to time he saw specks of two burning cigarettes glowing in the dark.

As they rode into a deep gully in Rokitne, the clatter of wheels died down — the horses went slower. For the first time Matyukha said something indistinctly to Hnida.

"Yes, exactly!" Hnida replied.

Ilko pulled at the reins and leaned back even more, pricking up his ears. Matyukha spoke again:

"Didn't I tell you not to fuss with him. But no, you started your stupid plotting! Now he's probably raised all hell... Lyonka might have saved himself a lot of trouble! Or he could..." The words did not reach Ilko's ear, for that moment the whip lashed and the wheels started to clatter rapidly, although the britzka was going uphill. Ilko urged his horse on as well: he had guessed that they were talking about David.

The horses approached the farmsteads at an even trot, so that at times Ilko had to ride his horse at a gallop when Matyukha's britzka closed on him. At the willow scrub they turned onto the pasture. Black patches of buildings looked out of the dark in the garden: a large cottage with lights in the windows, two wooden granaries, a very long cattle barn and enclosures. The dogs broke into a fierce bark and rushed to the gate.

Matyukha jumped down from the britzka and threw the reins to the farmhand.

"Don't unharness the horses, lead them to the stalls," he said and entered the cottage with Yakiv.

In the kitchen the domestic was busy at the oven. Ohir's wife and her daughter-in-law were standing at the table making dumplings and chattering to a red-headed militiaman sitting in his greatcoat at the table.

Matyukha shook hands with both women and gave a nod toward the door, as if to ask whether the men had gathered there. Ohir's wife said that he was expected.

As he took off his sheepskin and hung it up on the rack by the door, he heard through the crack the jingle of Lyonya's spurs and the voice of old Ohir who was speaking in a grave and ponderous manner:

"That's why religion is falling into decay. What's our Father Eulampiy worth? He's old. Life isn't what it used to be. Now you have to be at home in politics, for commandments alone won't get you anywhere. And we're a good lot too. If we, the proprietors, will insist on being niggardly, what can you expect from the CPP members? We must show an example for everyone. But some of us don't want to pay the price. Now if he does come, he won't be coming alone, but with twenty choristers at least."

Matyukha recalled that a priest from the Autocephalous Church had been invited to Obukhivka to preach on Sunday.

They had found a fine time to talk about priests, just when they were up to their necks in trouble, Matyukha thought grimly as he pulled his revolver out of the sheepskin and put it in his pocket.

He entered the room. Danilo jumped to his feet, delighted. He was confused and his usually neatly done hair was disheveled. A number of farmsteaders were seated around the table. The chief of militia was excitedly pacing up and down the room with his hands thrust into his pockets. Tyahniryadno was dully staring at the latter's feet, envying his box-calf boots. He had had a similar pair when he was with Khristov's band. After two years in jail he had become careless about his appearance. Now he would have to make up for that.

Matyukha went up to the chief of militia and asked in a whisper: "Well, what's up, Lyonya?"

Sakhnovsky looked at him and blinked his blond eyelashes.

"You'll find out right now, brother!"

He cast a look at Ohir's son, at the master of the house and at the farmsteaders. The master of the house understood what was expected of him, stood up heavily from his chair, and beckoned to the older men.

"Let's not disturb the young people. Please, come into the next room, my dear guests, and we'll have a talk there."

Without a word the old men left.

When the door closed behind them, Matyukha again asked impatiently and worriedly:

"Well, what happened?"

Sakhnovsky went up to the table and pulled some papers out of his tunic.

"What happened is that one fool wrote a letter from jail and another fool did not destroy it. Do you realize what that stinks of?"

Matyukha and Hnida were struck dumb and stared at the chief of militia. Ohir's son scowled and got red in the face; it was hard to tell whether he felt insulted or guilty. Tyahniryadno came up to the table with a heavy tread. Sakhnovsky turned round and looked at the door.

"Today I intercepted a registered letter mailed to the *Voice of Labor*," he said. "In it... oh well, it's got many things in it, and at the end it mentions the horse thieves and the inspector of finance."

Some of the faces turned pale. Everyone held their breath.

The chief of militia paused and continued:

"'Prosecutor, take note of this,' the letter reads. 'We've put by some evidence: a letter by a horse thief sent to his cronies from prison.' That's all. Is that enough for you?" He surveyed the room with a ferocious look. "Well, friends. If we go on being such fools

we'll all be done for before we know it. Do you think" — he turned on Matyukha — "they'll give a damn about you being a Party member? For that matter it'll be even worse for you! And you make such a fuss of him!"

"And this here windbag" — he looked furiously at Yakiv — "was waiting till his schemes ripened! Because of some bastard you want us all to land in jail, or something?" He then turned his bloodshot eyes on Danyusha. "And you, you fool! I told you about the letter that day, didn't I? I wonder how you still haven't lost your head!"

Danyusha, red in the face and sweating, wiped himself with a handkerchief and shrugged his shoulders.

"Who would have known it would happen like this!"

He still couldn't think of who might have taken the letter. He was positive he had lost it somewhere around the house, because that night Kushnirenko's wife had brought it there. Danyusha had put it in his jacket. Throughout the day he had stayed at home and next morning, when his mother was preparing to leave for Obukhivka, he had wanted to pass the letter on to Matyukha, when — *it was gone. At first he thought Ilko had found it. He had promised to give him a ruble if he did.*

"You're a fool, that's what you are! Listen to that, he promised him a ruble! He had a good laugh I bet. Do you think he's that reliable! Bring Ilko here immediately!"

Ohir went to call Ilko, but he was nowhere to be found in the house, so he sent his domestic to look for him in the yard and make him come right away.

Meanwhile, they put their heads together about what to do. Motuzka had the letter, that was a "fact," as Matyukha put it, and they had to get it back from him — that was also a "fact." Even if they did away with David there was no guarantee that he had not given the letter to somebody else: didn't he have quite a few associates, Tikhin, Yakim, for instance? Danyusha and Sakhnovsky had probably heard what had happened in Obukhivka last Sunday. Matyukha still could not gather his wits. They had disgraced them throughout the whole province and the Party committee must have heard all about it. They couldn't afford to wait a single day. They had talked it over with Yakiv and found a way of getting rid of David and at the same time whitewashing themselves. But in this case Lyonya would have quite a bit of work to do.

Presently Ilko entered.

"Did you call me?" he asked from the threshold, looking at them suspiciously and alarmed. The question was addressed not so much

to Danilo as to Matyukha. The latter got up and, outwardly calm, paced up and down the room past Ilko without saying a word.

The chief of militia said sternly to the farmhand:

"Come closer!"

Ilko stepped forward hesitantly and stopped.

"As a farmhand are you a member of the Vserobzemlis Union?" the chief of militia asked just for the sake of asking something. Then he jerked his eyes toward Matyukha, who had stopped just behind Ilko's back, and gave him a sign. The boy was about to answer the question, when Matyukha, with all might, brought down his heavy hand on the boy's temple. The boy spun around and clutched his head with pain. When he came to, Matyukha pushed his face toward his and asked quickly:

"Where'd you put the letter? Don't lie, I know everything!"

Ilko froze with horror, only his face burning. And the thought flashed through his mind: How did he find out? Although Ilko was shocked by the sudden blow, he realized that he must keep quiet about the letter, come what may.

"What letter?" he said. "I haven't seen any letter!"

"You bastard, you! So you haven't seen any, have you?" Matyukha's eyes bored into Ilko's tear-stained face. "Who gave it David then? He showed it to me himself."

Ilko shrugged his shoulders in surprise: he had never seen David in his life and didn't even know who he was. Matyukha tried to recall whether Ilko had been to Obukhivka during the past weeks. And remembered — he had brought Ohir's wife to Obukhivka just before last Sunday.

"You did it when you came with Ohir's wife, didn't you?" Matyukha said at random, although in a resolute voice. "Did you think I didn't know? You saw him then, didn't you?"

Ilko became bolder.

"But I've never seen him in my life," he said. "When I brought the woman I left straight for home, you ask anyone." That instant Ilko realized that Matyukha was lying and actually did not know anything.

Matyukha flared up.

"It couldn't have been a ghost who gave him the letter! I see, boy, that you've never been taken in hand before. But believe you me I'm gonna make you talk. Where's the letter?" He hit the boy in the face again. Ilko doubled up, but said nothing. Blood ran down his nose. He silently wiped it with his horny palm, looking down at the floor.



Matyukha flew into a rage. The boy's bloody face and frightened eyes evoked in him a strong sensation of bestial fury and heady pleasure. The sight of the gory face and the feeling of his limitless power and authority over the boy made his nostrils swell, as if they were greedily drawing in the smell of warm blood. Then he beckoned to Tyahniryadno. Large and sturdy like a bull compared with the boy, he came up to Ilko.

"Take him!"

With these words Matyukha pulled out his revolver and made for the door.

"No, not through that door, there are people there!" Ohir said worriedly. Matyukha returned and went out into another room with Danilo.

The night was starry. When they led him through the garden, the odor of yellowed leaves hit his face. It seemed strange that he was walking over these leaves so easily: his muscles were tense and he felt that if he were to stop they would lithly bend his legs nonetheless. He wriggled his arm in Tyahniryadno's hand, but the arm was pressed painfully as if in a vice.

"Come on, no tricks, boy!" Tyahniryadno mumbled grimly.

"Is there any hole around here?" Matyukha asked from behind.  
"If not, let's take him into the field!"

"There's a hole behind the enclosures," said Tyahniryadno.

They were now leading him across the farmyard past the cattle enclosures. In one enclosure the oxen were butting; the left-side ox which they had bought at the market recently was poised for a strike. Ilko instantly recalled that he had brought the manure to the field with these oxen today. He wondered whether the manure had smelled then just like it did now. From the barn the wind wafted the smell of fresh rye straw. It was just like in those days when he had been a shepherd and when he had piled the straw the other summer. By some strange association he recalled how he had been sitting with Zinka by the shed when she beat the hemp and warned her not to breathe a word to anybody. He had had a premonition of danger when he had said, "...if they find out I've got the letter they'll kill me...!" He was very sorry for Zinka or for somebody else — he did not know. Suddenly he started at the thought: Will they really kill me?

"Come on, no tricks!" Tyahniryadno twisted his hand so that it cracked in the shoulder, and the boy, setting his teeth, let out a stifled moan. Matyukha ran up from behind and kicked him with his boot so that the boy nearly fell to the ground.

They stopped by the hole.

Tyahniryadno twisted Ilko's hands behind his back crosswise and firmly held them against the boy's head. His bones cracked in their joints causing him terrible pain which tore across his chest as if it were on the verge of breaking. His neck stretched out, he stooped, his face reaching his knees. Matyukha kicked him in the face.

"Why are you stooping? Stand up properly!"

Tyahniryadno jerked the twisted hands downward. Ilko doubled up from pain and drew himself up.

"Now listen, you," Matyukha said, "if you won't tell me the truth where the letter is, we'll bury you in this here hole like a dog! Tomorrow morning there'll be a garbage pile on top of it. So just you mind! Where'd you put the letter?"

Matyukha cocked his revolver with a click.

"But, comrade, chairman, I don't know anything!"

Matyukha looked intently into his face for a long time and then stepped back.

"You bastard!" escaped from his lips. In the silence that followed



he quietly pulled the trigger and started to wipe his bloodied hand against his pants.

"Well, it's your luck you don't know! Now just listen 'ere — if you find any paper, don't poke your snout into it — give it to your master. Overko, let him go to the devil! Go wash yourself, you squirt, and don't you dare breathe a word to anybody! D'ye hear me?"

At this Matyukha and Tyahniryadno left Ilko.

When they came back, Sakhnovsky looked wryly at Matyukha and asked discontentedly:

"Looks like you've done something stupid again, Kornyusha?"

Matyukha was offended.

"It wasn't anything stupid! We had to interrogate him didn't we?"

He told his friends about the results of the interrogation.

Ilko did not know anything. But David had the letter, that was beyond any doubt. So they had to get down to work and decide what to do with him and how. They could not afford to waste a minute.

Ohir's wife came in with the supper. But her son-in-law chased her out so rudely, that she tripped on the threshold.

They racked their brains in the heated discussion that followed. Finally Matyukha and Hnida's scheme was approved. It was full of holes, but who would really find out. The main thing was to get rid of David, and Lyonya would do the rest. The other two were not that dangerous. Well, Motuzka's path would run only to the willow scrub and not a step further. They had to get it over and done with immediately. If they didn't manage it tonight, it had to be done next night without fail.

"Yes, there's no sense in putting it off," the chief of militia agreed. "For the time being we'll have to keep a close eye on him in case he runs away. We must watch him night and day, because there's no telling that he hasn't got away right now as we are sitting here."

That conjecture made Matyukha jump up from the chair and he started to dress immediately, followed by Yakiv and Tyahniryadno, who decided to leave with him. The chief of militia also pulled on his coat.

Ohir called for Ilko in the yard, but he did not respond. So he and the red-bearded militiaman had to harness Lyonya's horse. Matyukha also had to bridle his chestnut himself, and the three men climbed into the britzka.

Sakhnovsky shouted something from the threshold, but Matyukha did not hear him and was reluctant to ask. He pulled at the reins so that the chestnut snorted and hit its head against the yoke. Then it jerked suddenly and flashed in a gallop through the open gate into the night.

## XXVI

Maria was still staying with her sister Lukiya.

After that night she could not think about Tikhin without shuddering with humiliation and hatred. Last Sunday when she had been returning home with her sister and Nyurka, Tikhin had overtaken them, but her eyes had only flashed indignation and she did not say a word to him. Only Lukiya had known what it had cost her to laugh and to be merry in the library, for no one else had seen those bruises on her back and her breasts. Lukiya had seen them when Maria had flopped onto the bed and sobbed as she had probably never sobbed before. She had cried till evening, and they had not even put on the light.

Lukiya had tried to console her sister as much as she could. Things might turn out right yet, she had said. Many young husbands beat their wives and turned them out. But then they would come round and start missing them, and even came to ask them to return.

"Oh no, Lukiya!" Maria moaned. "If I were really...!"

It was dark in the room and Lukiya could not see Maria's face. Her voice betrayed grief and despair, and by its tone Lukiya knew her sister was crying and that her eyes were full of sorrow.

"Lukiya, try and understand me," Maria said, wringing her hands. "Both of them came to the library as if nothing had happened. He only glanced at me once, and then turned away. When he spoke at the table I never took my eyes off him for a second, but he didn't even look at me. Wasn't it for his sake that I went there? Wasn't it for him that I forgot about my bruises and laughed?"

Lukiya understood her, and she even seemed glad she did.

"How silly you are, Maria," she reproached her sister softly, stroking her head. "Why didn't you tell me before? You wouldn't be crying now! I saw how David looked at you and I know why. He came with Tikhin — so what? Women aren't the only ones who can pretend, men can be clever too. Just wait, everything will be all right, you'll see!"

Lukiya talked to her sister for a long time, trying to comfort

her and telling her of similar cases she knew. She even told her about the early years with her late husband. As for David — Tikhin would never be his match. In any case, he might die soon. Even if he didn't, David would take her all the same. But she had to wait. After all, Tikhin and David were friends fighting for the same cause, so David could not do it there and then. Maybe they could meet on the sly for the time being. He would drop in from time to time....

"You never know," Lukiya added thoughtfully after a pause. "The way Tikhin looks he won't pull through till next spring. Your house is new and you've got everything you need. It'd be better if he did die, God forgive me. You never can tell."

That same evening both sisters went to granny Upirka. The cards showed that she would soon be happy. A king of clubs had her on his mind, but he had an enemy — a king of hearts. His thoughts were evil and, apart from that, the cards showed a coffin. Then granny Upirka told her the king of hearts' fortune: he would get ill, but he'd recover all right, then he would get into a house that looked like a prison. Somebody would get him into trouble.

Maria looked eagerly into the thin, wizzened face of the hundred-year-old woman, watching attentively her sunken, toothless mouth mumbling word after word. And every word was like a bird brushing against the young woman's heart with its wings. Involuntarily she remembered how Upirka had told Lukiya's fortune before the war with the Germans. She had said her husband would be killed in action, and so it had happened. Whenever she told fortunes she guessed right. There was the fortune-telling about the stolen horses: one of the horses, said the old woman, would be found at a market to the east, but the rest were lost however long they may search. That was why Maria was so eager to take in every word which seemed prophetic to her. Granny Upirka guessed everything, as if she had visited Maria's soul.

What could the prison mean? Maria wondered. It couldn't be David she had in mind. The thought of it made Maria pale and then color would flood her face.

The next morning Vekla, Upirka's daughter, whispered to the young woman:

"You'd be a fool if you didn't take up with him! David's so handsome... you'll have a child right away." She laughed and whispered shameful words that made Maria flush. "I know, believe me!"

Khoma, Vekla's lover who was in the house making moonshine when Maria's fortune was being told, said:

"You can expect anything from a man like Tikhin! The cards show a prison, and they don't lie. Well, in this case we'll marry Maria off to the king of clubs. That'll be a real feast!"

The next day Maria went to granny Upirka again. She stayed there late and was still there when Yakiv and Tyahniryadno came to Upirka's place. She came home when Lukiya was already in bed.

In the morning Maria sat down to spin, thoughtful and uneasy. The thread broke too often. She hardly said a word to Lukiya. Each time her sister started a conversation Maria answered reluctantly and often not to the point, skirting the subject of yesterday's visit to Upirka.

Toward evening Lukiya's daughter Oniska came from the coop store where she had been to buy kerosene. She said a lot of people had gathered near the store, and she had heard Yakiv saying that fabrics would go up in price. His Filka and the second, married son had bought the most expensive suiting. Vekla and Nyurka also bought themselves some cloth. She had seen David and Tikhin there as well. David had said that the rumor was a lie, the prices on fabrics wouldn't go up. They had had a row on this subject with Hnida. Tikhin interfered, so Yakiv went after him: "You'd better keep your trap shut. You should have been put on trial long ago for beating the hell out of your wife who had to go and shelter at somebody else's home. You behave like a lord — as if nothing had happened at all, and I bet you're already looking around for another woman. You patted your wife for nothing: you ask David — he knows it was only foolish gossip." Yakiv also said that Maria had asked him to help her make it up with her husband. But he was supposed to have advised her to sue him instead.

"What did Tikhin say?" Maria asked, holding her breath.

"He said nothing."

For some reason Maria recalled the last night at Upirka's: Yakiv disappeared somewhere and then returned with a length of cloth... She was overwhelmed by a strange coincidence: the cloth, decorated with rosy flowers and green leaves against a gray background, was the same as that which her blouse was made of when she had first met Tikhin.

After a long pause Lukiya broke the silence:

"Well, it certainly can't go on like this forever. You go and take your things first, and then off to the court."

Maria was diligently pulling the thread out of the bundle of hemp. It was getting dark in the room.

"That's all rubbish, and so is what we were talking about

before, Lukiya," Maria said. "I won't walk out on Tikhin! I'm going to him today!" Although she knew she would stand her ground, the words were said in a state of excitement.

Lukiya and Oniska were dumbfounded: both were lost for words.

"After all, Tikhin's not so bad," Lukiya said at length thoughtfully. "You've lived with him for two years, and the cards showed that he'd recover from his illness."

Maria stood up from her spinning wheel and began packing. She left later on when nobody was in the house: Lukiya was in the cow shed and Oniska went for firewood.

Maria put on her sister's large checkered kerchief, took the little bundle with her things, and, excited, left the house. She forgot to tell Lukiya she was leaving, but Lukiya saw her preparations and asked:

"Where you going?"

"To him!" she answered without looking back.

She went along the dark side streets behind the meadows, so that people would not see her and laugh at her, saying there she goes, a battered wife, returning without an invitation. Near her house she turned off the street and, crossing the meadow, made for the house through the kitchen garden. She saw smoke rising over the chimney and stopped: should she go further? After a moment of hesitation she went on slowly.

The light was on, and through the window she saw the fire burning in the oven. She saw no one in the house and could hear no voices. The door was open.

As softly as a shadow, Maria sneaked along the wall and slipped into the entrance hall. Her heart was pounding. She pressed her hand to her breasts and was at a loss for a moment, not knowing what to do next. The moment was depressing and endless. Then, as if on impulse, she took off her checkered kerchief, caught her breath as if she had been running uphill rather than stealing up to her own house on tiptoe, and opened the door of the room.

Tikhin, sleeves rolled up, was kneading dough in a trough standing on a bench. As the door creaked, he drew up, turned his head and stood stunned. Maria made a step forward from the threshold and stopped, as if rooted to the floor. She was pale and stared at him with deeply sunk eyes. Then she made another step and said in a soft, excited voice, joking tenderly:

"Oh, my poor cook!"

Tikhin heard a tinge of sorrow, pity and excitement in her voice. There was a painful smile on her flushed face.

"Well, fancy seeing you here again!"

He pulled his hands out of the dough, looking at her with happy eyes. If his hands had not been covered with dough he would have embraced her; she was so dear and so desired, and her appearance was so unexpected.

"Go and wash your hands at least," Maria said, rolling up her sleeves. She suddenly recalled something, unrolled her sleeves and looked around the room. Yes, her spinning wheel was still in its place. For some reason this fact made her happy, she quickly went up to the spinning wheel, turned it a couple of times, and with an unpleasant, forced laugh looked at her husband.

"And I thought you'd thrown my spinning wheel away."

The laughter made Tikhin jerk up his head from the wash tub. He looked intently at her. He felt sorry for her, knowing too well that she did not really feel like laughing at that moment. They had not yet had a heart to heart talk and she probably thought he believed the dirty gossip. Meanwhile, she took off the spool: she had left her work unfinished. With a quick movement she put the spool on the windowsill, then turned round abruptly, and said, as if the idea had only just occurred to her:

"Well, since I haven't taken off my shoes yet, I might as well bring some hemp down from the loft."

"The ladder's not standing there as it should, be careful," Tikhin said after her. "Let me hold the ladder for you."

Maria's prompt answer stopped him:

"Why should I be careful? I have climbed up to the loft before, you know!" However, she did not leave the room, suggesting that Tikhin go and get some straw for the fire. She waited till he dressed and both of them left the room.

When Tikhin came back, Maria was still in the loft. He dropped the straw by the oven. Tikhin listened — not a single sound came from the loft. Maria's behavior today seemed odd. A terrible thought shot through his mind: the rope on which the bacon had hung was still dangling down the transom. He quickly went to the ladder and called up the loft:

"Maria!"

Silence. Tikhin rushed up the ladder when suddenly Maria's angry voice came from the loft:

"What are you crawling up for? What's all that yelling about? Here, take hold of this hemp."

Tikhin silently took the bundle and climbed down. His foolish suspicion made him feel awkward — of all the things to think! —

as well as her rude "What are you crawling up for?" He held the ladder for her, then took the bundle of hemp into the room and threw it on the bench. Maria examined the bundle thoroughly by the lamp and praised her fimble hemp aloud for Tikhin to hear. But her words came out unnaturally, as if she was repeating something learned by rote. Then she pushed the hemp into the oven niche and never mentioned it again the rest of the evening, and neither did she sit down to spin.

She busied herself kneading the dough for a long time. Tikhin had intended to make himself dumplings. She finished his job and prepared some dough to be baked early next morning. Tikhin sat on the bench without taking his eyes off Maria. He told her everything, admitting he was wrong and swearing he would never touch her — he would sooner cut off his hand.

Maria bent over the trough without looking at him.

He said he only realized what had happened when David came and told him the truth. This part of Tikhin's story interested her most. She even asked him a detail and when she heard the reply, a warm wave of joy swept over her: so David had not told him everything — how she had kissed him and yearned for him. Maria was happy not because Tikhin had not found out the whole truth, but because David had concealed it. Tikhin talked on, but his words did not reach her: her thoughts were far away in a world belonging to her and David alone, a world in which there was no place for Tikhin.

After supper Maria still did not sit down at the spinning wheel. Tikhin went out to feed the horse some oats. He returned with her checkered kerchief and put it on the table without saying a word. Until they went to bed he was gloomy and guiltily kind to Maria. Even when he lay down on the bed he timidly sidled up to her.

When Tikhin started smoking and broke into a cough, she stared into the darkness, thinking about granny Upirka and her fortune-telling cards. They had told her of his illness and recovery, and about the prison... Her thoughts wandered in a vicious circle. The cards had told her everything before it happened. She had never given it a thought before. But now, it was all coming true, just as the cards showed, and the king of clubs would make her happy — that was also true.

Yet something gnawed at her heart. She turned to the wall and cried, trying to stifle her sobs. It was the dead of night and she hoped Tikhin was asleep. Her crying must have awakened him.

He ran his hand over her tear-stained face just as he had that other night and, frightened, suddenly sat up and bent over her.

He nestled closer to her and asked why she was crying. What could she say? She didn't know herself. She cried even more and, provoked by his tenderness, she carressed him and stroked his head; she pulled his hand up to her eyes and pressed her tear-stained face against his.

## XXVII

In the morning Maria was already bustling around the house when Tikhin opened his eyes. On the table the lamp was burning low: the day before he had been at the coop store, but had forgotten to buy some kerosene. The gray daylight glimmered through the windows. Maria had apparently stoked the oven to bake, for she was kneading the dough and the reflection of the fire played on her figure.

The first thing that caught Maria's eye when Tikhin got up was the dirty shirt. He had not changed it since the previous Saturday. She stopped kneading and with one hand — the other was covered with dough — she rummaged in the chest for a long time and took out a fresh white shirt and drawers.

"Put this shirt on, Tikhin," she said sadly. She glanced at him and went on kneading the dough and then shaping the loaves. Tikhin changed at the bed without taking his eyes off Maria. He remembered her crying during the night: she had somehow changed, her face was very pale and her eyes hollow. She was fussing so much with that kneading and baking that it seemed as if Tikhin was about to leave home for a long time and there was not bread in the house for him to take along. That she gave him a white shirt on a weekday made the impression even stronger.

A button was missing on the shirt collar. He told her about it, but she said she was too busy with the baking.

"All right, no need to hurry," Tikhin said, dismissing the point with a wave of his hand. He put on his sheepskin coat and went out to see to the horse.

Dawn was breaking. Dogs were barking beyond the church, at the opposite end of the village. In the quiet morning air Tikhin heard distant, hollow voices which broke into shouts from time to time. He came up to the gate and strained his ears. Some people were running down the street.

"Do you know what's happened, Tikhin?"



"No."

From across the street, by the draw well, Knish's daughter-in-law said:

"I saw mounted militiamen riding down there. Looks like they're searching the village for moonshine."

"They wouldn't be hollering like that if they were," one of the women remarked.

Tikhin stayed at home. There was nothing unusual about this commotion in Obukhivka. Somebody must have been robbed or had his head beaten in in a drunken brawl. Since the militia were in action there was no point in his going over there. He fed his horse and cow and went back into the house.

Maria had put the bread into the oven. When Tikhin came in, she went up to him to sew on the missing button. He patiently waited while she did her work, and after she had pricked him with the needle a number of times, he said:

"There's some row out there."

He felt Maria's hands tremble at his neck. She turned pale and could not get the needle through the buttonhole.

"Where? Far away from here?" she asked worriedly.

"Somewhere behind the church."

Color flooded Maria's face, the pupils of her eyes grew as big as two large, black berries. In a moment she regained her poise, lowered her eyes and carefully bit off the thread. Then she quickly turned, put aside the trough, and stared into the oven. Tikhin prepared the pig feed as usual and carried it outside.

The noise was getting nearer. A crowd appeared from behind the church, driving a man in front of them, beating him, and apparently heading for the village Soviet. As they walked down the street, a group of men broke away from the crowd and entered every yard — it did look like a search after all.

The clamor grew louder. In the middle of the crowd Tikhin saw Yakim. He was bareheaded and wore a red sheepskin; blood was streaming down his face. What could that mean? Tikhin's heart leaped and he felt a sudden pain in his chest. Someone ran up to Yakim from behind and struck him on the head. He staggered, but not a sound escaped his lips. His wife cried and wrung her hands at the back of the crowd. It was old Knish who had struck him with his walking stick. The crowd seethed and yelled and pushed on the battered Yakim, filling up the whole street.

"Comrades, what are you doing?" Tikhin shouted in despair and ran into the street. The roar of the crowd drowned his voice. Yakiv

Hnida, breathing heavily, came running to Tikhin's yard and shouted into the crowd:

"Hey, somebody, go and search the Knishes' place! Please, no hard feelings, Panas Ivanovich. Since we've started, we can't miss a single house."

"Sure, I don't mind."

Yakiv, followed by a dozen men, rushed into Tikhin's yard. Matyukha suddenly popped up out of nowhere. His shaggy cap had slid to the back of his head and he held a revolver in his hand. His face was red and he too was breathing heavily.

"Make a good search of his place. They're friends after all."

The men dispersed over the yard, searching in the barn, poking with pitchforks into the straw and chaff piles. Tikhin followed them without saying a word.

"Tell me at least what's happened?"

"Someone robbed the coop store last night. One of its walls was broken in," Andriy Pivnenko whispered with a worried look. "That's their doing all right. They found a piece of cloth at Yakim's place and something else in a chaff pile; that lot put it there — no doubt about it. With David it was leather for five pairs of boots."

"Where's David?" Tikhin asked uneasily.

"They didn't find him at home."

The men returned from the garden, having found nothing at Tikhin's place.

"Even if you did find something," Tikhin said, "I can't be responsible for my yard. You could even have found a stolen horse in my barn for that matter, 'cause this is the first time I've been out of my house this morning."

"Certainly," one of the peasants remarked. "They could have planted something here on purpose, especially if you've got enemies."

"What smart alecks you are!" Hnida flared up. "What fool would put stolen property in his own coffer, when it's obvious he might be searched?"

More people came pushing into the yard. Filka and old Knish's son, both on horseback, appeared in the street, galloping past Tikhin's house. Matyukha shouted to them:

"Did you bring the rope? Go straight to the station, you'll still catch him!"

Tyahniryadno came flying on a black horse from Matyukha's yard. He lashed his stallion with a rope and galloped after the two horsemen past the school and the windmills into the steppe.

The crowd was about to leave the yard, when Matyukha stopped abruptly, struck by a new idea:

"What a bunch of fools we are! Why don't we search the house?"

Yakim dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand. However, he turned back, somewhat reluctantly. Some of the men followed him.

Tikhin let them enter the house without going inside. Through the door, over the villagers' heads, he saw Maria open the chest. Yakiv rummaged in it and then said something to Maria. She turned as pale as a sheet. Hnida left the room, followed by the men.

"Take a look in the loft," Matyukha said grimly to Pivnenko. He and Yakiv climbed the ladder. Those who remained in the entrance hall were silent. Overhead came the hollow sounds of heavy steps.

Maria held on to the jamb of the open door, as if she was about to faint.

"Why are you so scared?" Tikhin asked. "Let them search!"

For no reason at all Matyukha started playing with his revolver, turning its drum casually. Suddenly Hnida's triumphant yell broke the silence:

"Hey, it's here, boys!"

Those in the entrance hall froze. Yakiv appeared in the opening above the ladder with a package in his hands. He untied it and, holding one end, threw down a length of cotton print. The cloth rolled down in a long strip toward the door. It was gray and decorated with rosy flowers and green leaves.

Tikhin stood in a stupor, his face pale. He stared at the strip with unblinking eyes. As he looked at the door, he saw that Maria had gone into the room. Her whole body was pressed against the pole supporting the crossbeam. Her mad eyes were wide open. Tikhin understood everything. He looked at the cloth — strange, but he still remembered — it was an exact replica of the one which Maria's blouse had been made of when he first met her.

Matyukha's hollow voice interrupted his thoughts:

"Tie his hands!"

Without any resistance Tikhin crossed his hands behind the back to be tied. He did not even try to justify himself or say a single word to Pivnenko and Hordiy who stood near him. It seemed that it was not his hands that they were tying. His mind could no longer control his body. There was no sorrow, no indignation. He did not even feel the tight rope round his hands. His unseeing eyes stared through the open door of the entrance hall.



Yakiv climbed down from the loft and picked up the cloth. With mocking laughter he threw it over Tikhin's shoulder, as if it were a matchmaker's *rushnik*. Then he wound it around Tikhin's neck: the loose end reached to his heels. Yakiv leaned back and roared with laughter at the sight of Tikhin, then hit him in the face.

"That's what you really are like, dear citizens! You should be strangled, you bastards!"

"Take him away!" said Matyukha.

The crowd pushed through the door after Tikhin. Yakiv stuck his head into the room and shot to Maria from the threshold:

"Everything's all right! No need to worry!" — and slammed the door.

After a moment he returned and latched the inner door from outside — just in case.

## XXVIII

The street by the village Soviet was crowded with people. Noise and shouts, like at a market. A woman was lamenting, while old Knish standing on the porch was addressing the villagers. His words were hardly audible in the clamor:

"They must be done away with! It's not me or you they robbed; it's the whole community! The coop store belongs to the people. In words they are Party members and in deed — well, you can see what they are... They might have stolen those horses as well!"

"Who else!" somebody roared from the crowd.

"Where do you think Motuzka got his money from to buy a horse?"

"Do away with 'em!"

But the shouts were sporadic, for most people would not believe that David or Yakim could have done this.

"There, they're leading another one this way!" Knish shouted from the porch.

The crowd following Tikhin came out of the street. A discordant roar of laughter came from the porch. The crowd swayed and made way for Tikhin who was followed by Matyukha and Hnida.

Shouts and laughter came from the porch again.

"Just look at him: all made up like a matchmaker!"

"Gag him with that cotton!"

Someone cursed, and a heavy brick hit Tikhin in the back. Hordiy Chumak raised his hands in disapproval.

"Aren't you human beings? How can you do this to a man?"

"Shut up!"

"How can you believe that they're the thieves? I'll stake my life that it's nothing but a provocation! Do you really think Tikhin could have done it? Just look at him, he's a goner. What did you beat him up for? Don't you know whose work it is? They didn't finish him off last time — he's still coughing up blood — so now they..." He didn't finish, for that moment Matyukha hit him on the head with his revolver, making Chumak stagger and moan with pain. Hnida struck him with his fist, then they grabbed him and dragged him up the steps into the house after Tikhin.

"Why did you do that to Hordiy?"

"Who said that?" Matyukha flashed his frenzied eyes at the crowd. Then he rushed down the porch to the point from which he had heard the protesting voice and attacked Pivnenko. He took hold of him and dragged him into the village Soviet.

For a moment the crowd was silent. Then it erupted into a new outburst of noise. A woman's scream rent the morning air and someone started lamenting. Matyukha, accompanied by a red-haired militiaman in a red cap, holding a revolver in his hand, appeared on the porch again. His eyes roved over the crowd, as if looking for somebody.

His terrible look silenced the crowd. Matyukha, pleased with the effect, drew on his cigarette, threw it casually on the porch, and disappeared through the door.

Inside they were drawing up the charge sheets.

...It was already midday, but the crowd did not break up. Some went home, others came. The villagers talked quietly, their heads bent low. The witnesses at the search were called into the village Soviet one by one, and others were invited to testify. The women tried to console Karpenko's mother, Chumak's wife and the women of Pivnenko's family. Karpenko's mother was in despair. She had already prepared a small bundle for her son, having lost all hope of seeing him before they took him to the district center. She wanted to pass on some bread to him, but they would not let her. Children wandered about the yard and along the fence, and a boy had climbed the fence to watch the interrogation through the window. From time to time he informed his little friends what was going on inside.

"Oh! He's beating Andriy Pivnenko!"

"Really?"

"God! He really is! It's awful! He's hitting him right on the head with his revolver!"

The crowd seethed. The cries and moans coming from inside were drowned in the general noise. Some had already lost their initial excitement; someone told of a similar case of store robbery, another commented on the forthcoming visit of the priest of the Autocephalous Church... The men smoked a lot, casting impatient or worried looks down the road. Knish, who had just finished his harangue on the damage those new priests did to the prevalent code of morals, yawned and also looked down the street.

"They're taking their time. No sign of them yet?"

"No."

Chumak's wife was lamenting, surrounded by the women. Karpenko's mother went up to the porch, the small bundle still in her hand, and slowly, with effort, started up the steps. Yakiv, standing on the porch, yelled down to her:

"Off with you, do you hear me?"

A name was called out from inside, and Hnida repeated it for everyone to hear, while his eyes carefully watched the crowd, ready to catch every word and gesture of opposition. The people lowered their eyes and became silent under his heavy look.

"They're coming!" someone from the crowd called suddenly.

The people made for the street. A horseman galloped over from behind the school. It was Filka riding his gray horse all in lather. He jumped off at the porch, dropped the reins into somebody's hands and panted up the steps into the village Soviet.

Everyone waited with bated breath. And suddenly the whole crowd burst out as one man:

"They're coming!"

Two horsemen and a man walking between them appeared from behind the school. They moved slowly along the street. "Oh, God," someone whispered in the silence. A sigh escaped the crowd. Was it David they were bringing? It was hard to tell by the looks of him. His head was bare, his face bleeding, and his black hair clotted with blood. His greatcoat was torn all over and covered with blood and dirt. His hands were tied behind his back and the other end of the rope had been thrown over the neck of Matyukha's horse. He must have been dragged and had obviously stumbled after the trotting horse across fields and furrows because his boots were torn and his feet were like pieces of raw flesh.

"Whoa!" Tyahniryadno jerked at the rope.

David stopped, his head drooping. He was not led into the village Soviet and Tyahniryadno remained mounted. Knish junior jumped down from the horse and ran up to the porch. At this moment Matyukha, two militiamen, Hnida and a number of other men came out of the building.

"Ah, you're here! So you didn't manage to run away!" Matyukha grinned maliciously, intoxicated by his victory. "I see you're quite a restless fellow: they didn't catch up with you until you were almost at Hanivka manor!"

"Yes, that's exactly where we caught the bird," Tyahniryadno said.

"Did you search him?"

"Yes, and this is what we found on him." Filka took some papers out of his pocket and handed them to Matyukha who passed them on to the red-haired militiaman.

"Well, get moving. The authorities will investigate and make sure this sort don't incite people around here anymore and that you, David, don't besmirch the Party."

Unable to restrain himself, David turned his bleeding, battered face to Matyukha and said with hatred burning in his eyes:

"Ugh, you dirty bastard!"

Matyukha flared up and struck him across the face. A woman uttered a stifled cry.

"Oh yes, you can hit me now my hands are tied," David said wearily.

Suddenly he heard a familiar name as a woman said, "It's Zinka!" David drooped his head again.

The other prisoners were led out of the village Soviet: Yakim, Tikhin, Hordiy, old Motuzka, and several other men. Yakim and Tikhin had also been beaten up and tied.

There was no surprise in David's eyes when he saw them, because he had heard all about what had happened here from the conversation between his escorts on his way to the village. He only smiled painfully.

Old Motuzka was released at once. The rest were led into the street and lined up in twos. They were immediately surrounded by the militiamen, Tyahniryadno and Yakiv Hnida, all of them holding revolvers. The convoy started down the street.

A loud lament broke out, which added to the despair of the prisoners. Matyukha tried to disperse the crowd and even shot twice into the air, but it was only the women's laments that reached the prisoners' ears, making them even more downcast.

The crowd moved beyond the village to the steppe. The red-haired militiaman turned his horse and raised his revolver, shouting:

"Break up, or I'll shoot!" Two shots rang out.

The laments gradually died away as the prisoners reached the open steppe. Its oppressive silence hung over David and his comrades who gloomily trudged along. They reached the willow scrub. Yakim, walking in the first pair, said:

"They'll kill us, the bastards, in the willow scrub beyond Shcherbanivka. It won't be the first time for them!"

"Yes, they might!" David said. Excited, he shot a glance at the mounted guard riding at his side and without taking his eyes off him David whispered to Yakim:

"Keep your wits about you. If they're going to kill us they won't do it one by one... If they try, I'll tackle the red-haired fellow, Tikhin can take care of the second guard, and you take the third whoever he is. There won't be more than three of them. As soon as I say 'Drop!' you go ahead. I'll give the signal. Tell Tikhin."

On the way David managed to whisper to Chumak that he had



hidden the letter and some other things in a field. If only they could find it. Maybe Zinka could. It was hidden in a furrow just where the road turned behind the farmsteads.

They reached Shcherbanivka before sunset.

The sails of the windmills turned in the pasture and people gazed at the convoy from their doors. Everything was quiet as if nothing had happened. Some of the onlookers smoked and occasionally spat on the ground, probably wondering what had happened. These people did not realize that the prisoners would probably be killed that very night, or maybe the next, there in the willow scrub... Tyahniryadno had wanted to kill David right away, but Filka had stopped him: "Let him be, we might still need him. You'll have your chance soon — we only have to reach the willow scrub."

The militia station was housed in a half-ruined manor building on the village outskirts. They went past the storehouses, evading the main street and the market place. A poster on one of the storehouses caught David's eye. It advertised a play called *The Cloud*. When they turned into the yard, David saw the purple sun setting between the ruins, and in the distance across the valley, far, far away against the background of the red sky were the fields of Hanivka manor dominated by the lonely stack of the brickworks.

David recalled the lush rye fields and the starry sky of long ago, when he was being led toward the brickworks. They had got as far as the claypit and there he had managed to escape. He remembered the fragrant odor of the green rye and the earth.

David greedily inhaled the evening air. The smell of yellow leaves and ruins reminded him of that night. What a life he had wanted to build on those ruins...! Oh well, it will not stop without him....

"Halt!"

The chief of militia came out of the house and closely inspected the prisoners. The guards dismounted. The red-haired militiaman saluted and reported to his chief. All the prisoners were put in the lockup, except David; the red-haired militiaman led him to the cellar. He opened a heavy door covered with iron plates and pushed David down into the darkness.

## XXIX

The interrogations began that very night. David was sitting on the upper step near the door, listening to every sound from outside. It must have been dark already, because everything was quiet. From the distance he heard only the muffled sounds of ordinary village life on a starry autumn night as lights in the houses went on. Then he heard the bolt rattle on the lockup door and the sounds of feet crossing the yard and going up the porch of the militia station. Its door closed with a squeak and there was silence again. The church bell tolled — probably for vespers.

He lost all sense of time, which was not surprising as his whole body ached; his burning feet were two pieces of raw flesh covered with dirt. From afar he heard the voices of girls singing and the hollow booming of the bell, as if it came from the depth of the past... He recalled the three autumns he had spent at the manor... Then there was the noisy clank of the smithy and the green rye fields and the star-lit nights. She had come to him in one of the fields and put her soft hand on his battered head: the pain had gradually subsided. In the dark two large eyes had looked at him, and the blurred patches of distant green fields were reflected in them. When did it all start? In the dusk of the room that night? And what about the time in the forest, under the green hazel bushes, or in the wild steppes when he had charged the enemies with Budyonny's cavalrymen... And here he was, alone in the cellar, beaten up and bleeding. It was such a long distance from the days of his youth to this tortuous night in prison.

Right now the girls were probably walking to the village club and singing. The club was packed and the lights were on. The bell rang loudly. There was commotion behind the curtain: the young actors were putting on their makeup. In the corridor the men would probably be smoking and talking about the prisoners who had been brought to the district center for robbing the coop store in Obukhivka. Maybe some of them would say: "I'd kill the bastards there and then" and spit indifferently on the floor.

A door squeaked. Boots stomped on the porch and somebody moaned. Then the bolt of the lockup rattled and silence fell again. After a while David heard footsteps approaching the cellar. The keys clanged. By the shuffle he recognized the red-haired militiaman.

"Come out!"

How blue and starry the sky was! He felt a tightness in his head

from the strong scent of the ruins and yellow leaves. David stood up, greedily sucking in the fresh air once, twice. The red-head grabbed his tied-up hands and pushed him toward the house.

The chief of militia was sitting at a desk covered with a dark-red cloth, his head bare and his tunic unbuttoned. David saw a revolver, an inkstand and scattered sheets of paper on the table. At his side, by the oven, Tyahniryadno was sitting in an armchair, looking intently at David through the gray smoke of his cigarette.

"Untie his hands!" Sakhnovsky said.

The red-head fussed with the rope, for it had cut deep into David's swollen hands. Tyahniryadno took a knife out of his boot-leg and cut the rope. David doubled up and moaned from pain. The chief of militia offered him a chair and even pushed a packet of cigarettes across the table. David sat down, but did not touch the packet despite his craving. Sakhnovsky brought the revolver closer to himself and studied the prisoner for a long time without saying a word.

Then he took the pen, dipped it in the inkstand and started recording David's name, age, social status, party affiliation. David gave short answers to each of his questions. When David said he was a Party member, Sakhnovsky smiled faintly and remarked that this could not be inferred from the evidence he had.

"Where's your Party membership card?"

David explained where it was.

"Sorry, but I can't take your word for it. I'm not to blame that you haven't got your Party card," the chief of militia said with raised eyebrows, as if to say he was really sorry, and wrote "None" in the "party affiliation" column.

He continued writing, then put down the pen and dragged on his cigarette.

"Now, citizen Motuzka," he said after a pause. "We're not children and you're not a fool, and I have no secrets from the people present here. So let's not play hide and seek."

The paper he was writing, he went on, was a record of the inquiry about the store robbery. He wouldn't waste his time on David as he had on Karpenko and Kozhushny: he just wanted a "confession" from him. He emphasized this word and gave a cynical smile. They would have a long way to travel and their case would be passed on to the investigator. Motuzka's case would be dropped in a couple of days anyway. He smiled again, but this time crookedly.

"All you have to do is sign this record and that'll be the end

of it. We've got something more interesting to talk over with you than this."

He gave the record to David and threw the pen across the table. David read the paper — below the particulars about him was the following sentence written in an uneven hand: "I refuse to give evidence on the case of the coop store robbery." David added: "I don't know anything about it" and signed his name.

"You didn't have to do that," Sakhnovsky said after reading the paper. "There's no difference between 'I refuse' and 'I don't know anything.' Now if those other two testify that all three of you had a hand in it, whom do you think they'll believe?"

He dropped the record on the table with a careless gesture.

Then Sakhnovsky switched to the topic he was more interested in. He told David not to look at him as if he were a scoundrel, because he was in an unusually good mood today. He said he would be frank with David down to the minutest details, because this would be their first and last meeting. The store robbery was just a side show. "But," he said, "we agreed not another word on the subject." They would concentrate on something entirely different: first of all he wanted David to know that all the articles he had sent to the *Voice of Labor*, except the first, were in his pocket.

"You don't believe me? In the first article you wrote about Matyukha thumping people around and about the domestic I tried it on with. The second is about Kushnirenko's letter. Right?"

David slumped in the chair surprised and stared at the chief of militia.

"Now, how about the letter," he said after a pause. "Where is it? Hand it over!"

Suddenly he bent across the table and dropped his voice to a whisper for some reason:

"It's all the same to you, and you might as well know that we'll kill you in one way or another. Because right now it's either you or me!"

His eyes flared up and became large and round, his thin nostrils trembled nervously, and his upper lip twitched, revealing a line of white teeth.

"You give it to me and I'll kill you this very night. I'll do it myself wherever you want the bullet to hit you. I'll do it with one shot and you won't feel anything."

He nervously lit a cigarette and sat back in his chair.

"You won't get the letter," David said. "You searched me, didn't you? You didn't find anything on me."

"You gave it to somebody else. Who?"

"I didn't."

"You lie."

Somebody knocked on the door three times. After Sakhnovsky's "Come in" a swarthy militiaman entered and put two red tickets on the desk. The chief of militia asked whether the performance had already begun.

"No, they're still putting on the makeup. They haven't rung the curtain yet," said the militiaman and left the room. Sakhnovsky slowly put the tickets into his wallet which he shoved into his pocket, and stared at Motuzka.

"You're a good fellow as far as I can see. You make a good communist unlike Matyukha and those other bastards of ours. Why did you have to start this mess in the first place? You can't go against reality just like you can't swim against the current. See, you're already drowning." His eyes flared up again. "Where's the letter?"

"I don't have any letter," David answered without looking at Sakhnovsky.

The chief of militia gave a nod and Tyahniryadno and the red-haired militiaman immediately jumped to their feet, wrenched David's hands behind his back and tied them. Sakhnovsky, buttoning up his tunic, coldly dropped the words through his teeth:

"Tonight you'll taste the first portion. That'll go on for another two days. Two days of your life isn't worth the price and you'll spend it in a dark cellar. Lead him off!"

They pushed him head-first down the cellar steps so that he landed on his head. The door closed, but the guards were in the cellar with him. A dim lamp held by the red-head lit the musty brick vaults and the damp corners. Tyahniryadno kicked David to the ground and turned him on his stomach.

"Overko, be careful," said the red-head. "I know we're going to kill him, but the doctor will examine him first, so don't leave any bruises."

"Don't lecture me!"

Tyahniryadno finished smoking his cigarette, threw it away and spat into the palms of his hands. He placed one foot on David's back, then the other, and jumped up and down, seeing if he could hold him.

"This one will stand it! A heroic fellow I'd say," he said grimacing in mock sorrow.

He took David by his tied hands and pulled them up, at the same

time pushing his back down with a foot. Slowly he increased the pressure; when David moaned the strain weakened.

"Well, David this game will go on till dawn, till you're finished."

"You might as well give up right now," said the red-head. "You heard what the chief said. It'll be an easy death. Who's got the letter?"

David mumbled something, because his face was pressed to the ground: much as he wanted he could not raise his face. "Dog!" was the only thing his torturers could make out.

"Now that's no way to talk! Give it to him, Overko!"

Tyahniryadno slowly pulled David's hands up, as if he was afraid of causing him any pain. The purpose, however, was quite different. Slow pulls and jerks followed one another. The pain in David's shoulders was unbearable. David felt as if his chest was coming to bits. He groaned: his body arched under the heavy weight of Overko and chafed against the damp ground until it bled: he smelled his blood mixed with the odor of rotten potatoes and damp earth. The blood rushed into his head and rung in his veins. It seemed as if his head would burst any minute from the blood pressure. He wished they would finish him off right away,

*Before he passed out he saw hooves flashing before his eyes. The wind swept up stinging snow and bits of frozen earth and hurled it into his face. That was all he remembered. Then he plunged into a dark abyss. The first thing he felt when he came to was pain in his shoulder, as if someone had pressed a red hot iron against it. A woman's soft voice said:*

*"Be careful, comrade, his shoulder is wounded."*

*He opened his eyes and saw he was lying in a truck. A nurse with a serious face, dressed in white, adjusted his Budyonovka cap. The driver honked the horn and column after column of infantrymen passing by started to the side of the road.*

*"You heading for Perekop?" one of the wounded soldiers shouted from the truck.*

*"Right! Perekop!"*

*A soldier in a shaggy cap set on a bandaged head took out a red silken tobacco pouch and started to smoke.*

*David gave him a nod, and the soldier rolled him a cigarette.*

*"You from the First Cavalry Regiment?"*

*David nodded in reply. The soldier started telling about past battles. It was a long and exciting story. Other soldiers joined in.*

*The pale nurse was silent, her body swaying sadly as the truck rolled on. The pain in his shoulder was terrible. David closed his eyes. ...Then he remembered being taken to a hospital, where everything was white and quiet, except for a groan which broke the silence from time to time. But this happened mostly at nights: groans and indistinct utterings. Then David would hardly manage to get any sleep, thinking about his far-away village, trying to picture its life. He would think of the starry summer nights and the lush rye fields... until a nurse with a delicate profile would softly come up to his bed and put her hand on his burning forehead.*

*"You should sleep."*

*David would close his eyes, but could not get to sleep. How much alike they seemed, he thought, especially in profile... Memories flooded his mind. Then they turned into blurred images and sank into darkness.*

David started, opened his eyes and moved his parched lips. His mouth was dry and burning. He greedily inhaled the damp air and turned his battered face to the darkness and said softly:

"Nurse."

Silence. Something rustled in the corner: probably a rat. He inhaled the air again — a smell of rotten potatoes and damp earth. He moved his hands: they were tied. Now he remembered where he was. There was an unbearable pain in his shoulders. If only he could have a gulp of water. He thought of the iron plates on the door: they should be cold at night. Groaning, he crawled up the steps. It took him a long time to get there. He pressed his burning lips against the iron plate and started licking it, but its cold surface seemed as hot as a glowing chunk of iron.

Behind the door the night was still and, perhaps, starry. A distant bell tolled twice. It was two o'clock. In the distance he heard faint voices, then a song. The voices grew louder, and he could hear the ringing laughter of a woman. It came from the garden behind the cellar. A noisy group of young people passed the door. David heard the jingle of spurs. The woman shrieked, apparently trying to free herself from somebody's embrace, for she was laughing loudly and excitedly. He heard the sound of feet stomping on the porch, followed by a burst of laughter. The door slammed and everything was quiet again.

The distant sound of the bell echoed through the night from the opposite end of the town.

### XXX

Zinka found out everything. In the evening of the day when the prisoners were led off to Shcherbanivka she overheard a conversation between Matyukha and his wife:

"Don't worry, Liza, everything will be all right. Lyonka will make a clean job of it. He'll only scare them and tomorrow they'll be free. The other two he'll put in prison — without David they won't be dangerous. As for David... he won't get further than the willow scrub: he'll be made to 'escape.' It won't happen tonight, of course. First they'll interrogate him, and tomorrow nigh't'll be a dead cert. So take it easy, Liza!"

The same evening Zinka quit her job at Matyukha's.

She could not get to sleep. They did not even put on the light in Motuzka's home. Old Motuzka was sitting gloomily on a bench with some villagers, talking slowly in the darknes. Mother no longer cried; she just sat at the oven with her face buried in her hands. From time to time she raised her head and looked dully into the darkness, her eyes wide open from horror and pain. She would shake her head now and then and repeat, "Oh God," after which she buried her head in her hands again. The children did not even stir in their beds. Little Dokiya clung to mother's knees. Khristya was standing at the oven, her head bent low.

When Zinka came in nobody asked who the late guest was. She came up to Khristya, bent her head close to her friend's and both cried bitterly.

They lay down to sleep without making their beds. But nobody slept a wink that night, except, perhaps, the children. Everybody was listening to the silence, catching the sounds of sorrow, when now and then a sigh or a moan escaped somebody's lips.

...In the morning the women went to Shcherbanivka to see their husbands, and Zinka joined them.

Each woman carried a small bundle in her hand. Khristya also took a loaf of bread and a clean white shirt. Only Maria was absent. Pivnenko went to see her, but she was lying in bed sick with Lukiya at her side. "What hard luck. She comes back and makes it up with him, and next morning they take him away," one of the women remarked despondently. Pivnenko mumbled something appropriate in response. They went on in silence until they passed the willow scrub and reached the farmsteads. Here they stopped at the well for a drink and got into conversation with the



women of Mikhailivka, which they continued all the way to Shcherbanivka.

They arrived at an early hour and went straight to the district militia station. The red-haired militiaman did not even let them enter the yard. The second militiaman, who was cleaning the stable, at least condescended to shout back:

"Come later on! The chief of militia hasn't got up yet!"

"It's all the same," said the red-head, "there won't be any visits allowed today. The interrogation has not taken place yet."

The women left. One of the women noticed a group of people gathered at the ruins by the water tower. A man was taking some notes. It looked like a commission.

The women walked through the weeds and stopped timidly at a distance. The whole group were strangers to them. Two men looked like peasants, but the rest were townsfolk. One had an insignia of two little hammers on his cap and held a folder in his hand. They paid no attention to the women, looking at the water tower through a kind of telescope mounted on a tripod.

Khimka was the first to approach them.

"Comrade chief!" she addressed the one with the crossed hammers.

"Please help us," the women said of one accord and came closer. They all talked at once, now interrupting one another, now joining their pleading voices in what sounded like a mournful song.

One of the townsmen took off his pince-nez and, cleaning it with his handkerchief, squinted at the women. Then he replaced the pince-nez and again studied the women intently.

"What do you want?"

The women again started talking all at once. A portly gentleman from the group, who wore a dark-blue coat and a black hat, then explained to the townsman:

"You see, yesterday they caught some thieves who robbed a coop store. I think that's what they've come about." He turned to the women and said, "I'm afraid we can't help you. You must go to the chief of militia over there, in that house." He pointed in the direction of the militia station. "He's a nice man." He even called after them:

"There, over there!"

One of the women dismissed his suggestion with a wave of her hand, while Chumak's wife turned round and said:

"We've already been there. They didn't let us in."

The women went to the district executive committee. The porch

and the corridor were crowded with peasants. The clerks were scribbling something at their desks, and a lady was banging her white fingers on a clattering wreck of a typewriter. She shortly dropped her hands wearily and lit a cigarette. Then she turned to another typist and told her loudly about the nice time she had the other night after the show with Lyonya and his company.

Zinka came up to her and asked her something. The typist stopped talking, annoyed by the interruption, and nodded her head nervously to the door with the plate reading "Chairman of the District Executive Committee." But Zinka hesitated to enter the chairman's office. Finally she and Pivnenko went in. The secretary informed them that the chairman was out on an inspection tour of some buildings, so if they had urgent business to attend to they could go and see him there. The women told him the whole story, after which the secretary spread out his hands in a helpless gesture: this matter was only within the competence of the chief of militia.

The women left the office with a bitter feeling of hopelessness. Some men in the corridor joked: "These birds with bundles look like an important delegation."

"Maybe it's not a delegation but a cooperation," another man suggested, emphasizing the last word.

Some people understood the hint, and others who didn't, found out about the events in Obukhivka, which immediately became a subject of noisy talk in the corridor. Sharp remarks followed accompanied by derisive laughter: a peasant saw red if his horse or his grain were stolen. A coop was another thing... It made no difference whether someone robbed it, or its managers squandered it on drink. Who the hell cared?!

"I hear a Party member was caught too," someone said quietly from the corner.

"Not just one — they got the whole lot of those smart mouths. People say the villagers wanted to lynch them, but the chairman interfered and even threatened to use his gun to stop them."

"Well, he was a fool in that case!"

"What else could he do? He would be responsible as a representative of the authorities."

"He should've finished them on the spot!" one of the men said and pulled off his cap, swinging it down with excitement. "Today it's a coop store, tomorrow it'll be your last horse. A prison is nothing to them — there's amnesties every month. But if he'd killed them — the hell they'd get out of prison."

Hearing all this, Karpenko's mother said from the threshold:

"You should keep your mouth shut if you don't know anything."

Zinka did not leave with the women. When they had entered the building, she caught sight of a plate with the words "Party Committee, CP(B)U\*." She stood before the door hesitantly — should she go in or not? After all, this was a Party body and if they wouldn't help her, who would? Presently a man came out of the office and through the open door Zinka saw a portrait of Lenin on the wall and a man sitting at a desk. She took the door handle resolutely and stepped in.

"What can I do for you?" a voice stopped her. The man looked up from his papers, impatiently waiting for her reply.

Zinka did not know how to begin. She stood silent for a while, feeling the excited beat of her heart. The man was about to say something, when she quickly approached the table and erupted into speech.

"Comrade, I beg of you, help them! They're going to be killed tonight! In the willow scrub! You're a communist after all, so you must know what really happened. Everybody's indignant, because the stolen goods were planted on the suspected men. They'll kill them, I heard it with my own ears! It might even happen tonight! Please, help them!" She spoke the words passionately and quickly, stammering, breathing heavily, and pressing her hands to her chest. The secretary sat back in his chair and stared at her dumbfounded. What was she talking about?

"Who's going to be killed in the willow scrub?" he asked.

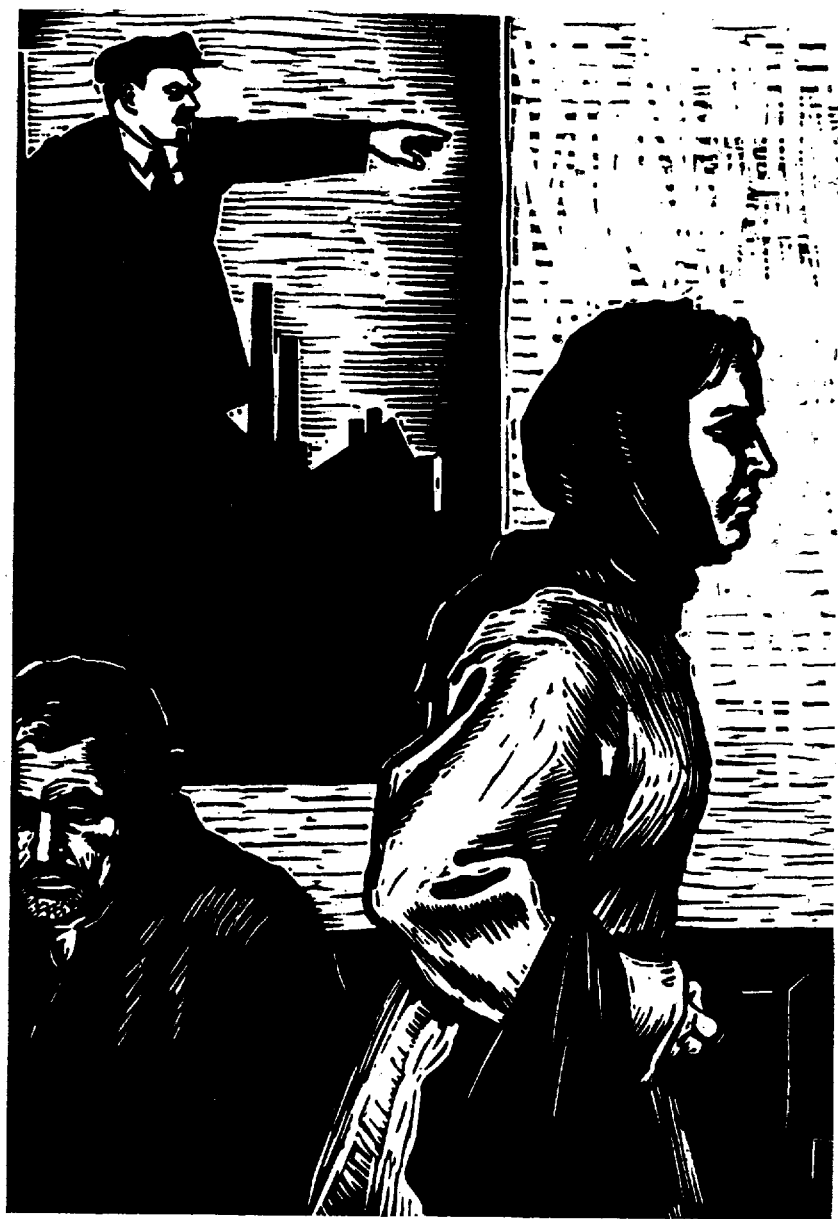
"Them, them! They're locked up in prison right now."

How did she know? What made her talk such nonsense? He looked hard at her, and the girl stopped talking abruptly and shrank under his cold stare. If he would not help her, who could? She made another step in his direction, her face was pale, her eyes burned. She must have had a terrible expression, for the man suddenly slipped from his chair and stealthily came round the table toward her without taking his eyes off her. Quickly he left the room and in a second returned with a man.

"That's the girl. Tell him to examine her," he nodded toward Zinka. Then he wrote a short note and gave it to the man. She watched them silently with wide-open eyes. The man came up to her and took her by the hand. She still stood numb without saying a word. Then her breasts heaved convulsively and, moving slowly,

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\* CPU(B) — Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Ukraine.



she followed the man out of the office. Only in the street, when they approached a hospital, she understood everything. Silently she snatched her hand free and went off without looking back.

The purple sun was setting, when she wandered like a ghost in the meadow, behind the garden. In the distance she saw the distressed women with bundles in their hands, returning home without having seen their husbands. Zinka decided not to join them. The sunken eyes on her palid and exhausted face were fixed on the ruins and the barred windows of the lockup.

When dusk fell, she stole up to the storehouse nearest to the militia station and pressed her body against the gray wall — her gray homemade kerchief and gray skirt made her invisible. She would stay there where she could see everything — the light inside the militia station was on, so she would see or hear in the night when they led the prisoners to be interrogated. And she would be there when they led them toward the willow scrub.

She did not know yet what she could do. But one thing was clear to her: happen what may, she would save them. How? Her mind was working feverishly, developing the wildest schemes. It was good that Ilko had come home after quitting work at the Ohir's. What would she do without him now?

In the dark she heard a rustling sound behind the storehouses. The girl started and pricked up her ears. It was Ilko. His obscure figure clung to the wall beside her. After a long silence he told her to go home, he would keep watch here. Zinka shook her head — no, she would not leave. She was dead tired: this was her second sleepless night, and she had not had anything to eat or to drink for two days. But she was afraid to go. Her legs gave way under her, she slowly slipped down to the ground and leaned her head against Ilko's knees.

The autumn night seemed to last forever.

### XXXI

In the morning two mounted militiamen — the black-haired one and another — the red-head was missing — led Yakim and Tikhin into the yard and drove them along the street lined with telegraph poles running toward the horizon. Perhaps they were heading for Matchukha to stay the night there and then go on to town. It was impossible to ask the prisoners about David. They were walking with drooping heads in the middle of the road, guarded on each side

by the two horsemen. Zinka watched them eagerly, ready to shout her question. But they did not even look up. The sandy road twisted downhill toward the wide reddish strip of the willow scrub standing out sharply against the white sand. On her way she saw people returning from the market.

No, they won't do anything to these two, she thought.

By evening the rest of the Obukhivka prisoners were released. Zinka stood by a windmill when they passed by. All were badly bruised and exhausted, yet they did not stop, and only one of them cast an anxious look back at the ruins behind the storehouses. Hordiy lagged behind. He stopped at the windmill and told Zinka everything: David had been thrown into the cellar, and the rest had been kept together. Tikhin and Yakim were eventually locked up in a separate cell; what had happened to David he did not know. In the night Yakim had looked through the window and seen them lead him away for interrogation. Then two guards had taken him to the cellar. One of them carried a lamp. They stayed there a long time, probably torturing him, these bastards.

Zinka stood motionless, cold and reserved. Hordiy mentioned something about the letter, but Zinka did not hear him. From Yakim's face her eyes strayed toward the ruins near the garden. She did not even notice when he left. Only when the light in the militia station went on did she regain control of herself. The light went on rather early today. For the first time an inexplicable horror gripped her soul.

She returned to the storehouse where she had been standing the previous night. But everything in the yard seemed strangely uneasy today. The lights in the windows went on so early today, someone ran from the stable to the house, and the door slammed in a different way from that of the day before. She looked at the cellar standing out in the darkness, and its outlines kept dissolving in the darkness under her tired gaze. Then the girl would tear herself from the wall and strain her eyes until she could see the cellar again. He was there. She would not miss him, she would not take her eyes off him. How was he? Was he alive? Now that Hordiy had told her everything she remembered seeing people entering the cellar the day before. She had not realized then what it meant. Today she saw the red-head carrying a bucket to the cellar. Maybe David had fainted. Or, maybe he was already dead...?

She stretched her neck into the darkness and gulped in the air excitedly — she wanted to cry out into the starry night, to call him and hear his quiet "I'm here." But she suppressed the urge,

although she was so anxious to know how he was, and hear at least one word from him.

She tore herself from the wall and warily listened into the darkness.

The silence around the ruins was interrupted only by the barking of the dogs in the village. Zinka made a step through the dry weeds and listened again. Then she stole past the ruins into the garden. The leaves rustled under her feet and her head swam with the pungent smell of autumn. She remembered how she had chased a calf, also in a garden, and had bumped into David standing by the wall in his Budyonnovka cap. They had not recognized each other then. A whistle came from behind the storehouses like a cry of a gull. She guessed it was Ilko looking for her, but she did not turn round and went to the yard at the edge of the garden, trying not to break a single twig. The cellar was quite near, only a few paces across the yard and separated from her by high weeds and nettles. She squatted and crawled, straining her ears.

Someone came out on the porch, stood for a while, then disappeared around the corner of the house. Zinka waited patiently, afraid the man might return. He did not appear and she decided he had gone. She bent down and crawled on through the nettles.

*At the cellar she knocked three times softly on the iron plates of the door. It was quiet in the cellar. She knocked again, pressed her ear to the door and held her breath. A hollow moan came from the depths of the cellar. Gradually it became louder. David was crawling up the steps, moaning all the time, as if every moan helped him gain one more inch. Zinka had to wait long before she could hear his strange voice, dull and hollow:*

*"Who's there?"*

*Zinka pressed her face to the door.*

*"David, dear, it's me. Are you alive?" The words escaped her lips with joy and despair. Then she looked back, listened into the night for a spell, and spoke again:*

*"They've released everyone except you. David, what are they going to do to you? But don't you be afraid!"*

*David said from behind the door:*

*"It'll be tonight! They washed off my blood before evening."*

*She pressed her whole body to the door.*

*"David, we won't let them. The boys and I are keeping watch. We'll follow you to the willow scrub till sunrise. Oh, if there were only a single crack in this door!" She ran her fingers over the iron*

*plates. "My dear, if I only could see you, just for a moment!" From the other side David brushed against the door, probably with his face because his hands were tied.*

Suddenly someone grabbed her from behind. She started and let out a scream. Behind the door she heard David's hollow cry and moan. Someone held her tight, squeezing her painfully.

"You dirty bitch!" a hoarse voice said.

The girl struggled desperately, she tried to bite the man's arm, but could not because of his coat. She felt herself lifted from the ground and thus carried to the house. On the porch she managed to bite his hand, and he dropped her on the ground, but did not let her go. Grabbing her with all his might, he dragged her up the steps and into the dark corridor.

When he pushed her into the room, the chief of militia looked up from behind his desk, and Tyahniryadno, sitting in an armchair with a rifle in his hands, raised his eyes. The red-head, still holding her from behind, said:

"I caught her at the cellar."

Sakhnovsky stood up and approached the girl, looking intently at her for a long time.

"But that's Matyukha's domestic," he said.

Now the red-head recognized her as well. He had caught her at the cellar talking with Motuzka, he said. So he's probably her lover. Sakhnovsky's eyes roved over the girl's face. It was beautiful, though pale, exhausted and imprinted with despair. His thin nostrils twitched and he said:

"Search her!"

While the red-head ran his hands over her body, he turned to Tyahniryadno, grinned and winked at him. Sakhnovsky caught his look and frowned.

"Cut it!"

Then he ordered him to take her to the lockup and bring him the key, and to make it fast without any tricks. The militiaman scowled and led Zinka out of the room.

As they went down the porch, she heard the rattle of the cellar door. Writhing in the iron grip of the militiaman she let out a cry. Then she heard a whistle coming from behind the storehouses, again reminiscent of a gull's cry. The red-head pushed her into the lockup, hesitated for a moment at the door, and then slammed it and turned the key.



For a moment she stood in the darkness, looking dully at the closed door behind her, unable to comprehend what had happened. From outside she heard someone banging against the cellar door: "Hey, you, stop that banging, or I'll make you quiet!" It was the red-head shouting. David replied something hoarsely from behind the cellar door, but she could not make out what. The girl rushed to a small barred window. It was too high. She felt the bare walls, then banged on the door. Suddenly she pricked up her ears.

She heard someone walking across the yard. There was another bang on the cellar door. Spurs jingled in the entrance hall.

Then she heard footsteps in the hall and someone said:

"Comrade officer, we're taking him off."

"Right. Be sure to make a neat job of it. Take him through the garden, and don't forget to untie his hands before that." A key clicked in the lock. Zinka clung to the door, hardly breathing. She ran her fingers over the door and pressed hard against it with all her body, as if she hoped to walk through it into the yard.

"Chief!" she cried through the crack.

Sakhnovsky approached the door.

"What do you want?"

Zinka talked rapidly and feverishly:

"I was stupid! I was really stupid! I'll be good now." She ran her hands over the door and pleaded through the crack: "Let me out! Please, come here!"

There was a pause. Sakhnovsky thought for a while, then said, turning the key:

"Now mind you, I'll take you into my room, but if you begin your tricks again I'll throw you into the cellar."

"No, I'll be good now! Really I will!" she said fervently.

Sakhnovsky opened the door and gripped her by the hand. As they crossed the yard she saw the dark mouth of the open cellar: David was not there. She tried to jerk herself free, but he tightened his grip and looked at her threateningly. No, I have to think of something else, she thought. They would have to go two *versts* to the willow scrub, so she could still make it. She would fly if necessary to overtake them...! Zinka quickened her step. On the porch she heard a whistle coming from the storehouses. Her heart missed a beat.

Sakhnovsky led her into his spacious, comfortable room and locked the door. On the table stood a bright lamp with a green shade, which made the whole room look green. Zinka stood in the

middle of the room like a ghost: her coat was unbuttoned and her head bare, because she had lost her large kerchief. She stood rooted to the ground. Sakhnovsky told her to take off her boots and coat, but it was a long time before the meaning of his words reached her. Then she stirred and pulled off the boots and the coat. Sakhnovsky went up to his bed, took a large orange flowered kerchief, and told her to throw it round her shoulders. Her hands trembling, she did as she was told and stood motionless, staring.

Sakhnovsky sat down on a sofa near the table and lit a cigarette. He looked at her and deeply inhaled the smoke. Then he said:

"Come here!"

Zinka started. Her eyes fell on him, then on a large cheval glass standing right before her. She looked into it and shuddered. No, it was not Zinka who stared back at her out of the glass. She saw the large orange kerchief round her shoulders, a green face, sunken eyes like two dark holes...

"Well, come here!"

Bang! Something as heavy as a brick hit against the window shutter. Crash! — another impact came from the other end of the building. Forgetting the girl, Sakhnovsky pulled his revolver out of the holster and rushed from the room through the dark office into the corridor. For a moment she stood rooted to the ground. She could only hear the wild beating of her heart, not knowing whether it was from fear or from joy. When she came to, the first thing she did was blow out the lamp. The room plunged into darkness. Softly, like a cat, she tiptoed barefoot out of the room, then through the office into the corridor. She made for the door but she saw him standing there. He was apparently afraid to go out onto the porch and shouted into the night:

"I'll shoot!"

Not a single sound came from outside. Just as he was about to close the door Zinka rushed forward with a wild cry and hit him in the back. He fell down onto the porch. She stumbled over him into the yard. In a moment she regained her senses, jumped to her feet and bolted zigzag across the yard.

Somebody chased her and she heard shouts behind her back. She had already reached the meadow, but the thud of boots and shouts still followed her. Zinka ran for her life, the wind singing in her ears. By the time she reached the windmills she could hardly stand on her feet. She gasped for air and leaned against the wall so as not to fall to the ground. Again she heard the thud of footsteps, as if two people were pursuing her. All at once it became quiet and

then she heard a soft whistle in the silence. She let out a scream and ran on. From time to time she looked back and shouted desperately:

"Hurry!"

The boys caught up with her when she was behind the last windmill. Still running, she told them where David had been taken off. She thought they might have followed him.

But the boys had missed David. Ilko and Savko had been waiting for her, then they had lost all hope and had begun throwing bricks at the militia station. What had the chief of militia done to her? Zinka said nothing in reply, but increased her pace, although she was slightly limping.

They had already reached the willow scrub, but there was no sign of David. Suddenly Ilko seized Zinka by the arm and Savko stopped. The girl held her breath, straining her eyes and ears. They could see nothing, and not a sound was heard. Suddenly something flashed at the edge of the willow scrub, as if somebody had flicked away a cigarette. A hollow voice said in the darkness:

"Stand here!"

Zinka screamed, and Ilko fired his gun on impulse. Two rifles answered from the willow scrub.

In the dark one more shot flashed into Zinka's face, deafening her as she rushed ahead. She ran on, fell, got up, fell again, breaking through the scrub and screaming wildly. She could not hear whether Ilko and Savko were following her. She heard more shooting, this time farther away. She stumbled, then ran on, her eyes wide open in the darkness, eagerly searching the scrub. Suddenly she stopped dead, then screamed and dashed ahead. He was lying on the gray sand motionless, his arms spread out like a black crucifix.

She dropped to her knees, clasped her hands and screamed into the night. Then she swayed and fell on the sand beside him with a faint moan.

Another two shots reverberated in the air, but they were far away, somewhere on the beach. A star, like a large burning tear, dropped from the sky into the dark night of silence and sorrow....

## XXXII

...Winter came and passed. It was only in early spring that David Motuzka returned to Obukhivka from town.

The train rolled into the railroad station at midday. The road was muddy and it was difficult underfoot. *Verst* after *verst* David trudged through the mud, his feet sinking through the thawed snow at every step. The sun was already setting when he approached the former Hanivka manor. He had ten more *versts* to go to reach the village outskirts. Late as it was he could still get home today if only his feet would carry him. But as soon as he caught sight of the smith's hut showing through the orchard the young man was filled with joy and he felt he would not go farther. Besides, there was no point in hurrying, considering the bad road and the late hour. And yet there was... she must have been missing him badly. He recalled her last letter: when she found out that he had left hospital and was to come home soon, she expected him every minute of the day. In the evenings she would go out to the dam, looking into the distance to see if he was coming from the railroad station. "I would stand and stand under the weeping willows," she wrote, "but you would not come."

The recollections made David quicken his pace. He had only a short way to go. From across the pond he caught the smell of oak buds. Beyond the two sturdy oaks he would turn from the road, cross the dam, and open the squeaky door of the smith's hut with a "Hello, everybody!" He even raised his hand to his cap to pull it down, pushing it back in the process.

He deeply inhaled the air. It was wonderful to be alive and to walk across the muddy spring road fanned by the sharp air of the thawing snow, the earth, and the willow buds. How wonderful! It didn't matter that his legs buckled from exhaustion as he trudged through the mud in torn boots: soon he would rest and dry his feet. In the darkness in front of him a light twinkled: it was probably the lamp inside the hut.

Suddenly his train of thought was interrupted, making him frown and set his teeth. He tried to dismiss the memory, but could not help returning to it. What would have happened if they had not caught up with him in the willow scrub that day...? He could hardly even believe it was true. And what about the previous life in Obukhivka — was it a reality or a horrible nightmare? In this raving world of nightmares he, David, had twisted and turned in delirium, mumbled with parched lips, writhed and moaned to wake

up and break through into reality. But each time he was pulled back by a rope.

It was just in this place they had caught him. The bastards — how they had beaten him up. Then they had roped him like an animal. Tyahniryadno had taken the other end of the rope, thrown it across his horse's neck, and dragged him off across the frozen ground. His feet had been torn to the point of bleeding. If it had not been for the horse, his bones would have been smashed to pieces: hard as Tyahniryadno lashed his horse, it would no sooner dart off than it stopped, looking back askance and snorting and beating the ground with its hooves. While the horseman urged his mount forward, David would draw up and catch his breath. However, when they had reached the village his strength had failed him.

Then came the lockup at the district militia station, interrogations and the willow scrub... If they had not caught up with him, he would never have seen the light of day again. They had come just in time. Her warm hands had touched his eyelids and opened them. And against the starry sky David had seen Zinka's exhausted and joyous face. That was all he remembered of the new world after he had come to. Then he regained his senses in the smith's hut. Zinka was at his side. She told him how they had rescued him: the boys had carried him all the way to the farmsteads, and there Savko had taken his aunt's wagon and stealthily brought him to the smith's home at dawn. "You'll be safe here," Zinka had said, but would not sit in the hut. She later confessed that she had been afraid for his life and had watched outside to see if any danger threatened, so that she could hide David in the loft or in the cellar. But everything had gone all right. In the night Hordiy Chumak and Pivnenko had come with a wagon (Ilko's idea). They had said that the whole village was astir, and the chief of militia had come, searching every house and yard. They only hoped it would not occur to him to come here. Quickly they had put David on the wagon and left for the railroad station. (The train was to leave at midnight.)

It was difficult to forget all this. But now it was all over. He had started a new life....

He pulled the cap off his head and with these emotions in his heart crossed the threshold with a "Hello, everybody!"

The reunion was joyous indeed — they did not know where to seat him and what questions to start asking first. Stepan was at home. (When David was still in hospital Zinka wrote him that

Stepan had come home from the Red Army.) Klim was there and all the "Hanivka community." "Since we're all here we might as well start a meeting," someone suggested in jest. "What's the first item on our agenda," the smith said merrily. "We might as well start with the question of hauling timber," Klim said. Yakim had written to David in hospital about their latest occupation. Generally, they were now living a Soviet life. Elections had just been held: Hordiy Chumak was elected chairman of the village Soviet, and the other members were chosen from the most trustworthy men. Stepan, too, had been elected. Then, the chairman of the district executive committee was replaced, as was the secretary of the district Party committee, while Mironov was expelled from the Party. Everything was all right at home. "Oh yes, Khristya had a marriage proposal," Zinka said and immediately turned red when father remarked: "Your mind's full of marriage." The villagers were now free from paying the tax in kind, which had been incorrectly levied on them. Klim asked how their case was going. Before he left town, said David, he had visited the prosecutor — the investigation was finished and within a week, next Sunday when the market would be held in Shcherbanivka, a session of the provincial court would come to Shcherbanivka for the trial. That was good news. The men reached for their tobacco pouches and started to roll cigarettes in excitement. "Oh, to hell, with them," said the smith, spitting on the floor. "Let's forget them, we've got pleasanter things to talk about."

After supper the men sat down around the oven to smoke and to talk. Klim's wife and her children had already gone to bed, but the men kept on talking. Only Zinka stayed up, for she wanted to seize an opportunity to touch him at least. But she eventually lost hope, became gloomy and pouted her lips. She gave vent to her anger when she chased the men away from the oven (as if they could not have found a better place for a chat) presumably to take some straw. She made the bed for the men and lay down to sleep. But she could not drop off — it was as if she were waiting for something to happen. It was long after midnight (the cock had already crowed) when the men turned off the light and went to sleep. David lay down at the edge of the straw bedding. She hesitated for a long time, then, silently stealing through the darkness, lowered her hand and — came across his open palm. Their fingers interlocked. Thus they fell asleep, their hands entwined.

No sooner did the sun rise above the horizon than David prepared to leave, but they would not let him. The smith's wife, whose

heart had sensed something, treated him like a son and asked him to stay for a while.

"You haven't had your breakfast. Or are you afraid to eat us out of our house and home?"

"Oh, what a thing to say," David said, smiling. "That's not the reason. You see, the ground is still a bit frozen, so it'll be easier for me to walk."

He said goodbye to everyone. Zinka put on her coat and saw him off, first beyond the threshold and then through the yard and up to the garden. She would have gone with him further, were it not for David. He embraced her and looking into her eyes said what sounded to her both like a jest and reality:

"Zinka, supposing you don't go back home?"

The girl blushed and pressed close to him. All at once she drew back and spread her hands:

"You mean just like that, in my slipper?"

David instantly became worried:

"Oh no, girl, what are you talking about. Run home immediately."

When he looked back she was still standing where he had left her. He shouted to her and gestured that she go home right away.

David arrived early in Obukhivka, just as the children were on their way to school. The village had come to life. The chimneys smoked, the draw-well sweeps squeaked, the cattle howled in the yards, and voices rang out in the frosty air. And above all these sounds came the even pulse of the steam mill on the beach.

When he passed Matyukha's house he looked with interest into the yard. It was empty, the buildings looked gloomy, and the windows were even nailed up with boards. (Zinka had told him that Matyukha had gone to live at his parents' on the farmsteads.) David turned his eyes to the cut-out hearts on the gate and could not suppress a smile. A heart might make up a flush, David thought, but a heart is not always a trump. He passed Pivnenko's farmyard. Smoke was rising over Maria's house. And suddenly his heart ached as he recalled Tikhin. The poor soul couldn't endure the tortures and died in prison. He felt really sorry about him. If he were alive now he would be exchanging greetings on passing his fence and chatting with his friend. They did away with him, the bastards. The quiet sorrow did not leave David all the way to his house. It disappeared a bit after the happy reunion with mother, Khristya and Dokiya. The men, Khristya said, were gone — one to the school, and father to the mill.

"He's been placed in charge of the mutual aid fund," mother added with pride. "Now we, too, son are regarded as people." She could not restrain herself from crying. But her tears did not dim the blue of her eyes. David felt this was the first time he had ever noticed his mother's eyes were blue. She wiped away her tears and now turned happily to her son: maybe he was tired and hungry. David said that he had spent the night at the farmsteads, but they had gone to bed very late and his head was a bit heavy, so after breakfast he would have a short nap. But this was not to happen, because no sooner did he sit down at the table than Yakim came in, having heard the news of his arrival.

"Ha-ha!" they greeted each other, laughing like little children.

"All right, have your breakfast quick and tell me the latest news," Yakim said. Mother became angry, because Yakim did not let her boy eat his fill. To which Yakim said with a laugh:

"Man lives not by bread alone. Besides, he musn't eat too much after hospital. Let's go!"

The men left.

David was thus caught in the maelstrom of Obukhivka's life from the first day. At first he felt like a guest (wherever he looked there was something new in store for him). From the village Soviet he went to the CPP, then to the mill and Yakim's office (Yakim was both the manager of the library and secretary of the "Victory" coop). He visited everywhere, saw everything and talked to his heart's content.

The following day he carted timber to the outskirts together with the other villagers, busied himself around the house, and like everyone else prepared for the day the land would be distributed (the surveyors were expected to come any day). David was so busy that he forgot about the forthcoming trial. He was reminded about it when a summons arrived at the village Soviet from the district executive committee, saying that the session of the provincial court would arrive on Sunday to consider the case of "Matyukha's band" and asked the village Soviet to notify the community about it. David and many other villagers were asked to appear as witnesses in court. The trial was to open on Sunday, when the market would be held in Shcherbanivka.

There had probably never been so many people in Shcherbanivka as on this market day. The market place was filled with wagons right up to the windmills. By the time the Obukhivka peasants arrived they could not find a place, for the market had spilled



right into the street. Yakim, Stepan and the smith went to find a place to put their wagons.

By the post office their caravan turned to the ruins of the former manor and after weaving between tree stumps and piles of brick they encamped behind the storehouses.

The men unharnessed the horses and tied them to the wagons. The women jumped down from the wagons and tidied themselves, shaking the dust off their skirts — the scene was reminiscent of geese which had just waddled out of the water onto the beach. All of them, their cheeks red from the frost, were dressed up in their Sunday best for this occasion. Not far from the wagons Klim spied the Obukhivka peasants and approached them with a group of farmsteaders. And Zinka appeared out of nowhere with the girls. She said a curt "Hello" to the men and cast a sharp look at David. In the meanwhile Stepan found out that the court session had arrived in Shcherbanivka yesterday and the prisoners had been brought here as well. He had just been at the village club — the trial was scheduled for eight o'clock.

"So we'll wait," Hordiy said. "We had to wait more than that."

They sat down behind the storehouses sheltered from the wind and started smoking. The women prepared to go to the market, when suddenly Pivnenko's daughter-in-law exclaimed:

"Girls, take a look there!"

Everyone turned round, looking surprised over the heads of the crowd. The people who had previously grouped around their wagons were now climbing on them, looking in the direction of the district militia station. The Obukhivka peasants followed suit. Khristya was the first to jump on the wagon, from which she shouted excitedly:

"Take a look, they're bringing them over here!"

Everyone rushed to reach an elevation to have a better look — some climbed on the tree stumps, others on the piles of brick, or on the wagons. The group of prisoners was slowly walking through the rows of wagons from the yard of the militia station. From the distance it was hard to identify them. Two of them wore great-coats — that was probably Sakhnovsky and the red-haired militiaman, the tallest of the men must have been Tyahniryadno, the one with the shaggy cap Matyukha. The whole lot had been brought together. The people looked darkly at them and followed them into the street.

The trial lasted the whole day. The club was full of people, and those who could not get in crowded in the corridors or on the porch to hear what was going on inside.

From time to time someone would come pushing outside, unable to bear the stuffy air in the hall. No sooner did he come down the porch than he was surrounded on all sides and showered with questions. This went on till the next man came out.

The trial was a subject of lively talk at the market as well. The chat continued late into the night in the houses and by the bonfires in and around the market place. Many were reluctant to leave home without finding out the result of the trial.

The trial ended at midnight, then the judicial council sat for another five hours to decide on the verdicts. The whole of Shcherbanivka did not sleep that night, the lights in the houses stayed on and the bonfires burned in the market place, humming with the sound of voices.

At dawn there was a sudden commotion and noise at the village club. The people rushed from their homes and the bonfires toward the club, each trying to push his way inside. It was hard to make out anything in the clamor. Three had been sentenced to be shot, but who in particular? And what about the rest?

Two guards appeared from the side door leading onto the stage. They forced their way through the crowd to make a passage to the wagons which stood ready. Then three prisoners were led out. The first was Sakhnovsky — very pale, with black eyes and tightly set teeth which made his face appear mouthless; he walked unusually erect, as if he did not notice anything around him. He was followed by Matyukha wearing his shaggy cap on his drooping head; he walked uncertainly and it looked as if he was trying to step exactly on Sakhnovsky's tracks. Behind him came Tyahniryadno — clumsy and ugly: walking down the passage, he winked stupidly into the crowd or spat carelessly through his teeth, then he stopped abruptly like an obstinate bull and the guards had to lead him by force to the wagon, while he tried to break loose and swore hoarsely. The prisoners were seated in the wagons with two guards each and the wagons rolled away.

Soon the rest of the prisoners were led out: Danilo Ohir, Kushnirenko, both of Hnida's sons — Yakiv and Pilip, the red-haired militiaman, Knish, Khoma Hubarenko, and Vekla, the moonshiner.

They were escorted to the district militia station, and from there they would be taken under guard to the jail in town.

Only Maria, put on probation for three years, was released from custody.

Now the crowd started to disperse, and after some moments the yard in front of the village club looked like a dug-out ant hill.

At the storehouses the Obukhivka peasants were harnessing their horses, merrily exchanging words from wagon to wagon. Hordiy urged on everyone to hurry, because the ground was frosty that morning and it would be a good idea to cart some timber today.

"Yes, sir," Yakim shouted, jumping onto the wagon. Pivnenko's womenfolk were still fussing with the departure. Some of the wagons had already left. David took the reins in his hands and waited for Zinka who could not finish her excited talk with the girls; Stepan had already called her.

"Sit down with me, Zinka," David said.

"But our ways must part," said the girl, looking up at him naively.

"Oh no, they don't," David said with a wink and smiled kindly at her. The girl started to breathe excitedly, her cheeks colored, and her eyes became bright and blue.

"I should have at least told my folks beforehand," she said confused.

David took her by the elbow, the girls lifted her up with laughter, and she jumped into the wagon.

Before they reached the street, they had to stop a number of times and get down from the wagons to push them out of the mud. Hordiy frowned; they could have been home a long time ago. At first they drove slowly, but David became restless, and turning to Yakim he loudly proposed they quicken their pace. Yakim also shouted something which rolled in an echo along the street.

David lashed the horses with the reins, and that instant the horses started with a jerk and the wheels clattered to life. Bits of frozen earth hit his face like little pellets and made Hordiy cover his eyes and smile. The girls behind broke into laughter. David turned round — they too had been strewn with the frosty earth pellets. All the girls covered their faces, Zinka shouted something. David only saw her joyous blue eyes looking at him from under her palms. He shouted back to her, but did not hear his own voice, and lashed the horses again. Ahead and behind him the road rang to the clatter of the hooves and wheels.

*Головка*  
*Андрей Васильевич*

**БУРЬЯН**

Роман

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